

Why Head Start Is Critical for the Wellbeing of Women and Girls

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Head Start and Early Head Start are essential programs for pregnant women, children, and families and are critical for advancing gender justice and women's economic security in the United States. Early Head Start supports pregnant women and children birth to three years old, Head Start serves children ages three to five, and both programs provide comprehensive services for families including health, dental, mental health, and nutrition. The programs' comprehensive approach has demonstrated long-term impact for girls and women, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.¹ **Half of participating children are girls and over eighty percent of participating family members are mothers,² and the programs are largely run by a majority-female educator workforce.³ As such, women and girls benefit significantly from Head Start and Early Head Start.**

Since its founding as part of the War on Poverty, Head Start⁴ has worked to mitigate economic inequality through early learning opportunities and wrap-around support to families with low incomes. Head Start has provided particular gains for girls, pregnant women, and mothers over the past sixty years. The following fact sheet details how Head Start's educational programming and holistic services improve participant outcomes and support economic stability with multi-generational impact. In the face of compounding threats to Head Start from extremists and the Trump administration who have an explicit goal of eliminating the program,⁵ it is imperative to defend Head Start as the critical anti-poverty program that advances gender justice program that it is.

Head Start improves education, health, and socioeconomic outcomes for girls and women

Head Start programs have served over 40 million children and families since 1965, with the explicit goal of promoting school readiness for children from families with very low-incomes.⁶ Through statute, rules, and regulations, the Head Start program ensures that as many children as possible have access to high-quality early learning and supportive resources. The academic, social, and personal development that comes from years of school and holistic support that Head Start offers supports participating girls in reaching their full potential. Participating in Head Start has been shown to reduce chronic absenteeism; increase the likelihood of completing high school; increase the likelihood of enrolling in college; and help girls living in poverty score higher in reading and math.⁷

Moreover, as Head Start girls grow up, they see long-term benefits that redound across generations. Girls who participated in Head Start are more self-sufficient: along with educational gains, participation in Head Start reduces adult poverty in women by 32 percent,⁸ and girls with greater access to education and resources have lower rates of teen pregnancy and lower rates of involvement with the criminal legal system.⁹ Additionally, for Head Start girls who go on to become mothers, the benefits of participating in the program roll over to the next generation: mothers' increased educational attainment and resources led to improved health and development for their children.¹⁰

Early Head Start provides critical services that support maternal health and lead to positive impacts for mothers and their children

Early Head Start, established in 1994 as part of the reauthorization of Head Start, serves pregnant women and children under age three.¹¹ Today, Early Head Start has over 600 programs that serve 45,000 families with low-incomes.¹² Like Head Start, Early Head Start deploys a multi-generation approach, focused on high-quality early childhood education and family services. Early Head Start

provides maternal health support, including connecting pregnant women with prenatal health care and comprehensive services like nutritional and food assistance, dental care, mental health care, and emergency shelter or transitional housing in cases of domestic violence. These interventions are particularly associated with improved outcomes for perinatal women and pregnancy outcomes, including reduced risk of gestational diabetes, preeclampsia, low birth weight, birth defects, perinatal depression, and infant mortality, among others.¹³

Notably, if an expectant mother enrolls in the program without an accessible source of health care, Early Head Start finds her one. This connection helps ensure access to critical pre- and post-natal care for the mother and her baby. This is especially key in a country with the highest maternal mortality rate among developed countries in the world¹⁴ and where the Black maternal rate is more than twice that rate at 55.3 deaths per 100,000. Maternal health care is not only critical for mother and child, it also contributes to financial stability for expectant families and the communities they live in. Mothers are the sole or co-breadwinner in two-thirds of American households, a number that has more than doubled over the last 50 years.¹⁵ Investing in maternal health also contributes to broader financial benefits and stability for hospitals, counties and states - especially in rural or underserved municipal regions.¹⁶ Maternal morbidity, or health complications from or aggravated by pregnancy, childbirth, or the postpartum period¹⁷ is expensive;- projections put the cost of maternal morbidity in 2019 at \$32.3 billion.¹⁸ Eliminating preventable deaths and severe illnesses associated with childbirth through the type of prenatal care Early Head Start facilitates helps address both the health harms and financial consequences of maternal morbidity for families and communities.

Early Head Start programs also ensure mothers receive a home-visit in the first two weeks after birth as well as postpartum education and services on recovery, mental health, infant care, feeding, and father engagement.¹⁹ Once a mother is enrolled in Early Head Start, her child is automatically enrolled as well, ensuring access to

all the benefits for children the program provides.²⁰ Family participation in Early Head Start is associated with a greater percentage of parents being in school or job training programs, parents reporting lower parenting distress, more supportive home environments for language and literacy, and improved academic and social-emotional outcomes for children.²¹

Head Start helps women balance work and family while improving outcomes for mothers and children

Head Start supports mothers' well-being and helps low-income working mothers break the cycle of poverty in a range of ways. Not only does it provide child care that enables mothers to work,²² it offers other supports such as education, connections to job training, and social services that help mothers on a pathway to the workforce.

Increased capacity to work and earn

Head Start supports many low-income mothers—especially single mothers and mothers of color—achieve long-term economic independence because the child care Head Start provides allows mothers to maintain full-time employment, which, in turn, promotes increased earnings, savings and financial stability.²³ Single mothers, who are both the primary earner and primary caregiver in their household, benefit especially from access to affordable and reliable child care like Head Start: single mothers' employment rates drop from 84 percent to 67 percent when they don't have access to a child care program.²⁴ For mothers with two children, access to child care is associated with at least \$94,000 increase in lifetime earnings and \$20,000 in savings.²⁵ For Black mothers in chronic poverty, access to child care is associated with at least \$108,000 increase in income.²⁶

Increased access to higher education

Head Start also particularly supports low-income mothers, single mothers, and mothers of color in their pursuit of higher education.²⁷ Head Start both provides a reliable place for their children to learn while their mothers are in school and provides unique educational opportunities through

partnerships with colleges.²⁸ Access to affordable early childhood education increases single mothers' college graduation rates by 21 percent, which, in turn, has direct impact on her lifetime earnings.²⁹ And a college degree not only increases parents' economic stability and mobility, it also improves their health and well-being and supports educational outcomes of their children.³⁰

Increased parenting skill and involvement in children's development

Head Start's family-centered approach³¹ includes specific support for child development and parent self-sufficiency.³² Programs are required to implement strategies that promote shared responsibility with parents for children's development and learning. Programs build on parent's knowledge and offer opportunities to practice parenting skills to promote children's learning and development.³³ For example, programs offer parent-child activities to support language, dual language³⁴, literacy, and bi-literacy development; programs provide parents with information about the importance of their child's regular attendance to promote consistent attendance. Head Start also specifically encourages parents to participate in their children's education, such as by volunteering in classrooms, participating in Head Start governance and leadership opportunities, and seeking out Head Start staff positions.³⁵

Low wages and benefits disproportionately impact the majority-women Head Start workforce and contribute to child care shortages

Disproportionate impact of low wages and benefits

Even as Head Start provides invaluable support for women and their children, women are also disproportionately harmed by the low compensation and benefits the program's majority-female workforce receives.³⁶ Early childhood education (ECE) workers consistently face low wages compared to the rest of the workforce,³⁷ and women – especially women of color – make up a disproportionate share of the ECE workforce.³⁸

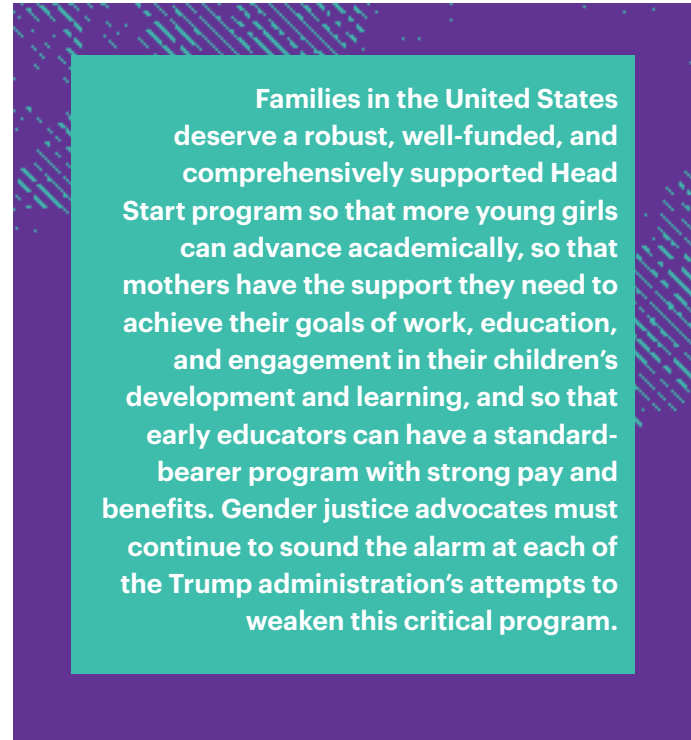
Indeed, women's overrepresentation in low-paid jobs such as child care jobs is a key driver of the gender wage gap³⁹ – a gap that is wider for women of color, mothers, and especially women of color who are mothers.⁴⁰ Low wages are particularly challenging for mothers primarily supporting their own children at home, and women of color are more likely to be the primary breadwinners of their family than their white counterparts.⁴¹ Early educators face disproportionate poverty rates because of this insufficient compensation,⁴² leading almost half to rely on public programs like Medicaid and SNAP to make ends meet.⁴³ (Note, as well, that these same women are therefore more likely to experience the impact of rampant and radical cuts to those programs.⁴⁴)

Disproportionate impact of insufficient child care supply

Insufficient compensation for the ECE workforce is also a primary driver of the child care workforce shortages across the country⁴⁵ which then also disproportionately impact women as the parent most likely to have to compensate for lack of child care.⁴⁶ Insufficient compensation leads to workforce shortages in two interrelated ways: poverty-level wages drive high burnout and turnover rates of early educators,⁴⁷ and high burnout and turnover rates drive staffing shortages that impede programs from enrolling to capacity.⁴⁸ Survey research suggests that improved compensation contributes to reduced staff turnover, and with it, the child care shortages parents face around the country.⁴⁹ While Head Start has made progress to improve educator and staff pay, increase benefits, and improve workplace conditions, the program faces a workforce shortage just like other ECE programs.⁵⁰

The workforce problems Head Start faces are further imperiled by proposed changes by the Trump administration. In 2026 alone, two proposed rules aim to remove advances in wages and benefits for Head Start educators and remove program standards that maintain a safe and supportive learning environment.⁵¹ Without these guardrails, Head Start educators are likely to see compounding negative changes that may lead to burnout or leaving the classroom entirely.⁵²

At the same time, and as discussed above, access to child care is critical for families – and especially mothers – to thrive. Mothers are more able to find work and stay employed when there is access to stable and affordable early care and education for their children.⁵³ Without such support systems, mothers are often forced to cut their work hours or leave the workforce entirely.⁵⁴



Families in the United States deserve a robust, well-funded, and comprehensively supported Head Start program so that more young girls can advance academically, so that mothers have the support they need to achieve their goals of work, education, and engagement in their children's development and learning, and so that early educators can have a standard-bearer program with strong pay and benefits. Gender justice advocates must continue to sound the alarm at each of the Trump administration's attempts to weaken this critical program.

Endnotes

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