

# Overview: Recent trends in income, racial, and ethnic school readiness gaps at kindergarten entry <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

Full article PDF available to read online <sup>[2]</sup>

## Abstract

Academic achievement gaps between high- and low-income students born in the 1990s were much larger than between cohorts born two decades earlier. Racial/ethnic achievement gaps declined during the same period. To determine whether these two trends have continued in more recent cohorts, we examine trends in several dimensions of school readiness, including academic achievement, self-control, externalizing behavior, and a measure of students' approaches to learning, for cohorts born from the early 1990s to the 2000–2010 midperiod. We use data from nationally representative samples of kindergarteners (ages 5–6) in 1998 (n = 20,220), 2006 (n = 6,600), and 2010 (n = 16,980) to estimate trends in racial/ethnic and income school readiness gaps. We find that readiness gaps narrowed modestly from 1998 to 2010, particularly between high- and low-income students and between White and Hispanic students.

Racial, ethnic, and income disparities in performance on standardized tests of academic achievement are a stubborn feature of the U.S. educational landscape. The White-Black and White-Hispanic achievement gaps in math and reading in Grades 4 to 12 range from roughly 0.50 to 0.85 standard deviations in recent years; the gap in achievement between kindergarten students from high- and low-income families was roughly 1.25 standard deviations in 1998 (Hemphill, Vanneman, & Rahman, 2011; Reardon, 2011; Reardon, Robinson-Cimpian, & Weathers, 2015; Vanneman, Hamilton, Baldwin Anderson, & Rahman, 2009). These disparities are present when children enter kindergarten, and they persist as children progress through school (Fryer & Levitt, 2006; V. E. Lee & Burkham, 2002; Reardon, 2011).

These academic achievement disparities are not immutable social facts, however. Indeed, they have changed substantially in the last few decades. The White-Black and White-Hispanic achievement gaps were considerably larger in the 1970s than they are today; these gaps narrowed sharply in the 1970s and 1980s, before plateauing through much of the 1990s and then beginning to narrow again in the last 15 years (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013; Reardon et al., 2015). The income achievement gap, in contrast, was considerably smaller in the 1970s than it is today but grew by roughly 40% between cohorts born in the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s (Reardon, 2011). The causes of these changes are not well understood.

In this article, we provide new evidence on very recent trends in these achievement gaps. In particular, we use newly available data to describe the trends in the magnitude of racial/ethnic and income gaps in math and reading skills among students entering kindergarten from the fall of 1998 to the fall of 2010. We focus on income-related gaps, rather than gaps related to parental education, occupation, or more general socioeconomic status, for comparability with the earlier income academic achievement gap trends reported by Reardon (2011). We also describe trends in racial/ethnic and income gaps in students' self-control, approaches to learning, and externalizing behavior. Because almost all other evidence on trends in academic achievement gaps is based on math and reading tests given to students in Grades 3 to 12 and because there has been little emphasis on income disparities in children's behavioral school readiness, our analyses fill several important lacunae in the literature. Moreover, they indicate whether the trends among birth cohorts from the 1970s to 1990s in the income academic achievement gap documented by Reardon have persisted among more recent cohorts. Finally, they may help us to better understand the sources of the continuing decline in elementary school racial/ethnic achievement gaps. It is important to note, however, that our analyses here are fundamentally descriptive, not explanatory; we are able to identify patterns of change (and stability) in school readiness gaps, but we do not attempt here to present definitive explanations for these patterns.

**Related link:** Low-income kindergartners are closing the achievement gap, reversing a decades-old trend <sup>[3]</sup>

**Region:** United States <sup>[4]</sup>

**Tags:** kindergarten <sup>[5]</sup>

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child outcomes <sup>[7]</sup>

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ethnic-school

#### Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/16/08/overview-recent-trends-income-racial-and-ethnic-school> [2] <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2332858416657343> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/16/08/low-income-kindergartners-are-closing-achievement-gap-reversing-deca> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7865> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/kindergarten> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/school-system-0> [7] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/child-outcomes> [8] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/income>