

Head Start Improves Achievement and Reduces Crime

A Report from
Law Enforcement

A Research Brief by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids

Quality pre-kindergarten and child care programs have produced dramatic, long-term impacts on the lives of children from disadvantaged families. These include increasing high school graduation rates and decreasing crime. Head Start is one of the programs that produces results in these areas. Quality improvements to Head Start hold the promise of even greater impact. Inadequate funding allows Head Start to serve only 60 percent of 3 and 4-year-old children in poverty. Early Head Start can serve less than 5 percent of younger children in poverty. Increased funding is needed so that more eligible children can be enrolled and improvements can be made such as increasing teacher qualifications and implementing proven curricula, including parent-coaching and interventions for children with behavioral problems. Investing in quality services now will help millions of vulnerable children become productive, responsible adults, and will prevent millions of Americans from being victims of crime.

Higher Educational Attainment

Research using a national, random sample of 3,200 children enrolled in Head Start shows that the program significantly raises the vocabulary and early writing and math scores of lower-performing children. Thus the program narrows the gap between children who enter at differing levels of school readiness. In a survey of over 4,800 American households, researchers found that former Head Start students reached higher levels of schooling than their siblings who attended other preschools. This result was particularly pronounced for Caucasian graduates who were 22 percent more likely to graduate from high school and 19 percent more likely to attend college than their siblings who enrolled in another program.

Lower Crime Rates

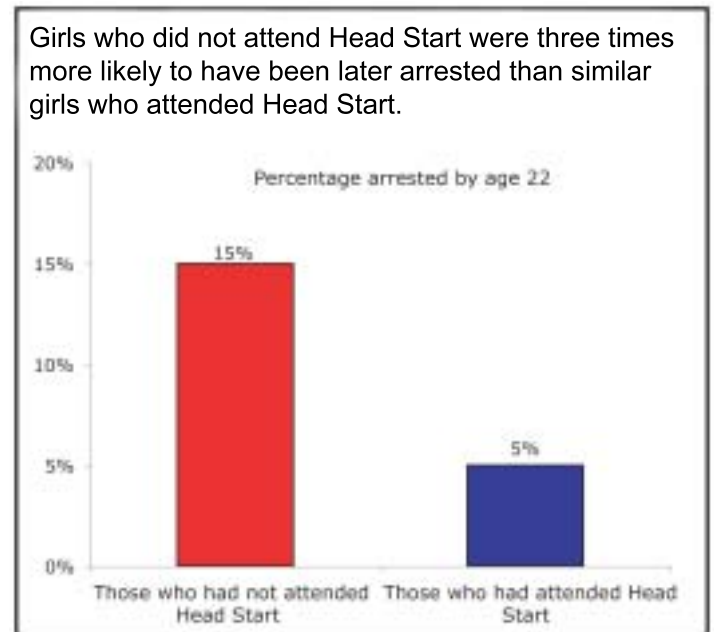
In the same survey, researchers also found lower crime rates among Head Start graduates. This result was strongest for African-American graduates who were 12 percent less likely to have been charged or convicted of a crime than their siblings who attended other preschool programs. In a study conducted in Florida, girls who had not attended Head Start were three times more likely to have been arrested by age 22 (15% vs. 5%) than similar girls who had participated in Head Start.

Long-lasting Impacts

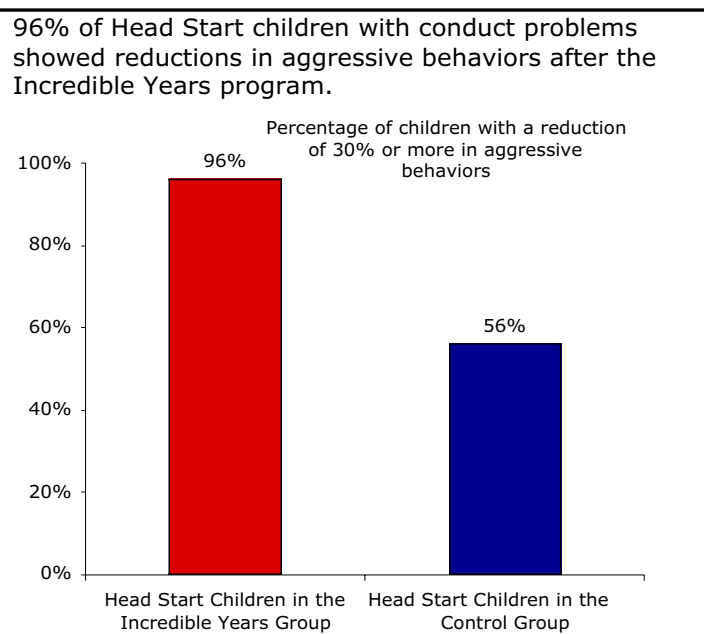
Analyses by Dr. Steven Barnett of the National Institute for Early Education Research and others show that preschool programs—including Head Start—have long-term effects on academic ability and success that do not “fade out” over time. Studies that gave rise to the “fade out myth” are badly flawed. For example, studies comparing the achievement test scores of children who had formerly attended Head Start to those who had not, failed to obtain scores for the children who had been placed in special education or retained a grade. These lower-performing students were more likely to have been in the non-Head Start group. Without their test results, the scores of the non-Head Start group were artificially inflated, resulting in the appearance of “fade out” for the Head Start group.

Success with Troubled Children

Head Start teachers report that 10 percent of their students exhibit high levels of antisocial, aggressive behavior. Research shows that 60 percent of young children with elevated levels of aggressive behaviors will manifest high



levels of antisocial and delinquent behavior later. Head Start, in conjunction with The Incredible Years program, has been proven effective in treating children at-risk for later behavioral difficulties. The Incredible Years program trains parents, teachers and family service workers to reinforce problem-solving skills and non-aggressive social skills in children. It has been tested in over 40 preschool and early elementary school programs, including Head Start. In a study conducted in Washington State, children in Head Start were randomly assigned to The Incredible Years group or to a control group. Ninety-six percent of children with conduct problems in the treatment group showed a significant reduction in aggressive and oppositional behavior, compared to 56 percent of children with conduct problems in the control group.



Early Head Start is Making a Difference

Early Head Start (EHS) is a proven program that extends the benefits of Head Start to younger children. Families are served by centers and/or home visits. Mathematica Policy Research and Columbia University conducted a national evaluation of EHS. Families randomly assigned to receive the combined center/home visit approach were 62 percent more likely to read to their children daily than families that did not receive the program. Children left out of EHS were 34 percent more likely to score in the low range on a test of cognitive, social and emotional development than those enrolled in EHS. Other center and home visitation programs for at-risk families also show dramatic long-term results. In Syracuse, families were provided services for the first five years of their children's lives. Ten years later, the juvenile delinquency rate was almost four times higher—and the offenses much more severe—for those who had not received the program than for similar children who had enrolled.

Quality Matters

Teacher Qualifications and Compensation: To achieve lasting impacts and good return on investments, pre-kindergarten programs like Head Start must provide quality services. Research shows that the education level of the teachers is a key factor in determining the quality of children's learning and development. Teachers with at least a four-year college degree and specialized training in early childhood are shown to be the most effective preschool teachers. Since the salary for a full-time Head Start teacher was just over \$21,000 in 2001 (and \$14,000 for an assistant teacher), attracting and retaining staff with bachelor degrees will require salary increases.

Curriculum: The curriculum content is another factor strongly associated with program quality. A randomized study compared the effects of a direct instruction model (in which teachers initiate academically-oriented activities) with those of a teacher/child learning model (in which teachers and children initiate social, physical and academic activities). Those in the direct instruction group were two times more likely to have been later arrested—including four times more likely to have been arrested for a felony—than those in the teacher/child learning group. They were also almost eight times more likely to need treatment for emotional impairment during their schooling than those in the teacher/child learning group.

Moving Ahead

Although Head Start produces lasting benefits for vulnerable children, the full potential of Head Start cannot be achieved without reaching more children with better quality programs. Dr. Barnett estimates the cost to society of failing to provide at least two years of quality early-childhood care and education to low-income children is approximately \$100,000 per child, totaling about \$400 billion for all poor children under five. It is imperative that new investments be made in Head Start so that more at-risk children can be helped to succeed in life, become contributing adults, and avoid a life of crime.

Endnotes

Head Start serves 60% of those eligible: The percentage of income eligible children who are enrolled in Head Start was computed by dividing the number of 3 and 4 year-old children served in 2001 (n=805,659) by the number of 3 and 4-year-old children in poverty in 2001 (n=1,369,000). For the former see: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Head Start Bureau. (n.d.). *2002 Head Start fact sheet*. Retrieved from: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/hsb/research/factsheets/02_hsf.htm. For the latter see: U. S. Bureau of the Census, & Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2002, September). Detailed poverty tables: 2001 P60 package. In *Annual demographic survey: March supplement*. Retrieved from http://ferret.bls.census.gov/macro/032002/pov/new23_001.htm

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