

Head Start is a federally funded program that delivers comprehensive early learning, health, nutrition, and family support services to children from birth through age five and pregnant women who are living below the poverty line.

CREATION OF PROGRAMS

Head Start was created in 1965 as part of President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty. Since its founding, the program has served nearly 40 million children and families.¹ Recognizing the profound benefits of Head Start for preschool-age children and the important role of prenatal experiences, as well as those in the first three years of life, Early Head Start (EHS) was established during the 1994 reauthorization of Head Start to serve pregnant women and children under age three during a critical developmental period when interventions are most effective.

Additionally, American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) programs serve children of AIAN heritage and often offer traditional language and cultural practices. Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) was created to specifically meet the needs of families engaged in migrant and seasonal agricultural work, where parents’ jobs require moving frequently and working long hours during certain times of the year.

HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

There are more than 17,000 Head Start sites nationwide.² Head Start grantees have the flexibility to customize services and programs to meet the needs of every community, while providing a continuum of high-quality early learning and comprehensive support services that meet common quality criteria outlined in the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS). Local flexibility also allows many programs to combine federal, state, local, and even private funding for preschool, child care, or other early care and education services to maximize the impact of available funds.

AT-A-GLANCE

CREATED

Head Start: 1965

Early Head Start: 1994

WHO THIS PROGRAM SERVES

Early Head Start: Prenatal to age three

Head Start Preschool: Ages three through five

Children whose family income is below the federal poverty line (\$32,150 for a family of four)³, those receiving TANF, SNAP, or SSI, or who are in foster care or experiencing homelessness.

Programs may enroll up to 10% of children from families that have incomes above the poverty line, and up to an additional 35% of children from families whose incomes are up to 130% of the poverty line in certain circumstances. Additionally, programs must ensure that at least 10% of children enrolled are eligible for services under IDEA.

NUMBER OF CHILDREN SERVED IN THE 2024 PROGRAM YEAR

Early Head Start: 224,129⁴

Head Start Preschool: 546,478 (includes 12,610 children in AIAN programs)⁵

Migrant and Seasonal Head Start: 20,862

ADMINISTRATION OF PROGRAM

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) awards grants directly to public or private nonprofit organizations, including community-based and faith-based organizations, or for-profit agencies within a community.

DELIVERY METHOD

Head Start programs are designed to meet community needs and can be center-based, family child care, in-home, or an approved locally-designed program option.

FY2025 FEDERAL FUNDING

\$12,271,820,000 total funding for Head Start across all program types.⁶





PROVEN TRACK RECORD

Decades of research shows that participation in Head Start programs have both short- and long-term positive effects for participating children and their families.

- Children who attend Head Start demonstrate academic and social progress and are more likely to enter kindergarten ready to learn.
- Adults who attended Head Start as children are more likely to graduate high school and are better prepared to be parents to their own children.
- Parents whose children attend Head Start are more likely to advance their own education compared to parents of similar children who are not enrolled in Head Start.

INCREASING ACCESS FOR ELIGIBLE FAMILIES

Despite the well-documented benefits of Head Start and the bipartisan support for the program among lawmakers in Congress, current funding is insufficient to provide access to all eligible children. In fact, in 2023, **only 26% of eligible children had access to Head Start Preschool and just 10% of children eligible for EHS were served by the program.**⁷ And while children experiencing homelessness are categorically eligible for Head Start services, in 2023, EHS served only 5.5% of infants and toddlers experiencing homelessness, and Head Start Preschool served only 13.6% of preschoolers experiencing homelessness.⁸

Increasing enrollment in Head Start requires more than simply increasing funding for slots. One of the leading challenges facing individual providers is difficulty recruiting and retaining a qualified workforce. Quality programs depend on effective, qualified educators, but chronic low pay and lack of basic benefits have made recruitment and retention pervasive issues in Head Start and other early learning programs.

CONTINUED IMPROVEMENT

Thanks to the longstanding bipartisan support for Head Start among lawmakers on Capitol Hill, there have been successful efforts to strengthen the program. Congress' bipartisan Head Start Act of 2007 included policies designed to strengthen teaching in Head Start programs and improve coordination between Head Start Preschool, Early Head Start, and other early childhood programs such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and child protective services.

Additionally, in 2016, HHS revised the HSPPS to further support high-quality early learning and comprehensive services by emphasizing performance and ongoing improvement, rather than compliance, and incorporating recent research on effective early learning, child development, and family engagement. In 2024, HHS published a final rule making further updates to the HSPPS to begin addressing the more recent stressors facing the program. It included multiple changes to support and strengthen the Head Start workforce, including requirements for Head Start programs to improve educator compensation and working conditions. It also included a provision to factor the high cost of housing into eligibility in certain areas.

¹ National Head Start Association, "2025 State Fact Sheets," <https://nhsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/National.pdf>.

² Ibid.

³ Office of the Assistant for Planning and Evaluation, "Poverty Guidelines," <https://aspe.hhs.gov/topics/poverty-economic-mobility/poverty-guidelines>.

⁴ Office of Head Start, Performance Indicator Report, Program Year 2024. <https://hses.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/pir/reports>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Allocations to the different program types are made at the discretion of HHS.

⁷ First Five Years Fund, "Child Care & Early Learning in the United States 2024 State Fact Sheet," <https://www.ffyf.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/2024-National-Fact-Sheet.pdf>.

⁸ Center for American Progress, "A 2024 Review of Child Care and Early Learning in the United States," <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/a-2024-review-of-child-care-and-early-learning-in-the-united-states/>.