



The Urban Child Institute champions maximum brain development for children from conception to age three.

Center for Urban Child Policy

The Urban Child Institute's Public Policy Initiative

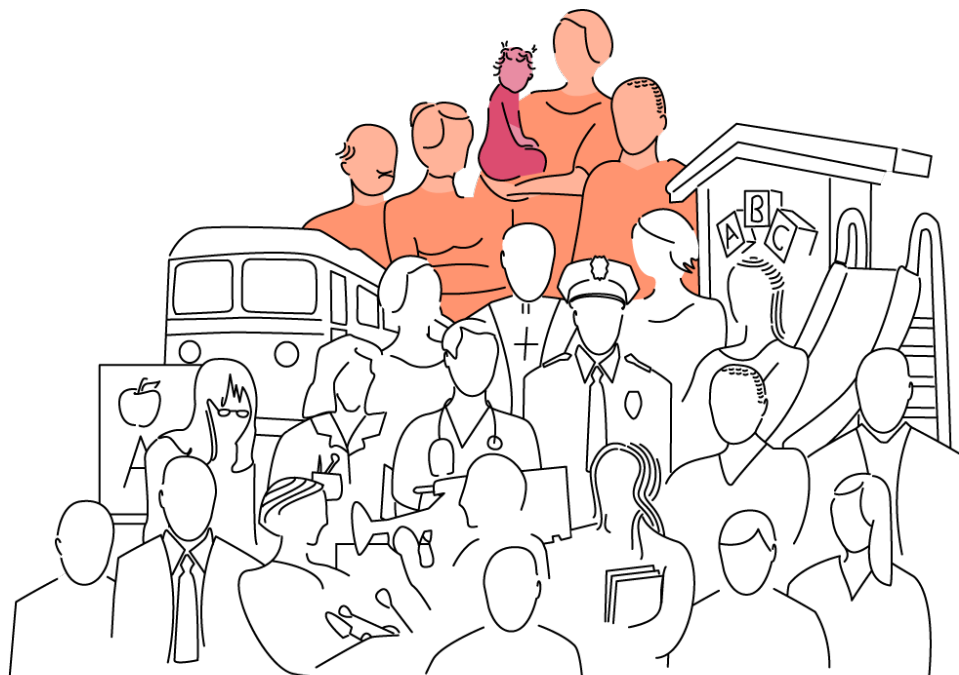
HOW DOES MOTHER'S AGE CORRESPOND TO HEALTHY EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING?

Higher levels of parental education and income correlate with healthier patterns of early childhood brain development. Levels of education and income, in turn, are strongly related to the age at which adults become parents.

Some highlights of the brief:

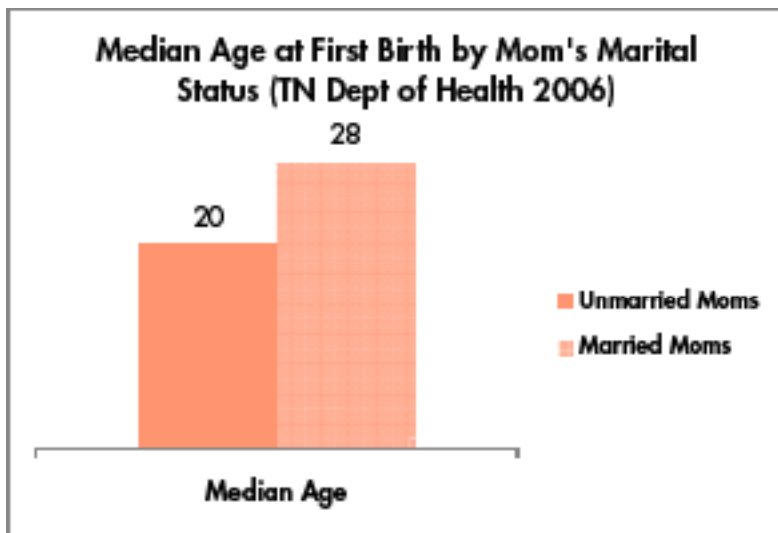
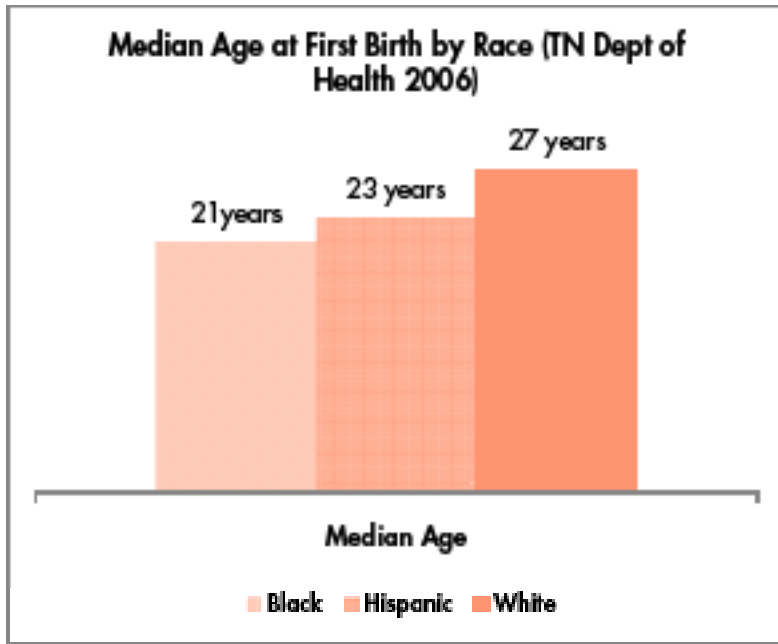
- » In Shelby County, the median age of mothers is 23 years at the time their first child is born.
- » These families typically survive on low-incomes (between \$15,000 and \$24,999 a year).
- » Age at first birth strongly correlates with parents' education level and - consequently - with their earning power.
- » In our community, early parenthood leaves many families struggling to secure access to the basic resources and protections that provide a strong foundation for children's early brain development.

May 8, 2009



INTRODUCTION

Over the last 20 years, the United States has seen both a decline in birthrates and an increase in mother's age at first birth. In 2006, the median age at first birth for all mothers in the U.S., was 25 *Martin et al. 2009*. In Shelby County the median age at first birth was 23. However, there are real variations by race and marital status in Shelby County. As the following figures indicate, minority mothers and unmarried mothers are likely to become parents at earlier ages.



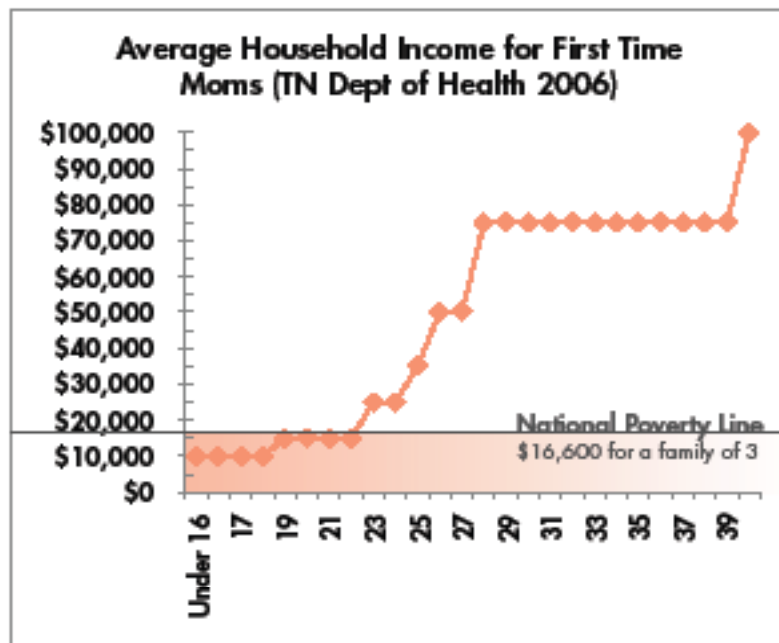
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MOTHER'S AGE AT FIRST BIRTH

When mothers are out of their teens and early twenties they are more likely to have higher levels of education and income. Additionally, delaying motherhood reduces the incidence of infant mortality and total family size Mullendore and Dhawan 1995.

Lacking access to basic resources such as food, shelter and health care poses a serious health risk to children. As much as 80% of a child's brain development occurs between birth and her third birthday, and patterns of brain development reflect the interactions between a child and the people and environments that surround her. When families have access to necessary resources, and protection from negative influences such as crime, maternal depression and disease, children have the greatest opportunity to develop to their full potential. Early brain development in turn serves as the foundation for later success in school and life.

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES A YEAR MAKE?

If we look at the average household income for first time mothers in Shelby County, we see the difficulty young families face in providing their infants with a solid foundation of basic resources and protection. In turn, understanding the capacity of new families to access needed resources will help us make effective decisions as a community about the types of supports that young families need to maximize children's early brain development and well-being.

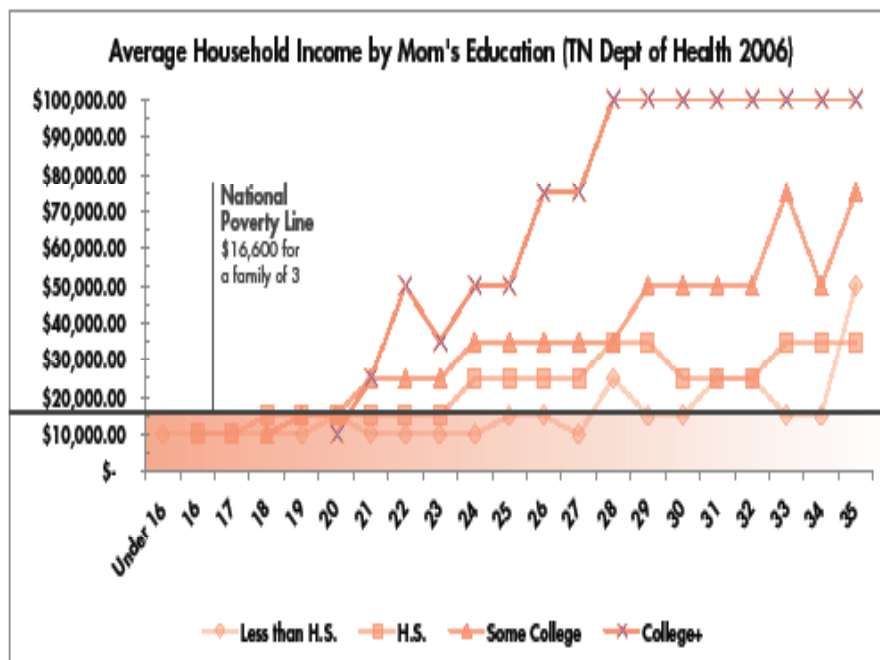


Discussions of age at first birth often make a critical distinction between teen and adult mothers. However, if we look at the average incomes for all first time mothers in Shelby County, we see that 20 year old mothers are struggling as well. Both sets of families are in poverty. Among all first time mothers, the average household income of 20 year olds was between \$10,000 and \$14,999, which place these families in or near the poverty line (\$13,200 for a family of 2 and \$16,600 for a family of 3).

Most experts agree it takes an income of roughly twice the poverty line for a family to adequately meet their need for food, shelter, clothing, access to medical care, child care, transportation, etc Zedlewski, Chaudry and Simms 2008. In Shelby County, first time single mothers do not reach this threshold of financial security (an annual income of \$26,400 for a family of 2) until 29 years of age. Unfortunately, the median age for first time single mothers is 20. Since more than half of children in Shelby County are born to single mothers every year, these findings are troubling as they suggest that children are born into families that lack access to the basic resources that they need to support early social, emotional and cognitive development TN Department of Health 2006.

Educational Attainment

Across the cohort of single mothers, we see a notable income jump between the ages of 23 and 24 (from a poverty level wage of \$13,200 to an above poverty level wage between \$15,000 and \$24,999 per year. There are good reasons why the mid-twenties are likely to be a time at which women begin to earn enough money to support themselves and a child. By this age, women have had enough time to earn some higher education and gain stable employment. In the last 30 years, a woman's education has become an increasingly important correlate to the timing of her first birth Kimbro and Wildsmith 2009.



We see this connection by comparing first time mothers' average incomes by their education levels. The average income of 22 year old first time mothers who lacked a high school diploma was under \$10,000. By comparison, 22 year old first time mothers with a high school diploma had an average income between \$10,000 and \$14,999. Meanwhile, 22 year old mothers with some college made between \$15,000 and \$24,999; and 22 year old mothers with a college degree or more made an average income between \$35,000 and \$49,999 a year.

Because these are household incomes, they would include husbands' and cohabiting boyfriends' incomes as well. First time mothers with a college degree are much more likely to be married than are first time mothers with a high school diploma. As a result the increased average household income of a mother with a college degree also reflects the increased likelihood that she has a spouse and he is employed. 88% of women who became mothers before they finished high school were single when they gave birth. By comparison, only 12% of women who became mothers after they finished college were single.

CONCLUSION

There is a strong relationship between age at first birth and the household income of new mothers. That increased income is largely a product of higher levels of education, work experience, and an increased likelihood of being married, and these differences matter when it comes to families having income and resources to support their children.

It is crucial for the well-being of children in our community that we begin to make the connections between a family's access to fundamental resources and a child's protection from risk factors in their earliest years as well as their subsequent life outcomes.

Children in our community will do better over the course of their lives when their parents have sufficient education to earn a living wage. Our findings in this brief suggest that too frequently, low income women begin parenting before they finish school or find a living wage job. In turn, the complications of raising a child and repeated pregnancies derail women from completing their educations and becoming financially stable.

It's not enough to convince young women to delay motherhood until they are out of their teens. It is not until their mid-twenties that young adults, both married and unmarried, have the financial capacity to support their families. By that point, young adults have the combination of education and work experience needed to hold living wage jobs that secure access to the goods, services and environments that are crucial to their



babies' development.

So what's the solution? Young women in our community will be more likely to delay parenting when they believe that there are realistic and available reasons to do so, like an affordable education that leads to more meaningful work, a better paying job that helps them afford a home and decent transportation, or a stable loving marriage that improves their quality of life and that of their children.

For too many young women in Shelby County, these goals currently appear unrealistic. In their absence, these girls are left with few reasons to delay motherhood. The result too often is another generation of children raising children, undermining the well-being and life prospects of both.

The Center for Urban Child Policy at The Urban Child Institute conducts nonpartisan research and evaluation to raise the quality of public and policy discussions of child well-being and early brain development. For more information, please visit: <http://www.theurbanchildinstitute.org/PublicPolicy>



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For more information on the well-being on children in Memphis and Shelby County, visit The Urban Child Institute at: <http://www.theurbanchildinstitute.org/Home>; and The State of Children in Memphis & Shelby County, available at: <http://www.theurbanchildinstitute.org/Databook.php>

All analysis of TN Department of Health birth certificate data included in this policy brief are independent estimates created by Frances Breland at the Center for Urban Child Policy utilizing Tennessee Department of Health 2006 Birth Certificate data for Shelby County.

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