



# Demographics

## For Shelby County’s children, Memphis and suburban Shelby County are two different worlds.

Shelby County has nearly a quarter of a million children. Over 70 percent of these children live in Memphis; the rest live in the outlying suburbs (Figure 1). On the whole, these two groups of children lead very different lives, with different opportunities for early experiences that promote healthy brain development and lifelong achievement.



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Improving the well-being of all Shelby County children requires an understanding of these differences and their implications for community action. This chapter presents a brief overview of the child population of Shelby County, with an emphasis on how factors associated with child well-being often vary between Memphis and suburban Shelby County.

(Note that throughout the Data Book “suburban Shelby County” refers to areas of the county outside of Memphis, while “Shelby County” refers to the county as a whole, including Memphis.)

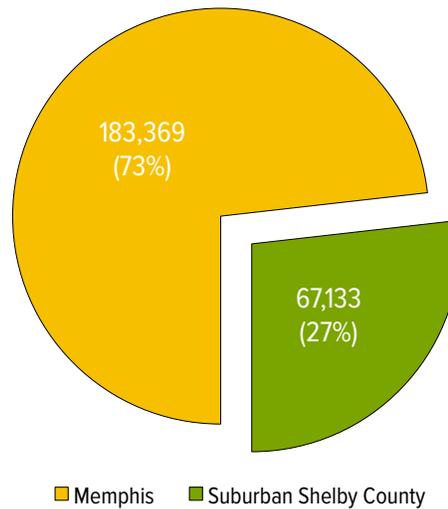
**Children in Memphis, as a group, differ from suburban children in age, race, and family type.**

Memphis has a higher proportion of young children than suburban Shelby County.

Figure 2 shows the age distribution of children in Memphis and in suburban Shelby County. Children under five are the largest age group of Memphis children, representing 30 percent of all residents under age 18. In suburban Shelby County, children from ten to 14 are the largest group (Figure 2).

**FIGURE 1:**  
Number & Percent  
of Children,  
Memphis and  
Suburban Shelby  
County, 2009

Source: American  
Community Survey,  
2009, B01001



**FIGURE 2:**  
Number & Percent  
of Children by Age,  
Memphis and  
Suburban Shelby  
County, 2009

Source: American  
Community Survey,  
2009, B01001

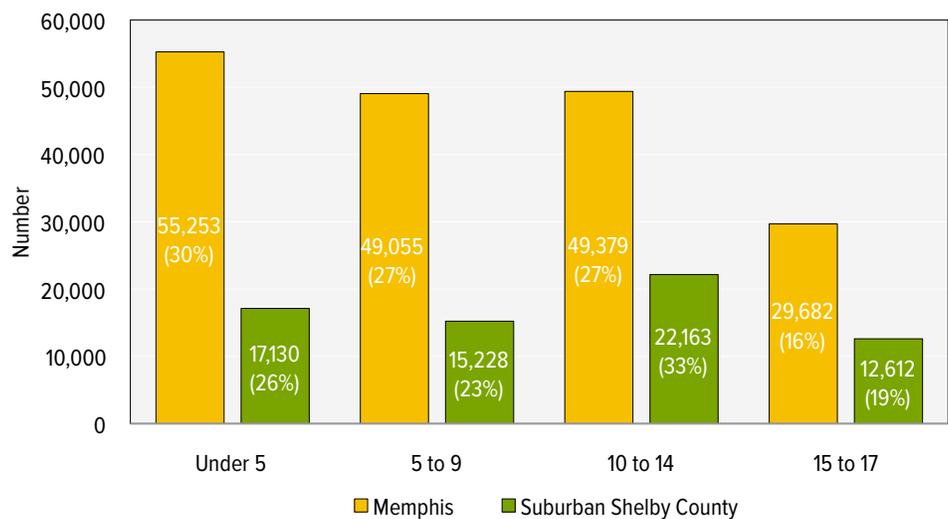


Figure 3 shows the racial/ethnic differences among the child populations of Memphis, suburban Shelby County, Tennessee, and the U.S. A large majority of children in Memphis (about 7 in 10) are black, compared to just over one in four in suburban Shelby County. The Memphis black-white ratio is also different from those of Tennessee and the U.S. The Hispanic

population of Memphis is similar to that of the suburbs and the state.

Memphis children are more likely than their suburban counterparts to live in single parent families. 60 percent of Memphis children live with an unmarried parent, compared to 28 percent in suburban Shelby County (Figure 4).

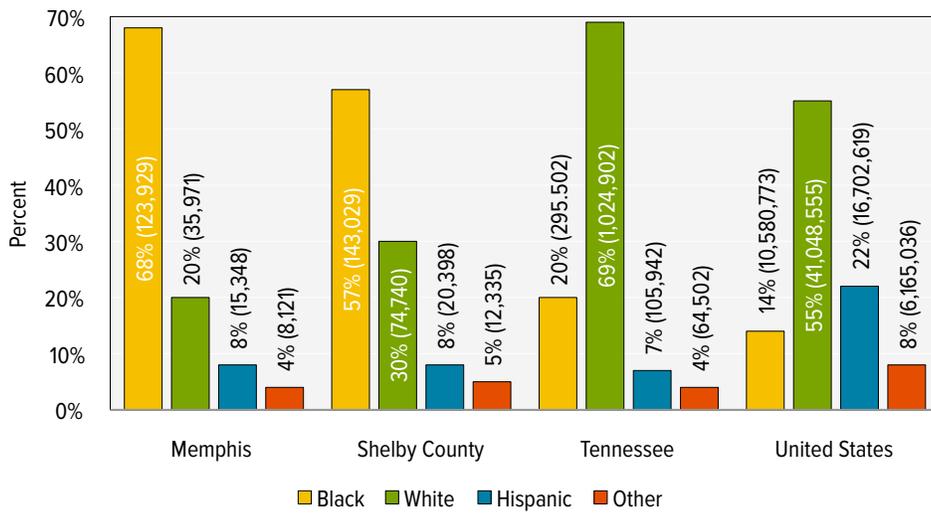


FIGURE 3:  
Number & Percent  
of Children by Race,  
U.S., TN, MSA,  
Shelby County,  
and Memphis,  
2009

Source: American  
Community Survey,  
2009, C01001B,  
C,D,E,F,H&I

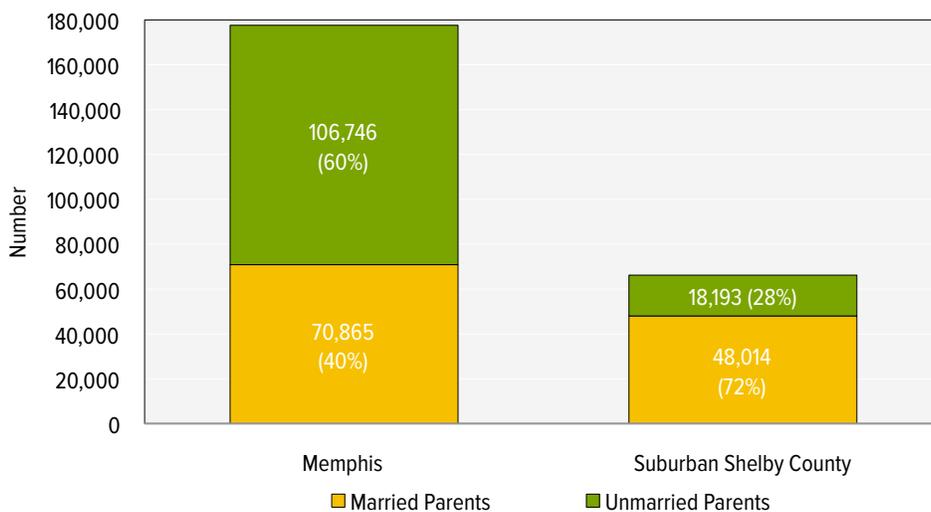


FIGURE 4:  
Number & Percent  
of Children by  
Living Arrangement,  
Memphis and  
Suburban Shelby  
County, 2009

Source: American  
Community Survey,  
2009, C17006

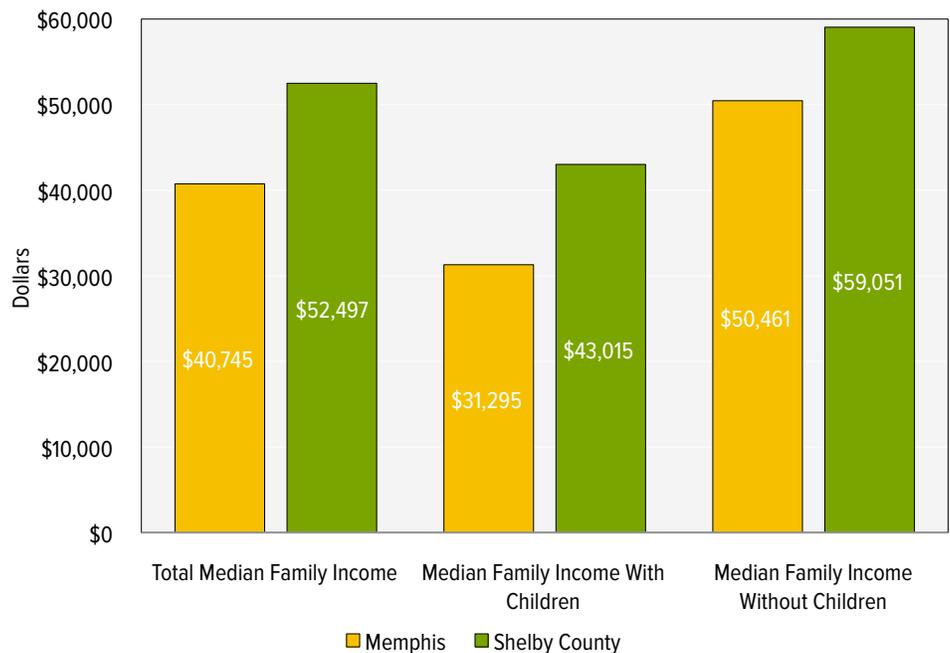
## Shelby County families with children make less money than families without children.

Family income is a good measure of child well-being. Children whose families have higher incomes tend to do better in school and show better behavioral and social adjustment. A stable and adequate income allows parents to buy books and educational toys, involve children in cultural activities, and purchase better child care. Too little income, on the other hand, is a cause of stress and can lead to less parental warmth and responsiveness.<sup>1,2</sup>

Figure 5 shows that across Shelby County, families with children have lower incomes than families without children. The median income of families without children is about \$16,000 more than that of families with children. When we consider only families living within Memphis, the gap is even larger: almost \$20,000.

FIGURE 5:  
Median Family  
Income by Presence  
of Children,  
Memphis and  
Shelby County,  
2009

Source: American  
Community Survey,  
2009, B19125



## Shelby County families pay a larger share of their incomes for rent than in previous years.

Housing is typically the biggest item in a family's budget. 30 percent of family income is widely considered an appropriate portion to spend on housing, but poor and low-income families often pay as much as 50 percent. Families with children may be particularly vulnerable to unaffordable housing: they earn less than other families, but need more. When less income is left over for discretionary spending, parents must make sacrifices that can reduce their children's quality of life. Too often, these choices include cutting back on necessities like food, clothes, and healthcare.<sup>3,4</sup>

Figure 6 shows that since 2000, more and more Shelby County families who rent are spending too much of their budgets on housing. The percentages tracked by the yellow line represent the percentage of families each year who pay 35 percent or more of their income on rent. Of these families, almost two-thirds pay 50 percent or more (not shown in graph).

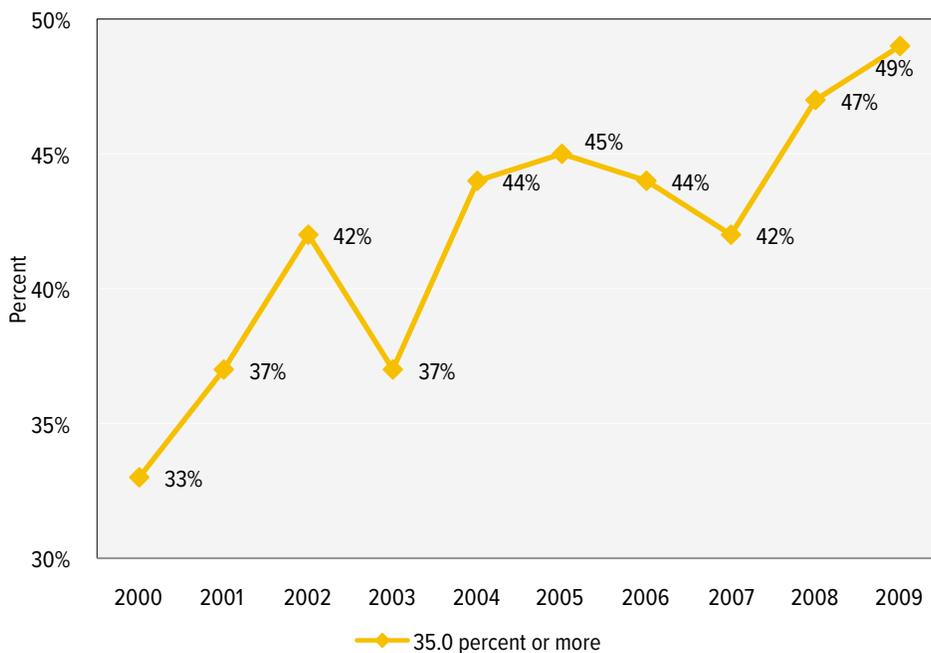


FIGURE 6:  
Gross Rent  
as Percent of  
Household Income,  
Shelby County,  
2000-2009

Source: American  
Community Survey,  
2009, B25070

## The Memphis child poverty rate is double the national rate.

The terms “poor” and “in poverty” are applied to families with incomes below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) set by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. FPL for a family of four is \$21,200.

Poverty endangers children’s healthy development.<sup>5</sup> Poor families experience, on average, more turmoil, violence, and instability than other families. Poor children watch more TV, have fewer books, and are read to less frequently than their better-off peers. Their daily lives are noisier, more crowded, and less safe. They are exposed to more toxins, attend lower-quality schools, and have poorer nutrition. As early as the first three years of life, they score lower on cognitive measures, and the effects of early poverty often persist into adulthood.<sup>6-8</sup>

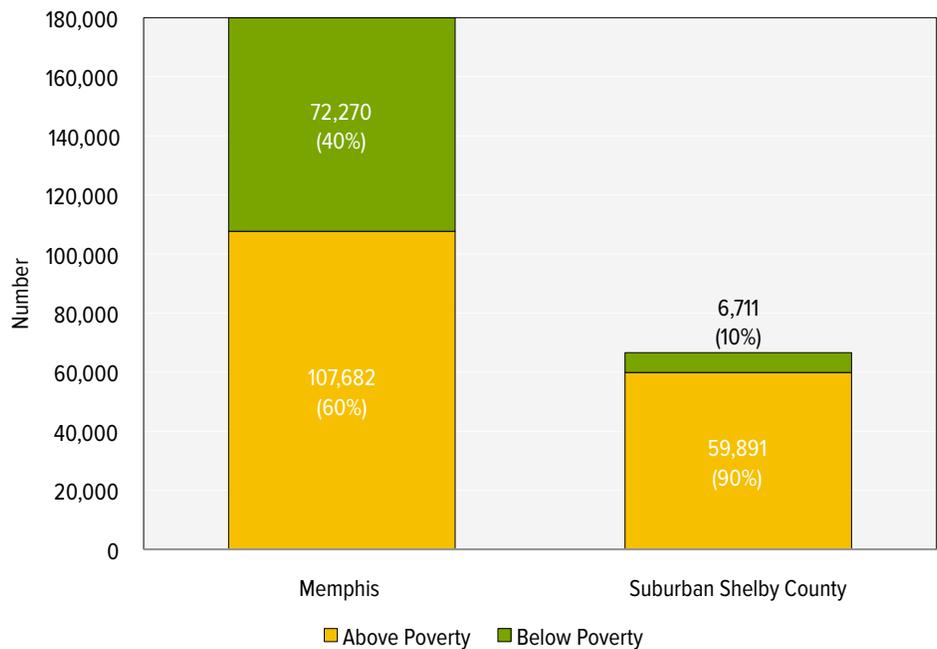
32 percent of all children in Shelby County are in poverty (Figure 9), and over 90 percent of them live in Memphis (not shown). As Figures 7 and 8 show, Shelby County poverty is largely concentrated in Memphis.

- In Memphis, 40 percent of children live in poverty, compared to 20 percent nationwide.
- Ten percent of children in suburban Shelby County live in poverty.

As Figure 8 shows, the percentage of children living in poverty has been relatively steady in Shelby County since 2003, with a slight increase in Memphis.

FIGURE 7:  
Number & Percent  
of Children in  
Poverty,  
Memphis and  
Suburban Shelby  
County, 2009

Source: American  
Community Survey,  
2009, C17001



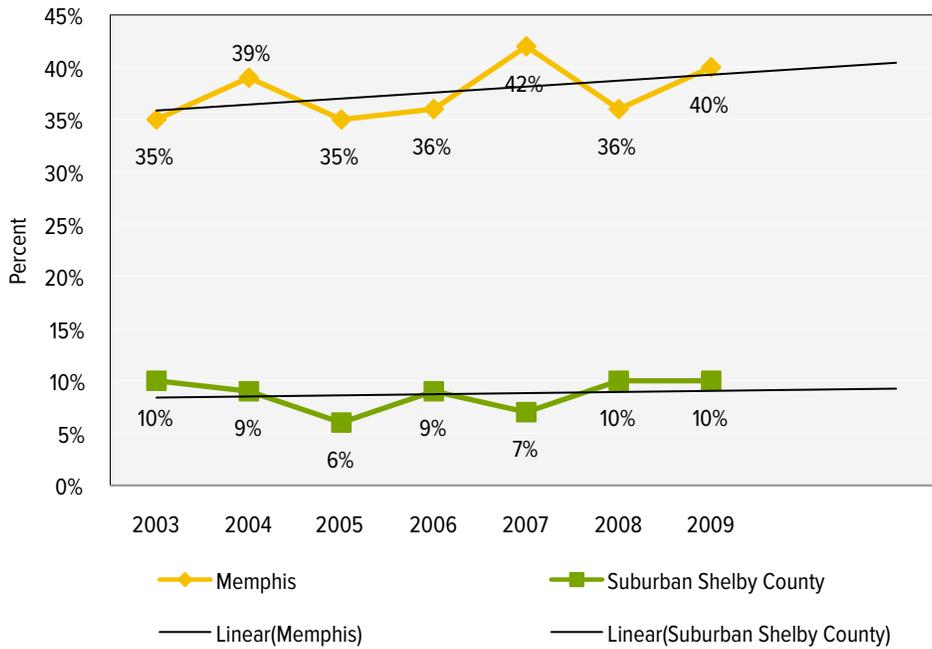


FIGURE 8:  
Percent of Children  
in Poverty,  
Memphis and  
Suburban Shelby  
County,  
2003-2009

Source: American  
Community Survey,  
2003-2009, C17001

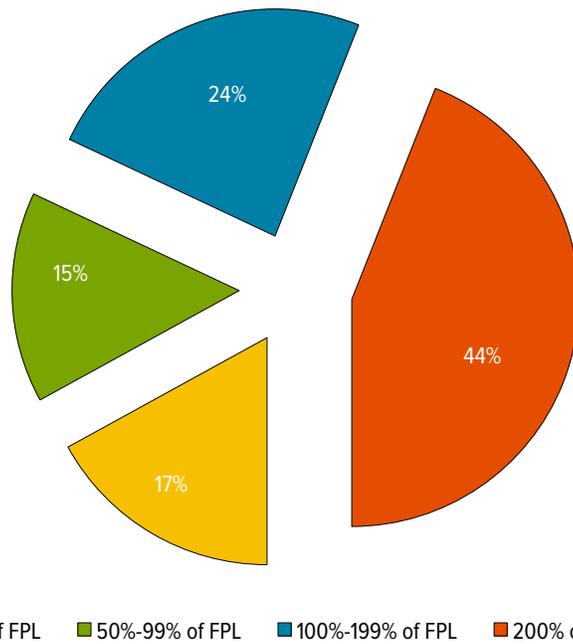


FIGURE 9:  
Percent of Children  
by Living Standard,  
Shelby County,  
2009

Source: American  
Community Survey,  
2009, C17024

## The Federal Poverty Level undercounts children living in economic distress.

The Federal Poverty Level (FPL) is widely considered an inadequate measure of economic hardship. The formula was developed in the early 1960's, when the relative costs of food, housing, health care, and other expenses were much different than today. Additionally, the formula is based solely on income; it does not recognize other forms of hardship such as being in debt or living in substandard housing.

The limitations of the official poverty level have led researchers to distinguish two additional categories of hardship: low income and extreme poverty. Extensive research shows that it takes an income about twice the poverty line for a family to meet its basic needs.<sup>9-11</sup> Low-income families—families with incomes above FPL but below 200 percent of FPL—face many of the same difficulties that poor families face. Families living on incomes below half of the FPL are considered to be in extreme poverty.

More than half of Shelby County's children are disadvantaged (Figure 9).

- Of the 32 percent who are poor, more than half are in extreme poverty.
- 24 percent of children in Shelby County live in low-income families.
- Fewer than half of Shelby County's children are economically secure (at or above 200 percent FPL).

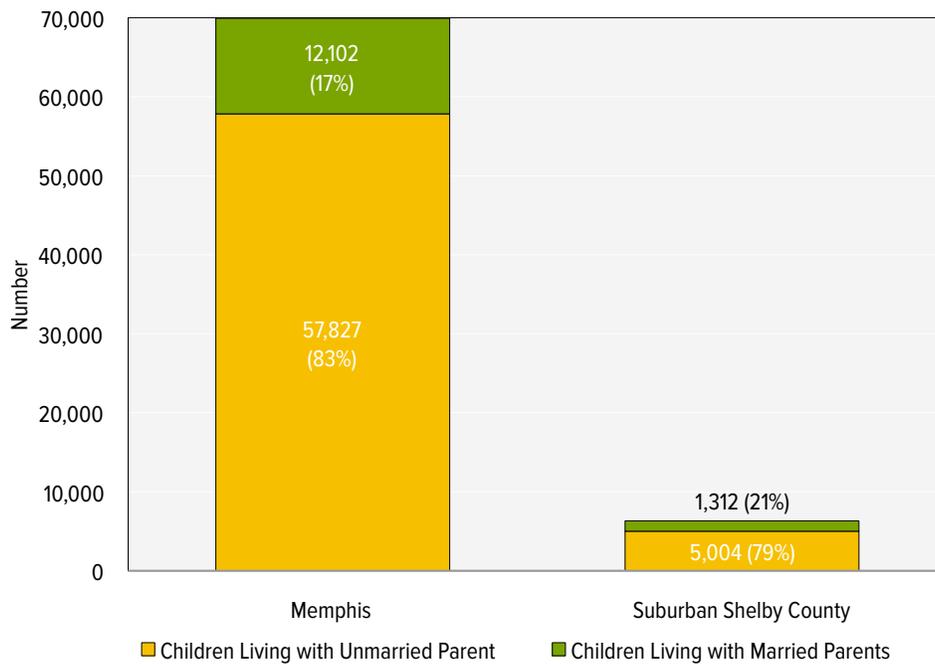


FIGURE 10:  
Number & Percent  
of Children Living  
in Poverty  
by Living  
Arrangement,  
Memphis and  
Suburban Shelby  
County, 2009

Source: American  
Community Survey,  
2009, C17006

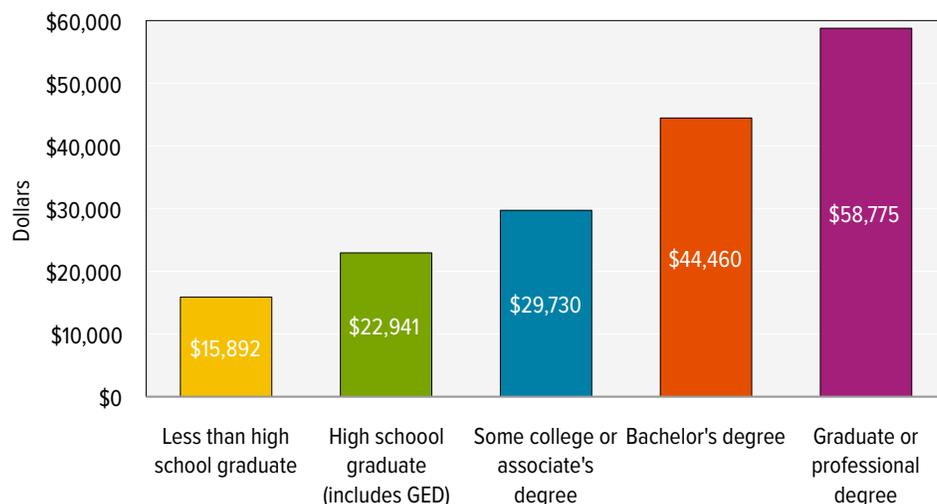
## Poverty does not affect all types of families equally.

Where a child lives is not the only factor in how likely she is to live in poverty. Figure 10 shows that children in single-parent and unmarried-parent families are more likely to be poor whether they live in Memphis or in suburban Shelby County. Poverty, along with low social support and high levels of parental stress, places these children at risk for behavioral problems and reduced cognitive outcomes.<sup>12,13</sup>

- In Memphis, 83 percent of children in poverty live in unmarried-parent families (Figure 10).
- Similarly, in suburban Shelby County, 79 percent of poor children live in unmarried-parent families (Figure 10).

**FIGURE 11:**  
Median Annual  
Income by  
Educational  
Attainment,  
Shelby County,  
2009

Source: American  
Community Survey,  
2009, B20004



## Kids fare better when their parents are educated.

Education helps parents earn more money, allowing them to improve their children's physical surroundings and purchase books and other stimulating materials. But income is only one way that children benefit from parental education. Better-educated parents tend to create home environments that promote their children's development. Compared to other parents, they read to their children more often, use larger vocabularies, and have higher expectations for their children. Their children, in turn, are likely to have higher academic and behavioral outcomes.<sup>14,15</sup>

In Shelby County, increases in education translate into substantial gains in annual income (Figure 11). High school graduates earn 44 percent more than high school dropouts. Attending some college raises a high school graduate's income another 30 percent, and graduating with a four-year degree means another 50 percent increase. A graduate or professional degree adds another 32 percent.

Researchers often combine measures of parental education, income, and occupation into a single variable: socioeconomic status (SES). SES is widely considered a better measure of a family's overall resources than is income or education alone.

The experiences that often accompany inadequate incomes and low levels of parental education have negative effects on brain development. The links between SES and children's health, cognitive development, academic achievement, and social adjustment are well documented.<sup>1,16</sup> Recent research is discovering possible underlying mechanisms for these associations—specifically, differences in brain activity among low-SES children and higher-SES children. These differences are especially dramatic in the prefrontal cortex, the brain region associated with higher-level cognitive skills such as language, memory, and cognitive control.<sup>17,18</sup>

**Together, family income and parental education strongly influence a child's chances for success.**

## Most Shelby County homes do not have children.

- Only 33 percent of households in Memphis have children younger than 18 years present (Figure 12).
- Only 43 percent of households in suburban Shelby County have children (Figure 12).

This presents a unique set of problems for community efforts to build and sustain an effective public voice for children. For instance, child well-being may be a lower priority for adults without children or those whose children have already come of age.<sup>19</sup>

The differences between Memphis and the outlying suburbs may add to these difficulties. Suburban Shelby County has a higher share of families with children than Memphis. As described above, it also has proportionately fewer children in poverty and children in single parent families. These demographic patterns tend to separate middle-class families from families in need and make it difficult to build a shared identity among parents and caregivers throughout our community.<sup>20</sup> The Urban Child Institute acknowledges these challenges and chooses to see them as opportunities for increasing our community's social capital and discovering new ways to improve the well-being of all its children.

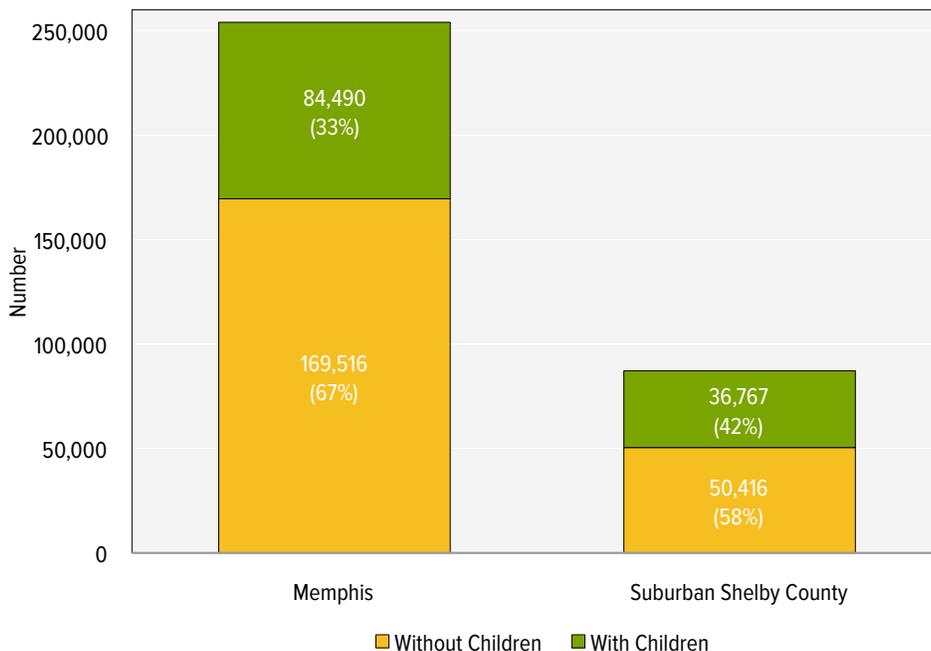


FIGURE 12:  
Number & Percent  
of Households  
by Presence of  
Children, Shelby  
County, 2009

Source: American  
Community Survey,  
2009, C11005

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