



# The Urban Child Institute

*A philanthropic organization that focuses on children*

The institute is a coalition of community researchers, strategists and interventionists dedicated to the improvement of well-being of children, especially from conception to age 3.

We will improve the lives of children and increase the social capital of Memphis by accelerating the infusion of meaningful knowledge and intervention that will change existing policies. We will work to connect research and knowledge with action.

For other individuals and organizations who want also to improve the lives of children, they will find the institute to be a trustworthy partner and resource for expertise, advice and collaboration.

This State of Children in Memphis & Shelby County was initiated and funded by the institute. The purpose is to collect in one document all existing, important research data on children in Memphis and Shelby County. Many individuals and organizations have benefited from pieces of this data, but this is the only up-to-date effort to assemble all the data in one place with analysis of the data by professionals.

Data have been organized in five segments, or domains.

1. *Children's Demographics* is a necessary prelude of important statistics.
2. *Children's Health* is an overall physical exam of the city's children.
3. *Children's Educational Well-Being* is a community report card.
4. *Family, Home Environment & Economic Well-Being* points out the influence of family and home and focuses on the disastrous results of poverty.
5. *Children's Community Environment* documents the impact on children of their neighborhood.

The institute's objective is for this reference guide to encourage and rally others into action and change. The data contained herein should provide clear direction to government leaders, education and medical professionals, community welfare and religious organizations of all types for more steps to identify objectives and strategies to improve the state of our children. The potential for many such additional actions is highlighted throughout.

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# Introduction



## **Under-educated children have no future.**

In *The State of Children in Memphis and Shelby County, 2006*, we identified single-mother birth as the most dangerous condition for children in Shelby County. The dangerous nature of that condition has not changed and remains a difficult challenge for children in our community. In 2007 we document the link between single-mother births, inadequate education, and persistent poverty in the City of Memphis, one of the least-educated cities in America.

We document the high percentage of single-mother births that result in prematurity, low birth-weight and infants that have special needs. We present information that shows how the absence of two parents leads to poverty and inadequate care during pregnancy. Poverty frequently leads to sub-optimal nutrition and excessive stress for the mother, the fetus and the very young child. This stifles development of an infant's brain in the critical months following conception. Poverty and poor family structure results in compromised children entering the Memphis education system. Their brain development has lagged from the moment of conception.

This book includes an important section on the development of the human brain from *conception* to age 3. It documents the problems of inadequate brain stimulation that create difficulties for educators. A child who enters school with exposure to only one-third as many words as other children, whose brain has had only a fraction of the stimulation of other children's brains, can not be taught as quickly, as thoroughly or as successfully.

Memphis parents must deliver to our schools children who have been given the opportunity to reach their full potential for learning the basic skills of reading, writing and mathematics necessary to succeed in college or vocational school, or the city can not thrive.

## **Memphis is at the bottom of the barrel.**

The U.S. is declining in educational standing worldwide. In 1991 only Canada and Finland had a higher percentage of young people with college degrees than the U.S. Today a dozen countries are equal to the U.S., and six (Belgium, Canada, Ireland, Japan, Korea and Sweden) have surpassed the U.S.

Even by U.S. standards roughly 75 percent of students in Tennessee fail to meet national grade appropriate standards, and Memphis is at the bottom in Tennessee. The average ACT score in Memphis City Schools (MCS) is almost three points below the Tennessee average, and the Tennessee average is below the national average. One of four adults in Memphis has less than a high school education.

State and local educators celebrate an increase in the number of students that are rated “proficient” and “advanced.” This improvement is largely because Tennessee educators consistently have lowered the scores needed to qualify as “proficient” and “advanced.” If the bar falls low enough, no effort is required to jump it, and there’s no reward. Our focus must change from compromising “success” to maximizing potential.

## **There are some signs of hope.**

- The infant mortality rate among black children has decreased (2005).
- From 2001 to 2005 the pregnancy rate among local teenage girls dropped by double digits.
- The overall Memphis poverty rate is down (2005).
- The percentage of children in Memphis living in poverty is down (2005).
- Shelby County unemployment is down (2005).
- The percentage of children living in a family with no wage earner is down (2005).
- The number of deaths among children is down (2005).
- Dropout rate in MCS has declined by 25 percent and Shelby County schools by 50 percent (2006).
- MCS ACT average is up (2005).
- Fewer Memphis public schools are on probation.
- The number of new cases of Type II Diabetes reported is declining.
- The divorce rate is decreasing.
- Tennessee funding for pre-kindergarten programs will increase by \$25 million.
- The U.S. Congress passed an increase in the Federal minimum wage that, when signed by the President, will raise the minimum wage by 40 percent over the next two years (2008 & 2009)
- This book includes a section that outlines “best practices” for dealing with many of our problems affecting children. It should not be ignored.

## **Memphis must break the cycle.**

Memphis can not afford even one more generation that is under-educated and dependent on society. Tennessee Governor Phil Bredesen has announced his impatience with under-achieving schools and school districts. He has made it clear that the state has the power, the right *and the intent* to take control of local schools that are not being operated effectively.

Time has run out. If MCS does not demonstrate *now* that it can educate the city's children, MCS can lose control of our schools.

Yet, educators face overwhelming challenges due to poverty and poor family structures. Everyone should understand the consequences of single-mother births. Attitudes must change. If we are unable to break this cycle, the city will stagnate.

*An under-educated city has no future.*