



Who Goes to Preschool and Why Does it Matter?

by W. Steven Barnett and Donald J. Yarosz

In a world shaped by global competition, preschool education programs play an increasingly vital role in child development and school readiness. There is growing awareness that early learning's impacts persist across children's life spans, affecting educational achievement, adult earning and even crime and delinquency.

Preschool education is increasingly seen as a middle-income essential. In 2005, two-thirds of 4-year-olds and more than 40 percent of 3-year-olds were enrolled in a preschool education program. This represents a substantial increase over earlier decades, particularly at age 4. The evidence indicates the increase in enrollment has not reached all segments of the population equally and there are variations in participation rates regionally within the U.S. This fact sheet identifies these important differences and sheds light on how income, education, ethnicity, family structure, maternal employment and geography relate to preschool education program participation.



Preschool Policy Facts

Policy Facts series edited by Ellen C. Frede, Ph.D., and W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D.

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What We Know:

- The preschool participation picture is complex and dynamic, with children attending a patchwork quilt of public and private programs.
- Long-term increases in pre-K participation owe as much to increased demand for education as increased demand for child care.
- Pre-K attendance rates remain highly unequal and many of those who might benefit most from pre-K participation do not attend.
- Targeted programs appear to have improved access to preschool education for children from lower-income families, but fall short of their intended goals.
- Families with modest incomes (under \$60,000) have the least access to preschool education.
- Existing data sources on preschool education do not provide an unduplicated count of participation by program.

Policy Recommendations:

- Federal and state programs will require expansion and greater coordination to finish the job of reaching disadvantaged children with high-quality preschool education.
- Strategies need to build upon and move beyond targeting to increase access to middle-income families who find it difficult to access high-quality pre-K.
- Policy initiatives should address regional imbalances in preschool education access.
- As access is increased, quality must be raised. Yet, there are limits to how fast the supply of good teachers and good facilities can be increased and policies may need to increase capacity gradually.
- Accurate data on participation by type of program, child's age and length of enrollment are needed. Coordination is needed among researchers, and local, state and federal agencies responsible for pre-K programs.

Long-Term Trend: Preschool Education is on the Increase

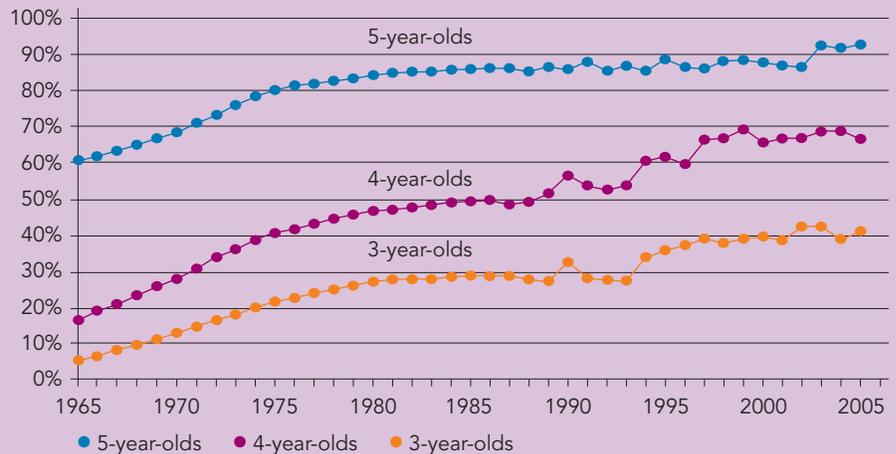
Preschool education program participation in the United States has increased steadily for many decades. Data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) describe the enrollment of young children in school (as reported by parents) over 40 years. In 1965, only 60 percent of 5-year-olds were in school. This rose to 85 percent by 1980 and reached the low 90s by 2005.

Maternal Employment: Preschool participation has increased at the same pace for children whether or not their mothers are employed outside the home. As children with employed mothers are slightly more likely to enroll in a pre-K classroom, the growth of maternal employment has played some role in increased participation rates, but child care demand is of secondary importance to education.

Ethnicity: African-American children have the highest pre-K participation rates among the three largest ethnic groups. White non-Hispanic children have participation rates that are somewhat below those of African-American children. The “other” category (which includes Asians and Native Americans) has the highest rates at age 4 and second-highest rate at age 3. Hispanic children have by far the lowest pre-K participation rates.

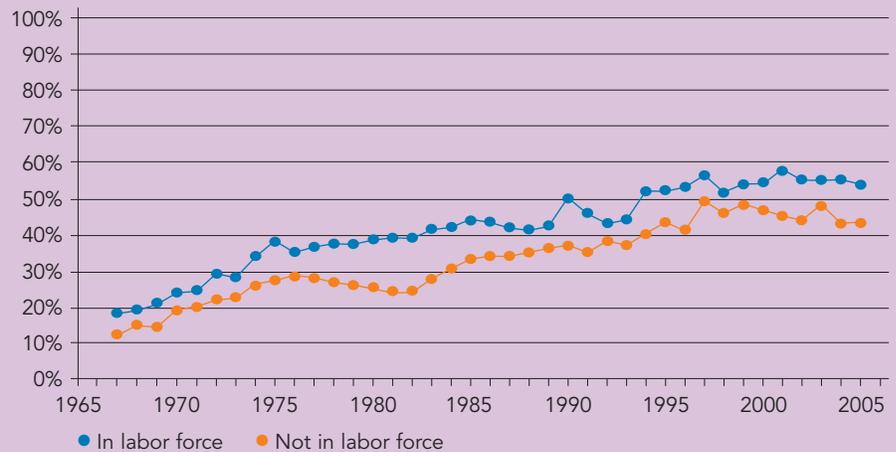
As children with employed mothers are more likely to enroll in a pre-K classroom, the growth of maternal employment has played some role in increased participation rates, but child care demand is of secondary importance to education.

Figure 1.
Kindergarten and Preschool Education Participation by Age: 1965–2005



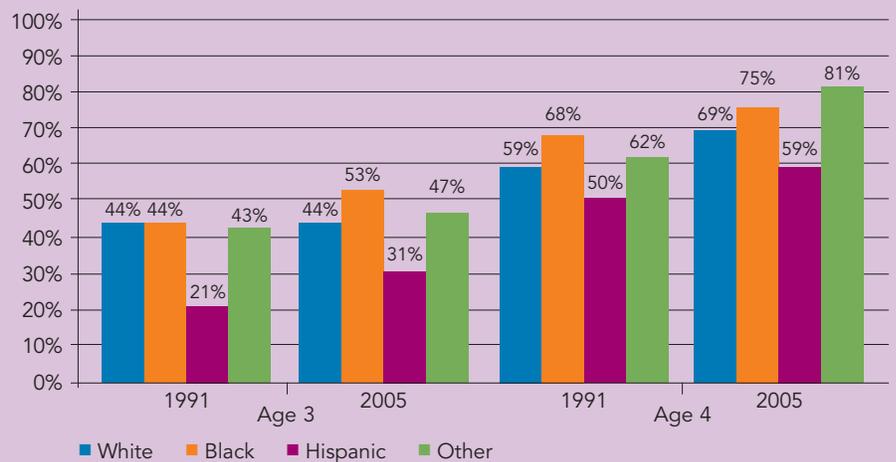
Source: Current Population Survey (CPS) October Supplement 1965-2005.
Note: Some children enter kindergarten at age 6 and are not included here.

Figure 2.
Preschool Education Participation by Maternal Employment: 1967–2005



Source: Current Population Survey (CPS) October Supplement 1967-2005.
Data for the following years have been interpolated: 1977-1981, 1983, 1984 and 1986.

Figure 3.
Preschool Education Participation by Ethnicity



Source: NHES 1991 and 2005.

Income: The participation pattern by income suggests that public policies raise pre-K participation rates for low-income families. However, young children in poverty still have much lower rates of preschool education enrollment than children whose families have higher-than-average incomes. Families with modest incomes may face the greatest difficulties in obtaining access to preschool programs.

Mother's Education: Mother's education is highly predictive of a young child's educational experiences. For both 3- and 4-year-olds, the highest participation rates are for children whose mothers have a four-year college degree (BA)—over 80 percent at age 4 and about 60 percent at age 3. Children of mothers with at least a high school diploma, but not a BA degree, have lower rates of attendance—about 60 percent at age 4 and 40 percent at age 3. Children of high school dropouts have the lowest participation rates: 55 percent at age 4 and 21 percent at age 3. This suggests that programs targeted by family income level are less effective at reaching children with the least educated parents.

Region: Pre-K participation rates vary substantially from one region to another and state-by-state. With regard to enrollment of 4-year-olds, all regions progressed, but the West and Midwest fell behind the Northeast and South. While regional differences in pre-K participation may reflect differences in populations, it is likely that differences in state policies also play an important role. Universal pre-K programs in Oklahoma, Georgia, and Florida have made free preschool education programs available to most children at age 4. Twelve states (six are in the West) offer no state-funded pre-K program at all.

Figure 4.
Preschool Education Participation by Income: 2005

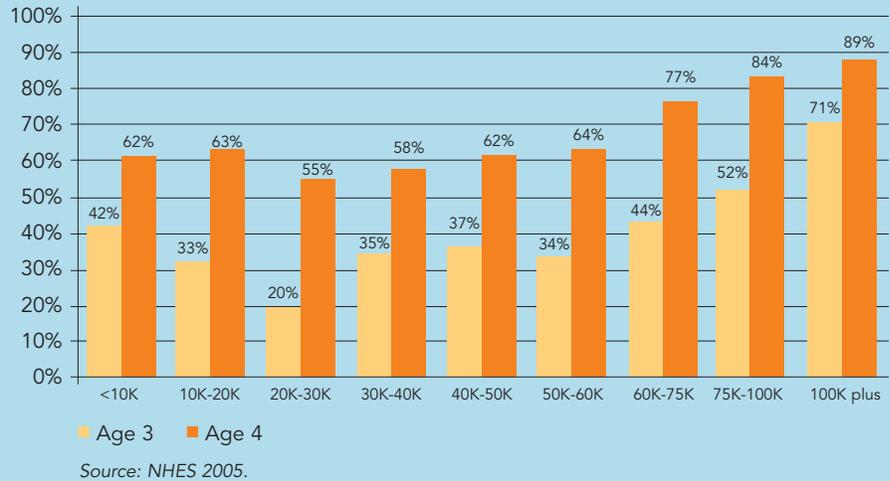


Figure 5.
Preschool Education Participation by Mother's Education

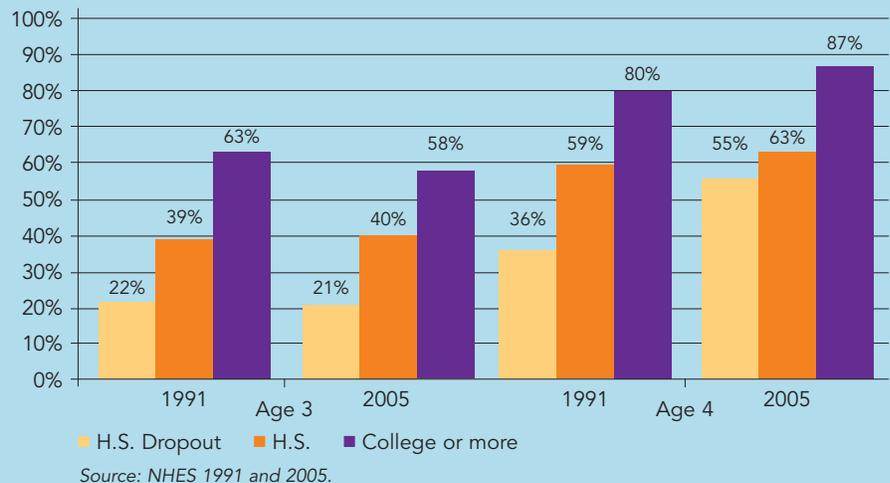
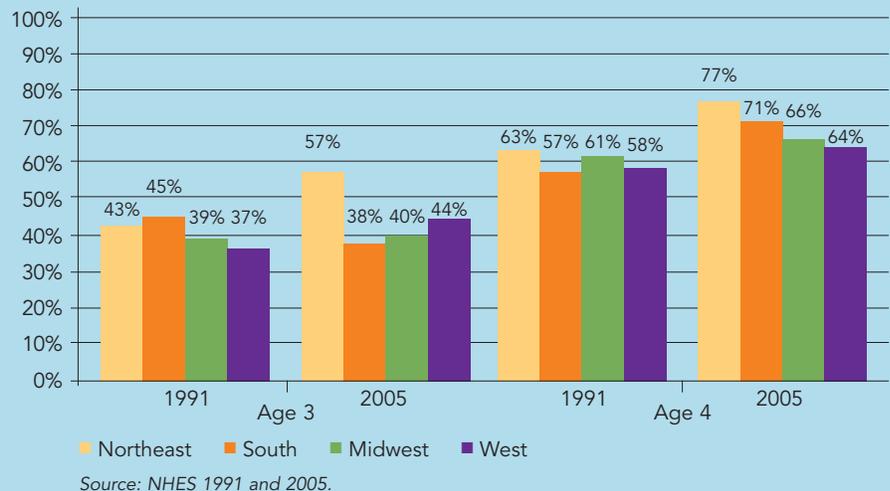


Figure 6.
Preschool Education Participation by Region



Why High-Quality Preschool Education Matters

A substantial body of research finds that high-quality preschool education can enhance a child’s learning and development. Researchers have quantified the costs and benefits of highly effective preschool education based on three studies (Perry Preschool, Abecedarian, and Chicago Child-Parent Center) with follow-up on a comprehensive range of outcomes from the preschool years into adulthood. Table 1 presents basic descriptions of each study together with estimated costs and benefits. These three benefit-cost analyses are particularly useful when considered together because they encompass different types and intensities of programs implemented with different populations in different types of communities.

Policy Challenge: Make Preschool More Available

Most American children spend time in a pre-K classroom at age 4 and many attend at age 3 as well. Yet, pre-K participation in the United States remains highly unequal, with many children starting out behind before they begin kindergarten. The children least likely to attend pre-K are those whose parents have the least education and least income, and who live in the western and mid-western regions of our country. Over the last decade, there has been progress in closing the attendance gap for 4-year-old children of the least educated parents. This likely reflects the growth of Head Start and state preschool education programs. However, these targeted programs have not fully accomplished their goals with respect to access.

This is in part due to the dynamic nature of the population, which leads to difficulties in identification, changes in eligibility, and geographic mobility.

Other studies have found that inequalities in access extend to quality as well as quantity. The nation and its children will not benefit if quality is sacrificed to increase participation rates. Higher standards and added resources for quality are essential components of any effort to increase equality of access to effective preschool education. Given the high returns of highly effective preschool programs, the challenge for public policy is not just to ensure that every child has a place in a classroom, but that every child has access to a *high-quality* program.

Table 1. Three Benefit-Cost Analyses of High-Quality Preschool Education

| CHARACTERISTIC | PROGRAM | | |
|--|----------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| | Carolina Abecedarian | Chicago Child-Parent Centers | High/Scope Perry Preschool |
| Year began | 1972 | 1983 | 1962 |
| Location | Chapel Hill, NC | Chicago, IL | Ypsilanti, MI |
| Sample size | 111 | 1,539 | 123 |
| Research design | Randomized trial | Matched neighborhoods | Randomized trial |
| Age | 6 weeks to age 5 | Ages 3–4 | Ages 3–4 |
| Program schedule | Full day, year round | Half-day, school year | Half-day, school year |
| COSTS AND BENEFITS (2006 DOLLARS, DISCOUNTED AT 3%) | | | |
| Cost | 70,697 | 8,224 | 17,599 |
| Child Care | 30,753 | 2,037 | 1,051 |
| Maternal Earnings | 76,547 | 0 | 0 |
| K-12 Cost Savings | 9,841 | 5,989 | 9,787 |
| Post-Secondary Ed. Cost | -9,053 | -685 | -1,497 |
| Abuse & Neglect Cost Savings | NE | 329 | NE |
| Crime Cost Savings | 0 | 41,100 | 198,981 |
| Welfare Cost Savings | 218 | NE | 885 |
| Health Cost Savings | 19,804 | NE | NE |
| Earnings | 41,801 | 34,123 | 74,878 |
| Second Generation Earnings | 6,373 | NE | NE |
| Total Benefits | \$ 176,284 | \$ 83,511 | \$ 284,086 |
| Benefit-to-Cost Ratio | 2.5 | 10.1 | 16.1 |

“NE” indicates that a benefit was not estimated for a particular outcome even though one might have occurred.

This fact sheet is based on the policy brief “Who Goes to Preschool and Why Does it Matter?” by W. Steven Barnett and Donald J. Yarosz. The brief includes full references and is available at www.nieer.org. It was made possible by the generous support of The Pew Charitable Trusts. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Pew Charitable Trusts.