What is striking about the Knoxville region (and the state of Tennessee) is the severity of child poverty. Knoxville has some of the highest child poverty rates in the U.S., especially among racial and ethnic populations. The findings are stark:

- Child poverty in the Knoxville metro area increased from 14.9% in 2000 to 17.4% in 2007. For children under five years of age, more than 1 in 5 are living in poverty (21.4%).
- In 2000, out of Tennessee’s seven metropolitan areas, the Knoxville area has the highest African American child poverty rates (42.7%), the highest Latino child poverty rate (29.5%), and the highest White child poverty rate (12.1%) in the state.
- Out of the 100 largest metropolitan areas in the U.S., the Knoxville region ranks 9th in Black child poverty, 7th in White child poverty and 23rd in Latino child poverty in 2000.

A critical finding is not just the scale of child poverty in the Knoxville community, but its disproportionate racial and geographic concentration. Poor and non-White students are concentrated into the poorest neighborhoods, and also the poorest schools.

Environments matter for kids because what they are exposed to – good and bad – can have lasting effects on their well-being. Children in the most distressed communities of Knoxville face multiple barriers to opportunity, including safe and stable housing, access to health care, high quality education, viable transportation, healthy food, and encouragement.

There are many promising ways to open up the pathways of opportunity for children trapped in the cycle of poverty. Children who received prenatal care, and who are under the care of a primary care physician, start out with a distinct advantage. Those who have early education and positive, encouraging role models can thrive in spite of depressed material circumstances. Kids with access to small classrooms with qualified teachers, safe and walkable neighborhoods, grocery stores with fresh food, parks and museums have advantages that last a lifetime.

By providing support services and pathways to opportunity for marginalized kids living in poverty, Knoxville can provide an environment where all kids can flourish and reach their full potential. Responding to this crisis is a critical investment in the future of the region.