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Schools, housing essential to solution

By JAY HAMBURG
 Staff Writer

The exact causes of the Davidson County poverty trends may be hard to pinpoint, but those who have looked at the situation agree it's important to take action now so it doesn't get out of control.

If migration to surrounding counties is a strong concern, then Nashville must continue to improve its public education system to make it less desirable to move, several economists said.

"The key thing we're interested in is affordable housing," said Ed Cole of Cumberland Region Tomorrow, a nonprofit group that studies growth in the Midstate.

Cole said affordable housing keeps a community stable and diverse and allows people to live closer to places of employment, if they wish. Purchasing a lower-cost starter home, rather than renting, also allows a family to start building financial equity.

Single female parents are another group that needs help and could have a large impact on the future.

An analysis by David Penn, who heads the Business and Economic Research Center at Middle Tennessee State University, showed that out of all children living in poverty in Davidson County, 73% were living in families headed

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by single women.

Many areas of the nation have similarly high statistics.

"We've got to do whatever is necessary to help them get good child care with child-care subsidies and good work subsidies — whatever it takes," Penn said. "I think it's just unacceptable that we're looking at (so many) children in Davidson County that are in these households."

Where to get the funds? Some cities have turned to a payroll tax, a tax on the incomes of those who work in the city but may live in the suburbs. But Tennesseans have shown a loud dislike for any type of income tax.

Other cities are starting to debate the merits of sharing business taxes across a region, as has been done in Minneapolis-St. Paul for 30 years.

Under the plan, approved in 1971, all communities in the area share revenue from commercial and industrial property taxes.

While some have hailed it as an avenue for reshaping the Twin Cities from lumber and milling to biomedical and other services, some community probably will feel slighted by the formula, said William Fox, an economist at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville.

A sociologist who has studied the disparity between cities and suburbs noted that in many cases cities have populations that are as educated or better educated than the suburbs.

And they often have a strong component of young professionals living there for the urban lifestyle, said John Logan, director of the Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research in Albany, N.Y.

"The challenge for the cities is to remain competitive for those people when they move into their 30s and 40s and start raising families," Logan said. "It's like you have a captive audience and can you manage not to lose it."

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