The Real Cost of Rolling Back Head Start Wage Requirements

By Morgan Healy, Rachel Fidel, and W. Steven Barnett

Background. On May 12, the Office of Head Start published a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) proposing to rescind the 2024 Head Start teacher wage regulations. The regulations required the creation of wage scales and progress toward pay parity by 2031, with Head Start salaries reaching public pre-K levels or 90% of kindergarten teacher pay.[1]

The goal of the Head Start program is to improve the school readiness of children in economically disadvantaged circumstances to break the cycle of poverty.[2] To do so, Head Start must produce robust impacts on learning and development that sustain gains in educational achievement. In response to rigorous evidence that Head Start did not uniformly produce such results, the 2007 reauthorization of the Head Start Act under the George W. Bush administration, required higher qualifications for the Head Start teaching workforce, increased operating hours, and greater accountability for educational quality.[3]

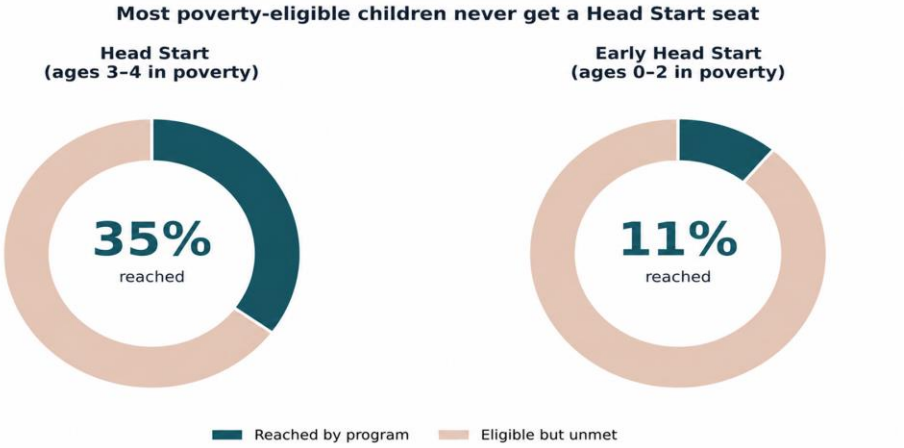
Nearly two decades later, funding limitations have undermined the progress that the law requires. Proposed changes to Head Start in the recent NPRM would reverse requirements for teacher salary parity, while others changes that may be proposed, such as increasing class sizes and child-teacher ratios, risk further undermining rather than improving Head Start effectiveness and returns to taxpayers. Head Start requires more funding, not less, if it is to fulfill its purpose.

1. Head Start already falls short of reaching eligible children in poverty

In 2024, only **35% of under 5 children in poverty eligible for Head Start** and just **11% of those eligible for Early Head Start** were actually enrolled.[4] Children from low-income families have low participation in early education overall, as fewer than half of 3- and 4-year-olds in families earning under $20,000 are enrolled in any classroom-based early education program.[5]

Paradoxically, Head Start faces both unmet demand and unused capacity: in 2024, **13% of funded Head Start and Early Head Start slots remained unfilled despite widespread waitlists**.[6] Staffing shortages are central to this gap, as programs struggle to recruit and retain qualified teachers, thus keeping funded slots unused. Head Start teacher turnover reached 19% in 2024—roughly 25% higher than turnover among K–12 teachers – and more than 20% of vacancies remained unfilled for at least 3 months, emphasizing Head Start's challenges at both retaining and recruiting qualified teachers.[7, 8]

Figure 1. Share of income-eligible children reached by Head Start and Early Head Start in 2024-2025



Source: Head Start Program Information Reports (PIR, 2024-2025), U.S. Census Bureau child age 0 to 4 population estimates (2024); Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC, 2024)

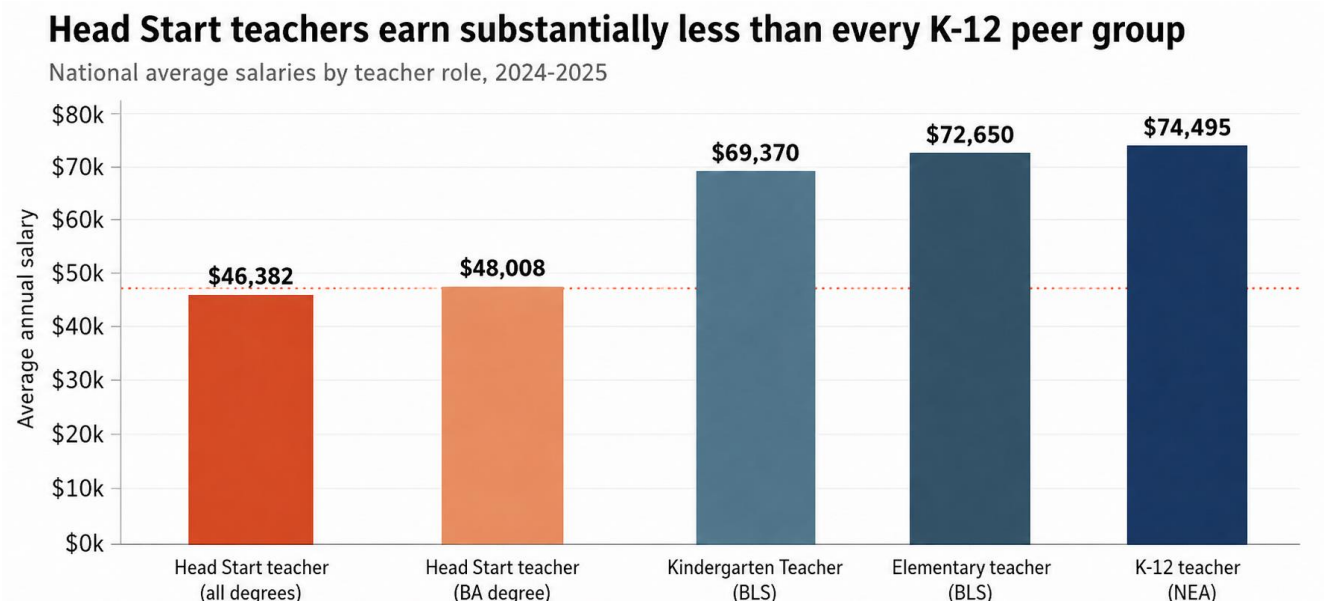
2. Head Start teacher salaries have stagnated for a decade, despite gains in qualifications and remain significantly lower than K-12 teacher salaries

The share of Head Start teachers with a bachelor's degree rose from **45% in 2007 to 70% in 2021**,[9] while teachers' inflation-adjusted salary increased by less than 1% over a similar period (from $41,389 in 2010 to $41,691 in 2023).[10]

Head Start teachers with a bachelor's degree earn just **64% of an average K–12 public school teacher salary — about $26,487 less per year**,[11] with similar shortfalls relative to kindergarten teachers (69%)[12] and elementary teachers (66%).[13] The gap exists in 50 of 51

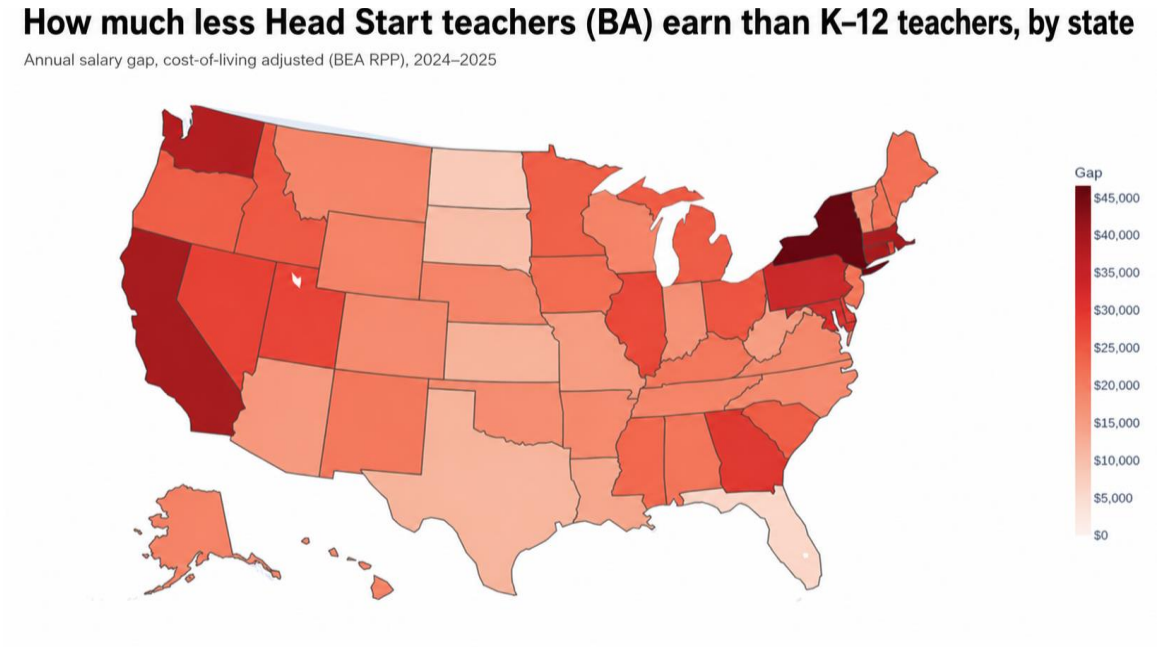
jurisdictions and widens in higher-wage states (See Tables 1 and 2). **In 12 states, K–12 teachers earn at least 40% more than Head Start teachers of all levels; in Idaho, Head Start teachers earn just 54% of K–12 pay.**[14]

Figure 2. National average for the salaries of Head Start teachers of all degree levels, Head Start teachers with a BA degree and Kindergarten, Elementary school and K-12 teachers (2024-2025)



Source: Salaries of Head Start teachers of all degrees and teachers with a Bachelors' degree (PIR, 2024-2025); Public and Private Kindergarten and elementary school teacher salaries (Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), May, 2024); Public K-12 teacher salaries (Education Association (NEA), 2024-2025)

Figure 3. Cost-of-living-adjusted dollar gap between K–12 and Head Start with a BA teacher salaries, by state.



Source: NEA Educator salaries 2024-2025 (K-12) + PIR 2024-2025 (Head Start teachers with a BA), cost of living adjusted via U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) Regional Price Parities, 2024.

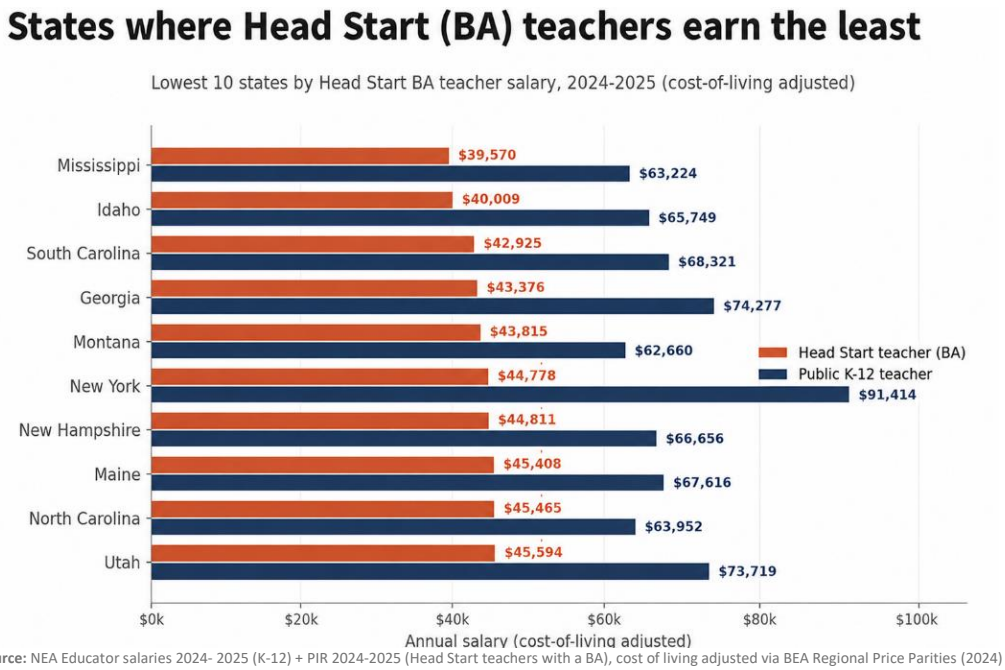
California ($40,338), New York ($46,636), Connecticut ($39,239), Massachusetts ($39,108), and Washington ($38,122) show the largest gaps.

3. Rolling back wage regulations will likely worsen teacher turnover, reduce quality & diminish school readiness

Declines in Head Start unfilled slots, from 13% to 8%, and teacher turnover, from 19% to 17%,[15] between 2024 and 2025 suggest that the **2024 HSPPS Final Rule wage regulations may already be helping stabilize the workforce** and improving programs' ability to fill funded slots. Rescinding these regulations risks reversing these gains.

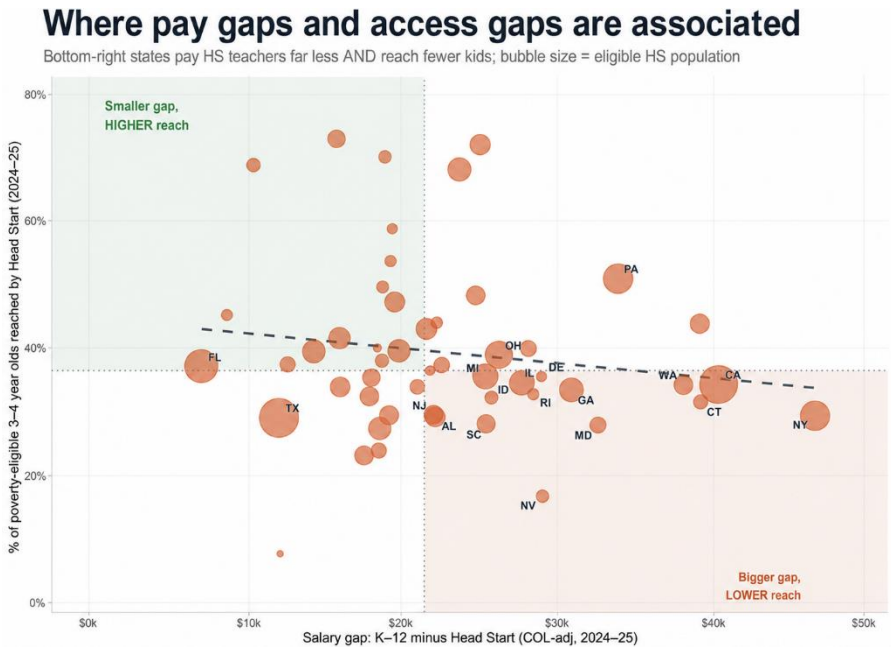
Rolling back Head Start wage requirements would likely weaken teacher compensation at a time when programs are still struggling to recruit and retain qualified staff, despite small gains.[16, 17, 18] Research shows that **teacher turnover is associated with lower classroom quality,**[19] **reduced child safety,**[20] **and poorer child outcomes**,[21] including weaker language, attachment, and self-regulation skills.[22, 23]

Figure 4. The 10 states with the lowest Head Start (BA) teacher salaries compared to K–12 averages in each state



Source: NEA Educator salaries 2024- 2025 (K-12) + PIR 2024-2025 (Head Start teachers with a BA), cost of living adjusted via BEA Regional Price Parities (2024)

Figure 5. Associations between BA-level Head Start and K-12 Teacher Salary Gaps and Enrollment in Head Start for Children in Poverty, by State



Source: Head Start Program Information Reports (PIR, 2024-2025), U.S. Census Bureau child age 0 to 4 population estimates (2024); American Community Survey (ACS), % of children 0 to 4 under 100% the federal poverty line (2024)

Note: Bubble size reflects the eligible Head Start pre-K population. States in the bottom-right quadrant — biggest pay gaps, lowest reach — concentrate many of the largest-population states[24]

States that pay Head Start teachers the least also tend to reach the smallest share of eligible children. California, New York, Pennsylvania, Washington, and Connecticut all sit in the high-gap, low-reach quadrant below — places where compensation reform and underenrollment are not separate issues, but deeply intertwined.

4. CLASS instructional quality scores have stagnated for a decade despite rising teacher qualifications, suggesting that credentials alone may be insufficient to drive quality without stronger compensation

Head Start program instructional quality scores as measured by CLASS averaged only **2.9 on a 7-point scale between 2012–2019**,[25] showing little improvement despite a steady rise in teacher credentials. This could be directly connected to teacher turnover, which is higher among more qualified staff who may leave for better compensation elsewhere; and turnover, in turn, is associated with decreased instructional quality.[26] Recruiting and retaining qualified Head Start teachers likely requires higher pay to reduce turnover and improve instructional effectiveness.

5. Broad deregulation of Head Start teacher wage requirements will likely not increase efficiency, quality or access

As the Office of Head Start considers regulatory changes to increase efficiency, it must avoid weakening access and educational quality. Rigorous evidence shows that the strongest early childhood programs have well-qualified, fairly compensated teachers and low child-to-teacher ratios. The most rigorously evaluated early-childhood programs, including the Perry Preschool, Abecedarian and Chicago Parent-Child Programs, which have produced large, lasting gains and economic returns of $2.5-$9 for each $1 invested share a common architecture: **highly qualified teachers paid on a K–12 scale and with low child-to-teacher ratios** (<8 pre-K children for every 1 teacher) [27,28,29,30,31,32]— features that current Head Start regulations preserve. The Abbott court-ordered preschool program in New Jersey — the closest current approximation to Perry Preschool at scale — uses BA-degreed teachers on the K–12 pay scale with class sizes capped at 15 and has produced substantial lasting gains in school readiness and achievement.[33] Similarly, rigorous research has found Alabama's First Class Pre-K Program—which requires BA-level pre-K teachers to be paid at K-12 parity—to have lasting positive effects on children's reading and math proficiency.[34]

What Head Start advocates and programs can do

Submit a public comment on the NPRM at **regulations.gov** before June 12th. Comments are most persuasive when they:

(1) Cite your state's state-level pay gap (see appendices on the next pages for this data) and the national enrollment percentage
(2) Describe the teacher turnover, CLASS-score, and DRS-recompetition risks you have observed
(3) Connect those workforce impacts to the impact of the pay gap and related teacher turnover on actual enrollment and child-outcome consequences you have experienced and those cited here

Encourage state Head Start Associations, partner K–12 districts, and local elected officials to file companion comments.

ABOUT NIEER
The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, conducts and disseminates independent research and analysis to inform early childhood education policy.

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Suggested citation:
Healy, M.R., Fidel, R., & Barnett, W. S. (2026). The Real Cost of Rolling Back Head Start Wage Requirements. Policy Brief. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.

APPENDICES

Table 1: Differences between Head Start teachers with a BA and K-12 public teacher salaries, 2024-2025 (cost-of-living adjusted)

State	Average Head Start Teacher Salary with BA by state (2024-2025)	Average K-12 Public Teacher Salary by state (2024-2025)	Salary difference: Head Start teacher with BA vs. K-12 Public Teacher (2024-2025)	Head Start teacher with BA salary as % of K-12 teacher salary (2024-2025)
Alabama	$48,800	$70,911	-$22,110	69%
Alaska	$60,363	$79,573	-$19,210	76%
Arizona	$47,949	$63,859	-$15,909	75%
Arkansas	$49,645	$68,087	-$18,442	73%
California	$53,188	$93,526	-$40,338	57%
Colorado	$52,658	$70,626	-$17,968	75%
Connecticut	$47,232	$86,471	-$39,239	55%
Delaware	$47,721	$76,717	-$28,997	62%
District of Columbia	$74,411	$86,511	-$12,101	86%
Florida	$47,735	$54,792	-$7,057	87%
Georgia	$43,376	$74,277	-$30,902	58%
Hawaii	$50,294	$68,994	-$18,700	73%
Idaho	$40,009	$65,749	-$25,740	61%
Illinois	$50,804	$78,528	-$27,724	65%
Indiana	$48,581	$66,068	-$17,488	74%
Iowa	$51,885	$74,419	-$22,535	70%
Kansas	$55,682	$68,248	-$12,566	82%
Kentucky	$45,677	$67,208	-$21,531	68%
Louisiana	$50,132	$64,377	-$14,245	78%
Maine	$45,408	$67,616	-$22,208	67%
Maryland	$50,673	$83,279	-$32,606	61%
Massachusetts	$49,354	$88,461	-$39,108	56%
Michigan	$48,455	$73,815	-$25,360	66%
Minnesota	$52,603	$77,300	-$24,697	68%
Mississippi	$39,570	$63,224	-$23,654	63%
Missouri	$47,226	$63,167	-$15,941	75%
Montana	$43,815	$62,660	-$18,845	70%
Nebraska	$51,620	$70,282	-$18,662	73%
Nevada	$45,770	$74,828	-$29,058	61%
New Hampshire	$44,811	$66,656	-$21,845	67%
New Jersey	$56,085	$78,098	-$22,013	72%
New Mexico	$54,639	$75,626	-$20,986	72%
New York	$44,778	$91,414	-$46,636	49%
North Carolina	$45,465	$63,952	-$18,487	71%
North Dakota	$59,591	$68,238	-$8,647	87%
Ohio	$49,874	$76,084	-$26,210	66%
Oklahoma	$52,656	$70,502	-$17,845	75%
Oregon	$53,993	$79,002	-$25,008	68%
Pennsylvania	$47,170	$81,046	-$33,875	58%
Rhode Island	$55,400	$83,860	-$28,460	66%
South Carolina	$42,925	$68,321	-$25,395	63%
South Dakota	$55,692	$66,022	-$10,330	84%
Tennessee	$46,880	$66,640	-$19,759	70%
Texas	$53,690	$65,682	-$11,992	82%
Utah	$45,594	$73,719	-$28,126	62%
Vermont	$55,012	$73,369	-$18,357	75%
Virginia	$49,388	$68,498	-$19,110	72%
Washington	$52,137	$90,259	-$38,122	58%
West Virginia	$49,213	$64,917	-$15,704	76%
Wisconsin	$52,563	$72,048	-$19,486	73%

Wyoming	$51,513	$70,846	-$19,333	73%

Table 2: Differences between Head Start teachers of all levels and K-12 public teacher salaries, 2024-2025 (cost-of-living adjusted)

State	Average Head Start Teacher Salary, all levels by state (2024-2025)	Average K-12 Public Teacher Salary by state (2024-2025)	Salary difference: Head Start salary vs. K-12 Public Teacher (2024-2025)	Head Start salary as % of K-12 teacher salary (2024-2025)
Alabama	$45,314	$70,911	-$25,597	64%
Alaska	$50,513	$79,573	-$29,059	63%
Arizona	$43,878	$63,859	-$19,981	69%
Arkansas	$46,464	$68,087	-$21,624	68%
California	$49,872	$93,526	-$43,654	53%
Colorado	$48,822	$70,626	-$21,804	69%
Connecticut	$50,780	$86,471	-$35,692	59%
Delaware	$46,649	$76,717	-$30,069	61%
District of Columbia	$88,120	$86,511	+$1,609	102%
Florida	$43,817	$54,792	-$10,975	80%
Georgia	$41,771	$74,277	-$32,506	56%
Hawaii	$48,867	$68,994	-$20,127	71%
Idaho	$35,437	$65,749	-$30312	54%
Illinois	$47,859	$78,528	-$30,669	61%
Indiana	$45,202	$66,068	-$20,866	68%
Iowa	$50,858	$74,419	-$23,561	68%
Kansas	$52,763	$68,248	-$15,485	77%
Kentucky	$43,127	$67,208	-$24,081	64%
Louisiana	$47,631	$64,377	-$16,746	74%
Maine	$43,948	$67,616	-$23,667	65%
Maryland	$57,541	$83,279	-$25,739	69%
Massachusetts	$47,336	$88,461	-$41,125	54%
Michigan	$45,717	$73,815	-$28,098	62%
Minnesota	$50,003	$77,300	-$27,297	65%
Mississippi	$36,777	$63,224	-$26,446	58%
Missouri	$42,855	$63,167	-$20,311	68%
Montana	$40,884	$62,660	-$21,776	65%
Nebraska	$53,750	$70,282	-$16,532	76%
Nevada	$44,490	$74,828	-$30,337	59%
New Hampshire	$42,197	$66,656	-$24,458	63%
New Jersey	$57,207	$78,098	-$20,891	73%
New Mexico	$47,421	$75,626	-$28,205	63%
New York	$47,483	$91,414	-$43,931	52%
North Carolina	$43,675	$63,952	-$20,276	68%
North Dakota	$53,176	$68,238	-$15,062	78%
Ohio	$47,216	$76,084	-$28,868	62%
Oklahoma	$47,009	$70,502	-$23,493	67%
Oregon	$52,208	$79,002	-$26,793	66%
Pennsylvania	$47,181	$81,046	-$33,865	58%
Rhode Island	$55,026	$83,860	-$28,834	66%
South Carolina	$40,742	$68,321	-$27,579	60%
South Dakota	$49,453	$66,022	-$16,569	75%
Tennessee	$48,373	$66,640	-$18,267	73%
Texas	$50,843	$65,682	-$14,839	77%
Utah	$41,906	$73,719	-$31,813	57%
Vermont	$53,685	$73,369	-$19,684	73%
Virginia	$47,908	$68,498	-$20,590	70%
Washington	$45,472	$90,259	-$44,787	50%

West Virginia	$53,919	$64,917	-$10,998	83%
Wisconsin	$49,482	$72,048	-$22,567	69%
Wyoming	$46,941	$70,846	-$23,905	66%

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