

Head Start and African American Children

A Summary of:

“Does Head Start Make a Difference?”

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Focus

- Early Childhood
- ✓ Primary School
- ✓ Middle School
- ✓ Secondary School
- Postsecondary
- Extended Learning

Overview

Head Start is a federal matching program started in 1965 as part of the “War on Poverty.” It offers a comprehensive array of services to economically disadvantaged children, ages three to five, including health care, learning activities and social skills development. The goal is to provide children in poverty with the necessary health and intellectual support so they can start elementary school with foundations similar to more advantaged children. The program requires that 90% of participants come from families living below the poverty line. Ten percent of the openings must be set aside for children with disabilities. The Head Start Bureau indicates that, since its beginning, Head Start has served nearly 17 million children and their families. In Fiscal Year 1997, 793,809 children have been served in both Head Start classrooms and home-based programs. Of these, 36% were African American, 31% white and 26% Hispanic. Sixty-one percent of the families served had incomes of less than \$9,000 a year. Federal funding for the program in FY 1997 was nearly \$4 billion, with an average cost per child of \$4,882.

POPULATION

The sample for this study was taken in 1990 and included 4,787 children aged three years and older, who had at least one sibling over three years old. Of these, 69% were white and 31% were African American. Among the white children, 14% had attended Head Start, 35% went to a non-Head Start program and 51% did neither. Among the African American children, 32% had been in Head Start, 25% went to another type of preschool and 43% did neither. The sample showed that Head Start children, when compared to those attending preschool, tend to have families with lower income levels, and mothers and grandmothers who have fewer years of schooling. African-American mothers of Head Start children are better educated than white mothers of Head Start children, but tend to live in households with lower income levels. Family income levels of Head Start children are also lower than those for children who attended no preschool.

Key Findings

When differences between families are controlled, the following outcomes were observed:

Academic Outcomes

- ◆ Children who participated in Head Start showed statistically significant (nearly seven percentage points) increases in vocabulary

test scores when compared to their siblings who did not attend the program.

- ◆ White children who participated in Head Start were 47% less likely to repeat a grade later in elementary school when compared to their siblings who did not attend the program.

- ♦ African American children were found to lose benefits gained from Head Start faster than white children and, by age 10, they retained no gains, while white children still retained an overall gain of five percentage points.
- ♦ Participation in other types of preschool programs had no statistically significant effect on test scores or grade repetition.

“If the factors preventing African American children from maintaining the gains they achieve in Head Start could be removed, the program could probably be judged an incontrovertible success.”

—Currie and Thomas, 1995

- ♦ No statistically significant differences were found in growth rates for children who attended Head Start compared to children who did not attend the program.

Measures of health status

- ♦ All children who attended Head Start were 8% more likely to be immunized than children who had not attended the program.
- ♦ Younger siblings of children who attended Head Start were more likely to be immunized than younger siblings of children who did not attend the program.

Discussing the different outcomes of Head Start across racial groups, the researchers observed that African American children in Head Start tend to come from more disadvantaged homes and live in poorer communities. Differences in retention of Head Start gains may also be due to differences in the types of schools that these children attended after they left the program.

Program Components

Head Start provides comprehensive services for children from low-income families, aged three to five. The program is administered by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Grants are awarded to public or private non-profit agencies by ACF Regional Offices and the Head Start Bureau’s American Indian and Migrant Programs Branches. The community has to match twenty percent of the program cost.

According to information provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Head Start programs are tailored to the local needs of the participating children and the community served. However, all Head Start programs must focus on:

- ♦ education
- ♦ nutrition
- ♦ socio-economic development
- ♦ physical and mental health
- ♦ parental involvement

Head Start programs are expected to provide activities that foster the child’s intellectual, social and emotional growth, while respecting his or her ethnic and cultural characteristics. The health component includes immunizations, medical, dental and mental health services. Another required component of the program is to provide children with nutritious meals.

Parental involvement is an essential component of Head Start. Parents serve as members of policy councils and committees and participate in administrative and managerial decisions. They also participate in classes and workshops on child development, health and nutrition education. Program staff conduct home visits and work with parents in educational activities that can take place at home.

Among other services provided to families of Head Start children are community outreach, needs assessment, recruitment and enrollment of children, information and referrals, emergency assistance and/or crisis intervention.

Contributing Factors

Early Intervention for the Most Vulnerable Children

Research indicates that children who are intellectually stimulated from early ages, and receive appropriate health care, will be more likely to succeed later in school and in life. Head Start programs focus on the most vulnerable children, those who live in poverty and/or have disabilities.

Parental Support

The programs do not focus solely on the child. They offer education, information and referral services to participating families, empowering them

to raise their children in a healthier and more supportive environment.

Comprehensive Services

Head Start offers a comprehensive array of services for participating children and their families. The program also encourages the communities to use non-Head Start resources so that more children can be reached. In 1996, nearly 68% of Head Start children were enrolled in the Early Periodic Screening, Diagnosis and Treatment (EPSDT), a Medicaid program that pays for preventive medical and dental care for children.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

Researchers used a sample from two national databases: the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) and the National Longitudinal Survey's Child-Mother (NLSCM). The NLSY started in 1979 and has annually surveyed 6,283 women. As of 1990, the women, aged 25-32, had given birth to over 8,500 children. The NLSCM includes the NLSY mothers and their children. To control for family background and differential treatment among children, the researchers contrasted children enrolled in Head Start with siblings not enrolled in the program. These siblings were further divided between those who had not attended preschool and those enrolled in a non-Head Start type of preschool program. To measure academic gains, researchers used the Picture Peabody Vocabulary Test score (PPVT) and the absence of grade repetition. The impact of Head Start on children's health was measured by immunization status (specifically whether the child had been immunized for measles) and growth rates. Regression analysis was used to estimate the effects of participation or non-participation in Head Start in the four measures.

EVALUATION FUNDING

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GEOGRAPHIC AREAS

All 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico have Head Start programs.

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