



# DATA BOOK 2012

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2012 SPECIAL INTEREST SECTION

Shelby County  
Books from Birth

## The State of Children in Memphis and Shelby County

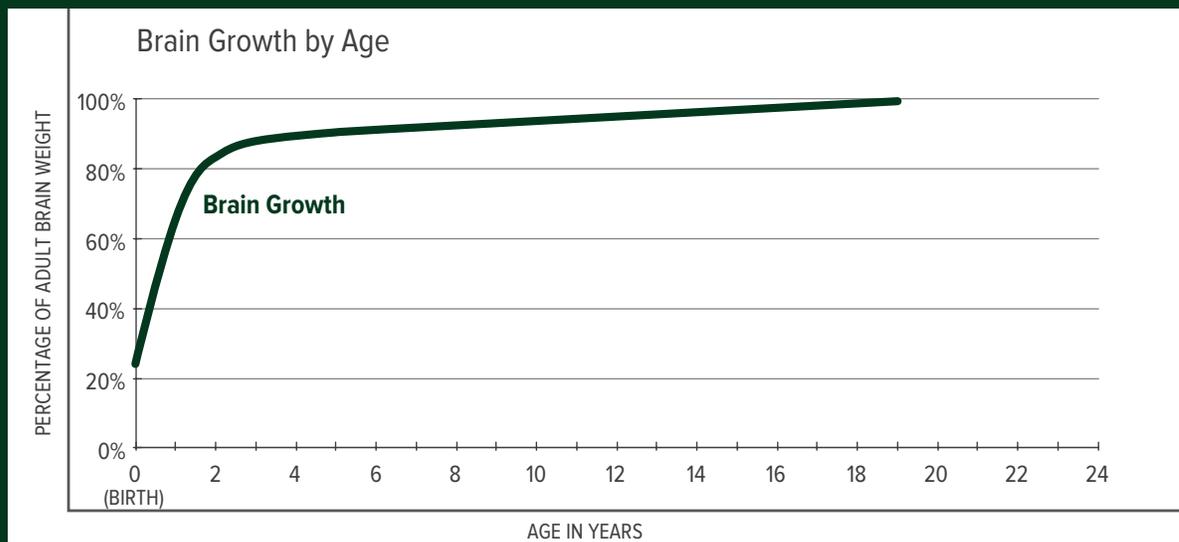
Available online at [www.theurbanchildinstitute.org](http://www.theurbanchildinstitute.org)



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 our community's children a fair start in life, we must invest in their earliest years. The first three years are crucial for children's long-term well-being and success 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 2012* at [www.theurbanchildinstitute.org](http://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 increase 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

The 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.

- The Memphis child poverty rate is double the national rate. 39 percent of Memphis children are living in poverty.
- Over half of children throughout Shelby County face economic hardship, qualifying as poor or low-income as measured by the Federal Poverty Level.
- Education helps parents increase their earnings, improve their children's home environments, and engage in more effective parenting.

## Health

This year's Health chapter presents the most recent available county-level health data on our community's children. Although there have been positive changes on some measures, many Shelby County children face serious health risks even before they are born, and racial disparities in birth outcomes are large.

- Infant mortality (death during the first year of life) remains a persistent public health issue. Shelby County's infant mortality rate is 10.3 deaths per 1,000 live births.
- 14 percent of black babies are born at low birth weight, compared to 6.6 percent of white babies.
- The percentage of mothers receiving no prenatal care has decreased, and initiation of breastfeeding among new mothers is increasing.

## Family and Home Environment

This chapter discusses the importance of children's earliest experiences for their future well-being. Using data from an ongoing comprehensive study of Shelby County mothers and their babies, we examine how conditions during a child's first three years can affect later outcomes like kindergarten readiness, high school achievement, and even adult success.

- Early risk factors such as family poverty, maternal depression, and low parental

education are strong predictors of children's cognitive development, social adjustment, and emotional well-being.

- Research on Shelby County families shows that many young children are at risk for developmental delays.
- Policy efforts to reduce economic hardship, increase parents' education, and improve the identification and treatment of maternal depression are promising strategies for improving children's early home environments.

## Education

The Education chapter highlights the importance of the first years for children's language development, literacy, and school readiness. Although children from poor and low-income families often begin school at a disadvantage, home reading practices and high-quality early education can help level the playing field.

- Young children in Memphis are read to less than national averages.
- Memphis children who spend the year before kindergarten in a high-quality program

like Head Start or Memphis City Schools Pre-K arrive at kindergarten better prepared than children who spend the year at home with a parent or relative.

- The Shelby County *Books from Birth* program, which provides age-appropriate books each month for children's first five years, is building a culture of early reading, promoting family literacy practices, and helping Shelby County children arrive at kindergarten ready to achieve.

## Community

This year's Community chapter emphasizes neighborhood influences on children's well-being. Unfavorable neighborhood conditions increase children's risk for negative experiences early in life. Neighborhood poverty, widespread unemployment, and other community-level risk factors create unhealthy environments for children's development.

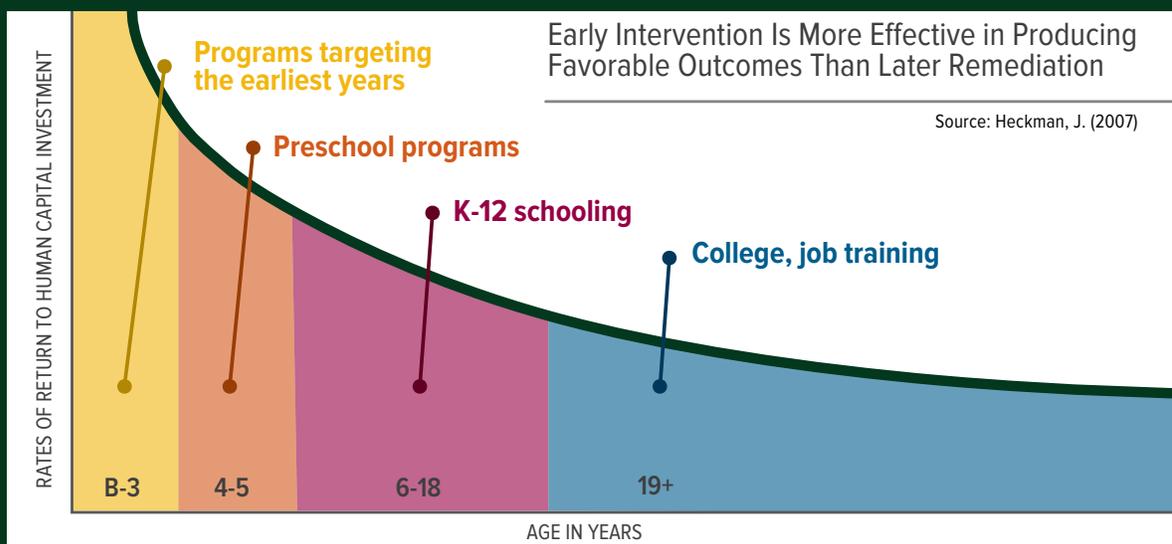
- The neighborhood where a child lives can have effects over and above parental income and other family-level influences.
- In Shelby County, high-risk neighborhoods are also neighborhoods with large numbers of children.
- Children in neighborhoods like these are at higher risk for health problems, behavioral difficulties, teen pregnancy, high school dropout, and substance abuse.

## Best Practice

The Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) is a home visiting program aimed at improving the health of at-risk mothers and their children. Beginning in pregnancy and continuing through children's first two years, specially trained nurses visit families in their homes, forming collaborative relationships focused on improving prenatal health, increasing positive birth outcomes, promoting effective parenting, and strengthening families' economic self-sufficiency. Program founder David Olds provides an overview of what the research says about NFP's effectiveness.

- Research shows that participation in the program is associated with fewer pregnancy complications and fewer child injuries.
- Additionally, children in the program have been shown to have better cognitive, social, and emotional outcomes than non-participating children from similar backgrounds.
- NFP families also tend to use fewer government entitlement services, which reduces public spending and suggests that NFP is a cost-effective intervention strategy.

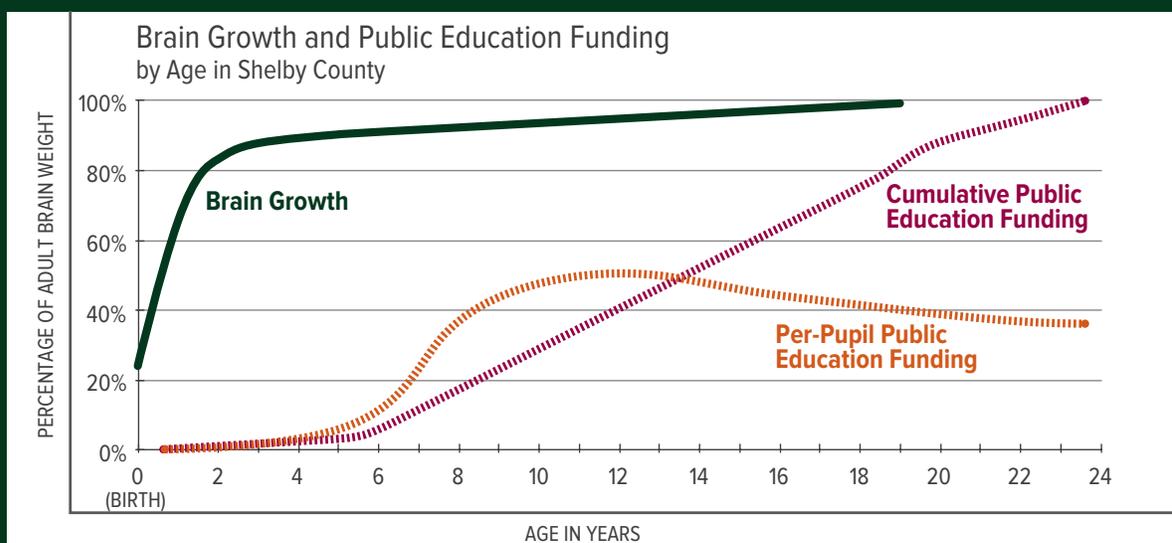
FIGURE 2



Experts in the field of economics provide additional evidence for the importance of children’s earliest years. Investments in children’s first three years result in 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: Data Book 2012*  
at [www.theurbanchildinstitute.org](http://www.theurbanchildinstitute.org).

The recently released 2012 *State of Children in Memphis & Shelby County* (“Data Book”) collects the best and most recent available data on children in our community. This edition not only updates the numbers, but also includes several new features. For instance, this year’s Best Practice chapter is provided by David Olds, founder of the Nurse-Family Partnership—an intervention program that is improving the health and well-being of at-risk families and their children. And this year’s Education chapter includes a Special Topic section highlighting Shelby County’s *Books from Birth* program, which is promoting early literacy and kindergarten readiness among our community’s children.

We hope that the Data Book will be a useful resource 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.