

# Head Start slashes likelihood of adult poverty

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One of the United States' most successful anti-poverty measures starts very early in life: Head Start, a preschool program for disadvantaged kids, increased children's education and significantly reduced the likelihood of adult poverty, according to a University of Michigan study.

Martha Bailey, professor of economics and research professor in the Population Studies Center at the Institute for Social Research, and colleagues found that [children](#) who attended the program were 12 percent less likely to be impoverished as adults and 29 percent less likely to rely on public assistance. Children who attended Head Start were almost 20 percent more likely to complete college.

Comparing government dollars spent to the gains in potential income, the researchers calculate a significant rate of return of the government's investment. Money spent on Head Start in the 1960s and 1970s led to a 4-percent return for girls and an 11-percent return for boys. This means for every \$100,000 dollars spent on Head Start, the government earned back \$111,000 for boys, and \$104,000 for girls.

"These returns would be larger if they accounted for government savings on public assistance programs," Bailey said.

The Head Start program began almost 55 years ago during President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. Impoverished children were entering grade school underprepared—in large part because of a lack of access to nutrition and health care. Blood tests showed that as many as 40 percent of the Head Start children were getting less than two-thirds of their daily requirement of iron, and 10 percent were extremely undernourished.

"Hungry children have trouble focusing and learning. Children who can't see or hear well can't keep up with children who can," Bailey said.

Additionally, the program provided vaccines and screenings for illness—including providing medical help for families whose children required glasses or hearing aids.

"Head Start did a lot of seemingly small things like giving kids healthy meals and helping them get glasses or hearing aids," Bailey said. "This helped disadvantaged kids learn in preschool but also helped them succeed for many years afterwards."

The researchers examined how long children received education, their likelihood of finishing high school, and enrolling in and completing college. The researchers also determined the children's economic self-sufficiency in adulthood. In all, they found participating children also achieved 2.9 years more education, were 2.1 percent more likely to complete high school and were 8.7 percent more likely to enroll in college

In the [preschool program](#), health and nutrition services comprised between 17 and 20 percent of the program's budget, which was \$9.6 billion and served 900,000 children in 2017. Early childhood education used about 70 percent of the budget, while parental involvement and social services took up the rest of the budget.

The researchers based their study on children born from 1965 to 1980 in the U.S. counties in which they knew the cut-off age for attending the program. During the first wave, the researchers compared children from the same counties who attended Head Start to those who were too old to enter the program. The researchers also limited their sample to those who are in their highest earning potential years—ages 25 to 54.

"There is so much evidence that model preschool programs are highly effective. But sometimes the perfect, model programs are infeasible—they are simply too expensive to implement," Bailey said. "As a result, policymakers do nothing. The perfect becomes the enemy of the feasible."

"Head Start in the 1960s and 1980s was far from a model program. No

one knew how to do a public preschool programs on a large scale because no one had ever tried. The fact that this [program](#) had such large effects is an optimistic message for the power of public policy."

**More information:** Prep School For Poor Kids: The Long-Run Impacts of Head Start on Human Capital and Economic Self-Sufficiency: [www-personal.umich.edu/~bailey ...](http://www-personal.umich.edu/~bailey...)  
[Bailey Sun Timpe.pdf](#)

Provided by University of Michigan

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