

Who benefits from Head Start? Kids who attend – and their kids, too ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Early childhood education benefits more than the kids who participate - it also helps their kids, even decades later.

A new study of Head Start, the large federally funded pre-kindergarten initiative that started in the 1960s, found that the children of kids who participated were substantially more likely to graduate high school and attend college, and less likely to commit crime and become a teen parent.

It's the latest signal that a substantial investment in early childhood education, particularly when paired with well-funded K-12 schools, can have long-lasting benefits - and offers a striking extension of that research into a second generation.

"Our findings indicate that societal investments in early childhood education can disrupt the intergenerational transmission of the effects of poverty," write researchers Andrew Barr of Texas A&M and Chloe Gibbs of Notre Dame.

Since the study focuses on the effects of Head Start as it existed decades ago, it's unclear if today's program would have the same positive effects. Still, the research is relevant to the nationwide debate on whether to expand, maintain, or reduce spending on early childhood education.

The program currently serves about 40 percent of three- and four-year-olds in poverty nationwide.

Critics of Head Start have pointed to evidence that test-score boosts from the program fade in early grades, and some have advocated cutting the program entirely. But the latest study, which has not been formally peer-reviewed, adds to previous research showing that Head Start can lead to major benefits in adulthood.

To determine the effects of Head Start, the researchers looked at children whose grandmothers did not have a high school diploma and whose mothers lived in counties where the program first launched. In order to isolate the effect of the program, Barr and Gibbs compared children of mothers who grew up in places where Head Start was initially rolled out to those who did not have the option to attend; the researchers could not directly measure whether someone actually enrolled.

The study finds that disadvantaged women who had access to Head Start seemed to benefit from the program in ways that helped their children down the line. Because of the program, crime in the second generation fell by 15 percentage points and high school graduation increased by 12 percentage points. Rates of teen parenthood dropped by nearly 9 percentage points and rates of college attendance rose by 17 percentage points.

The study does not examine the income of those second-generation beneficiaries, but the authors point out that a number of the outcomes, like graduating college high school or avoiding crime, are associated with avoiding poverty.

It's not entirely clear why the program had such big effects years later. The mothers benefitted directly from Head Start - including in the form of higher adult earnings and greater educational attainment - and this may have translated in a number of ways to their children. Other research has shown that increases in family income improve children's well-being and academic achievement.

The findings also suggest that previous estimates may miss the true cost-effectiveness of Head Start by failing to account for its effects across multiple generations. If investing in the program now reduces poverty later, that saves society money - potentially including resources spent on Head Start.

Still, changes in Head Start, and in America, make it unclear whether the program will have similar effects today.

Head Start was originally intended to provide comprehensive support to students and families, including health services. That goal remains, but Gibbs says the program now focuses more on improving kids' cognitive skills, and that students entering the program are likely much less disadvantaged than they were 50 years ago. Alternatives to Head Start may also have changed in quality over the last

several decades, and home environments for students not attending pre-K may have, too.

But her finding, Gibbs says, "is a proof of concept that an early childhood program can in fact have important anti-poverty implications in the second generation."

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