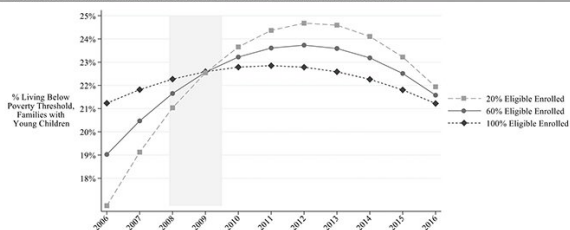


# Increase in head start funding "a national priority"

7 December 2020, by Sara Savat

PREDICTED FAMILY POVERTY RATES BY HEAD START AVAILABILITY



Note: Shaded area represents recession period from December 2007 through June 2009.

Predicted rates of family poverty from 2006 through 2016 for states where 20%, 60% and 100% of eligible children were enrolled in Head Start. These percentages capture approximate data points in the sample. For instance, Nevada has 22%, Illinois 60% and North Dakota 100% of all eligible children enrolled in their Head Start programs. Credit: Collins

Increased funding for Head Start—the largest federally funded, early childhood development program in the United States—is needed to support families during the COVID-19 recession and to ensure a more stable economic recovery.

After studying a decade's worth of U.S. data around the 2007-09 Great Recession, researchers from Washington University in St. Louis, University of North Texas, University of Melbourne and the Maryland Population Research Center made the recommendation in a study published Dec. 5 in the journal *Family Relations*.

"History has shown that families who are already economically vulnerable are often the most harmed by a crisis and face the toughest recovery. COVID-19 has been no exception," said Caitlyn Collins, study co-author and assistant professor of sociology at Washington University in St. Louis. "Not only are many families facing extreme economic precarity, but school and childcare

closings during the pandemic have removed major sources of support on which families rely.

"Head Start funding should be a national priority to support the nation's most [vulnerable children](#) and families."

Their study comes at a time of crisis for remote education and childcare due to the pandemic.

"In times of economic recession, programs like Head Start provide a vital resource for families who lack childcare support as they seek employment or return to work," the authors write.

"Yet, the availability of Head Start varies widely depending on a [family's](#) state of residence. Community agencies have discretion in allocating federal funds and state governments may supplement funding to expand Head Start availability and services."

William Scarborough (North Texas), Caitlyn Collins (WashU), Leah Ruppanner (Melbourne) and Liana Christin Landivar (Population Research Center) examined this state-by-state variation to study whether the availability of Head Start during the 2007-09 recession mitigated the impact of that crisis on [poverty](#) rates among families with young children.

Using data from the American Community Survey from 2006-16 and state-level data from program information reports, they found that states with higher levels of Head Start enrollment experienced less poverty growth among families with young children during the Great Recession. They also experienced a faster and more stable economic recovery than states with lower Head Start enrollment.

**"The more children enrolled, the less poverty growth"**

Despite starting out with higher rates of poverty among families with young children in 2006, states with higher Head Start enrollment did not experience as rapid an increase in family poverty up to 2012. In fact, by 2009, there was practically no difference in family poverty rates between high-, medium- and low-Head Start enrollment states. By 2012, low-enrollment states had poverty rates 1 percentage point higher than medium-enrollment states and nearly 2 percentage points higher than high-enrollment states.

Take Mississippi and Alabama, for example. Prior to the recession, the poverty rate in Mississippi—where 90% of eligible children are enrolled in Head Start—was about 6 percentage points higher than neighboring Alabama, where only 47% of eligible children attend these programs. When the recession started, family poverty rates increased faster in Alabama. As a result, the gap had fallen to 3.5 percentage points by the end of the recession in 2009. Mississippi also recovered faster with [poverty rates](#) beginning to decline in 2011, while Alabama did not peak until 2013. By 2016, the two states had nearly the same poverty rate.

"The findings suggest that greater access to Head Start programs prevented many families from falling into poverty and helped others exit poverty during the Great Recession," Scarborough said.

"As we face new challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, we urge policymakers to heed this evidence and designate funding to expand Head Start."

### "Current funding can't keep up with growing demand"

Head Start is a school readiness program that offers free childcare for children 5 and under and provides comprehensive support services for eligible families. To be eligible, children must live in a family with income below the poverty line, receive other type of income-based public assistance and either be homeless or in foster care. Head Start operates in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Current federal funding for Head Start remains well below the established demand. At minimum, the research team recommends all states enroll 100% of eligible children without further restricting eligibility standards. Previous studies have estimated doing so would cost an additional \$14.4 billion.

While this would more than double the current Head Start expenditures, the authors said this amount is "minuscule" when compared with other types of coronavirus relief spending.

Ideally, they recommend a more proactive approach: broaden eligibility guidelines and funding to help keep vulnerable families out of poverty.

Even with substantial increases to Head Start funding, the U.S. would likely lag behind many other developed countries in terms of early childhood education and care funding.

Currently, the U.S. devotes around 0.4% of GDP to early-childhood programs, coming in a lowly third-to-last among 17 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations. By contrast, Sweden spends 1.8% of GDP on early childhood education, while France spending exceeds 1.3% and the United Kingdom spends 0.6% on these programs.

Beyond the economic benefits for families and communities, increased access to Head Start will help level the playing field for at-risk children.

"Early childhood education is vital to support children at a critical developmental stage that's fundamentally different than K-12 education," Collins said. "Wealthier families have more resources to ensure that their children receive high quality care at this important stage, but low-income families do not. Their [children](#) need high-quality care, too.

"This is a matter of funding priorities."

**More information:** William J. Scarborough et al, Head Start and Families' Recovery From Economic Recession: Policy Recommendations for COVID ?19, *Family Relations* (2020). [DOI:](#)

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