



DATA BOOK 2011

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The State of Children
in Memphis and Shelby County

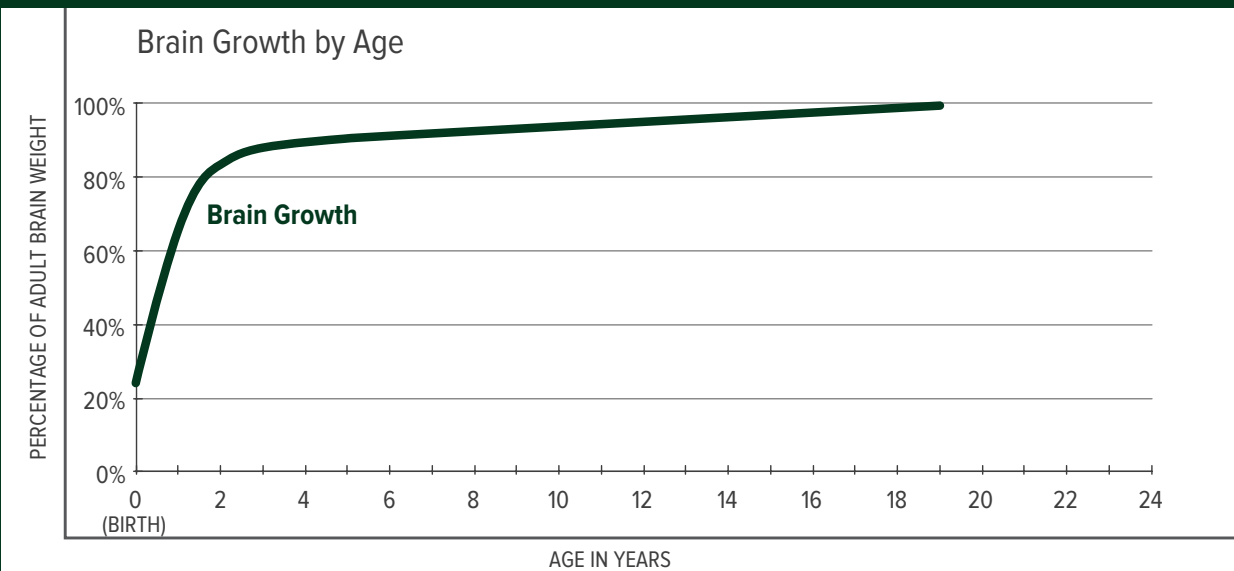
Available online at www.theurbanchildinstitute.org



The Urban Child Institute is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the well-being of young children in Memphis and Shelby County. Specifically, our mission is to promote optimal brain development from conception to age three. In order to give children a fair start in life, our community must invest in their earliest years. The first three years are crucial for children's long-term development because of the unique importance of brain development during this period.

Download the full version of *The State of Children in Memphis & Shelby County: Data Book 2011* at www.theurbanchildinstitute.org.

FIGURE 1



Between conception and age three, a child's brain undergoes an extraordinary amount of change. By age three it has reached 80 percent of its adult volume. Figure 1 shows how brain growth begins to level off around age three.

Even more important than the brain's growth in size are the changes in how it works. The brain's billions of neurons communicate with each other across connections called synapses. Around age three, synapses that are rarely or never used begin to be eliminated. A child's early experiences help decide which synapses become strong and survive and which disappear. In other words, early experiences not only determine *what* information enters the brain, but also influence *how* the brain processes information.

Demographics

This year's Demographics chapter presents an overview of the child population of Shelby County, with a special emphasis on how factors associated with child well-being often vary between Memphis and suburban Shelby County.

- Memphis has a higher proportion of young children than suburban Shelby County.
- The Memphis child poverty rate is double the national rate. In suburban Shelby County, the rate is half the national rate.
- Across Shelby County, families with children have lower incomes than families without children.

Health

This year's Health chapter presents county-level data on children's health. Many children in Memphis and Shelby County face serious health risks even before they are born.

- Infant mortality is widespread, and low birth weight and prematurity threaten children's brain development and long-term health.
- Maternal smoking during pregnancy, excessive weight gain during pregnancy, and inadequate prenatal care are among the many other factors that compromise children's chances for healthy and productive lives.

Family and Home Environment

The Family and Home Environment chapter discusses the importance of parent-child interactions. Using data from an ongoing comprehensive study of new mothers and their babies, the chapter examines how the quality of a mother's interactions with her infant can be affected by postpartum depression, the most common medical complication of childbirth.

- 23 percent of mothers at 12 months and 39 percent of mothers at 24 months scored in the At Risk range on an established measure of interaction quality, indicating that their parenting styles were not fostering optimal development.
- At 4 weeks after birth and again at 12 months, mothers answered a brief questionnaire designed to screen for possible depression. At 4 weeks, 14 percent of all mothers scored At Risk. At 12 months, 11 percent scored At Risk.

Education

The Education chapter focuses on the link between kindergarten readiness and children's earliest experiences. Differences in school readiness among children reflect differences in their early exposure to risk factors like poverty. On average, children from poor and low-income families begin school at a disadvantage. However, as the chapter documents, high-quality educational experiences before kindergarten can improve children's school readiness.

- Children who attend quality center-based childcare, Head Start, or pre-kindergarten score higher than other children on language and math tests at school entry.

Community

This year's Community chapter focuses on the effect of neighborhood influences on children's development. Unfavorable neighborhood conditions increase children's risk for adverse experiences early in life. The chapter examines several of these community-level risk factors—including poverty, unemployment, residential mobility, and violent crime—and their distribution throughout Memphis and Shelby County.

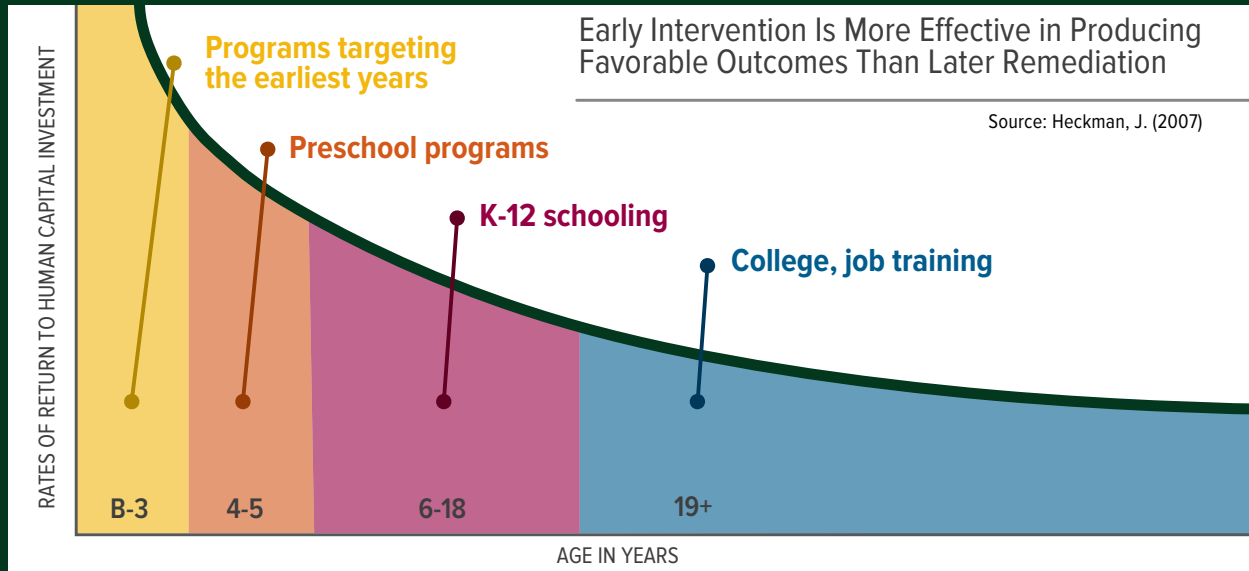
- Nearly one out of three census tracts in Memphis have poverty rates of at least 40 percent, and poverty continues to spread into formerly low-poverty neighborhoods.

Promising Practices: BLUES Project

Across Shelby County there continue to be significant health disparities among racial and socioeconomic groups. Reducing these disparities is a key goal of the BLUES Project, an intervention targeting low-income, at-risk mothers. BLUES staff work with participants during pregnancy and throughout the child's first two years of life, helping mothers and fathers set attainable life goals and take an active role in their health and the health of their children. Comparing the birth outcomes of BLUES participants to outcomes among other at-risk Shelby County mothers provides strong evidence of the program's effectiveness.

- BLUES mothers had lower rates of prematurity, low birth weight, and infant mortality compared to mothers who were eligible for the program but chose not to participate.

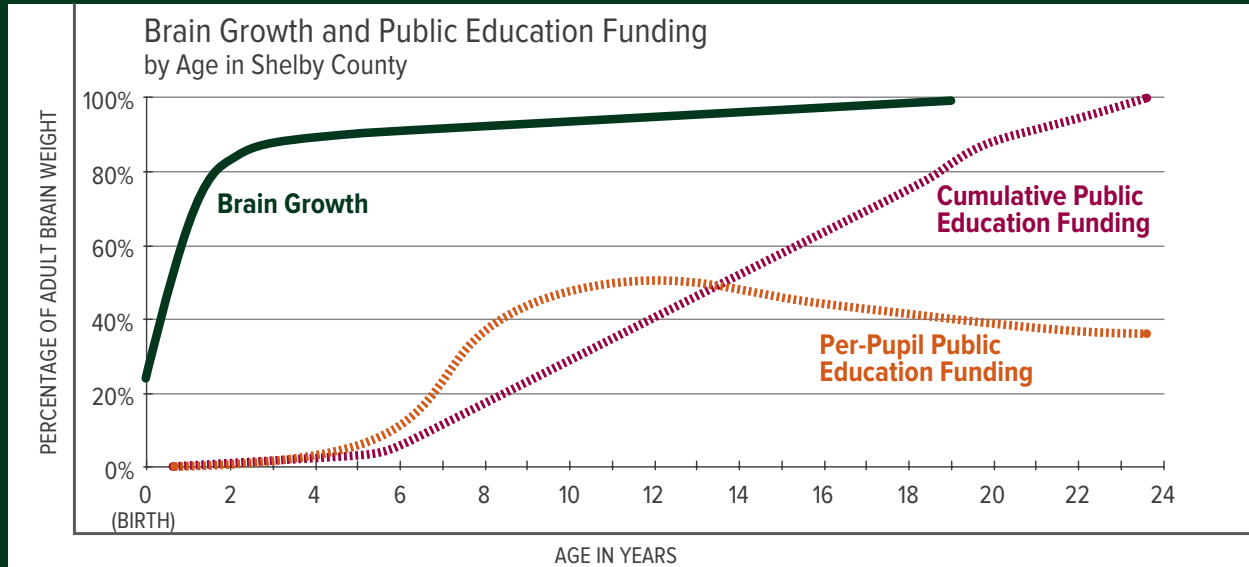
FIGURE 2



Experts in the field of economics have provided additional evidence for the importance of children’s earliest years. Investments in children’s first three years provide bigger economic returns than investments that begin later in life. Figure 2 shows that the earliest investments have the greatest returns.

Our current spending patterns are out of alignment with our knowledge of child development. As Figure 3 shows, most spending on children’s education begins too late. Most programs begin after many at-risk children have already fallen behind. Waiting until children are in jeopardy before we make meaningful investments in their future is an inefficient strategy. We can do better.

FIGURE 3





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The State of Children in Memphis & Shelby County was created by The Urban Child Institute and first published in 2006. The initial purpose was to collect the best available data on children in our community. Many individuals and organizations were gathering important information on children, but the 2006 “Data Book” was the first time that the data had been assembled in a single document.

This 2011 volume continues to track and update the data. It has also become more focused on our community’s youngest children, specifically those under age three. Additionally, The Institute is excited that the new Data Book includes contributions from some of our community’s top experts in various fields related to children’s well-being.

We hope that the Data Book will be a useful tool for government leaders, service providers, educators, and all community stakeholders who desire positive changes in Memphis and Shelby County. We believe that the evidence it presents for the importance of children’s earliest years provides clear direction for efforts to improve the lives of our children and the future of our community.