

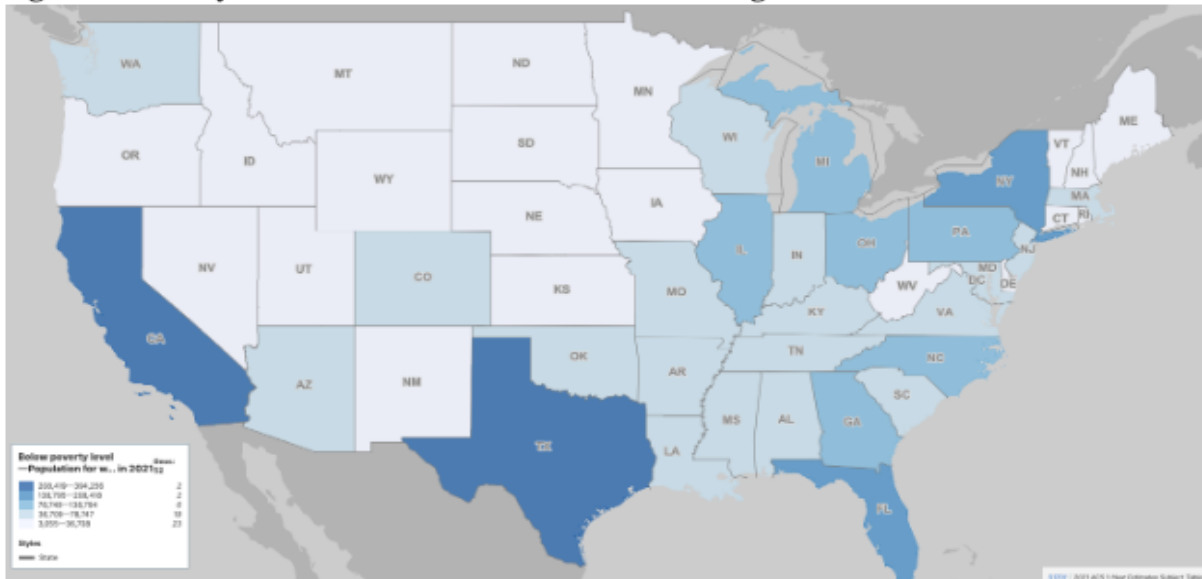
HEAD START: AN ANALYSIS OF EARLY CARE & EDUCATION NEEDS AND PARENTAL DECISION-MAKING IN CALIFORNIA

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Why This Study

In California, many children and families living in or near poverty are unable to access the early care and education (ECE) services needed for school readiness. ECE programs, including Head Start, are providing services to some families in need throughout California, but not all.¹ The U.S. Census Bureau estimated that approximately 12.3 percent or nearly 4.75 million Californians were living in poverty in 2021.² Of those Californians in poverty, a little over 330,000 are young children under five. In 2021, California had the second most children under five living in poverty in the U.S. (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Poverty of Children Under 5 Years in the Contiguous U.S.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau Map of American Community Survey, 2021, 1-Year Estimates (S1701)

A study on the impact of early childhood poverty suggests that poor children begin their K-12 education behind their more affluent classmates and that many lose additional ground during their academic careers.³ Minority and low-income students continue to have systematically less access to the resources they need to perform well academically, a trend known as the opportunity gap.⁴ Quality ECE interventions can lead to several positive effects for young children, including improved mathematical skills, language, and literacy, among other competencies, as well as increased future earnings.⁵

¹Head Start is a federal ECE program established in 1965 that provides school readiness and wellbeing services for preschool children, toddlers, and infants of low-income families in the United States (<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ohs>).

²U.S. Census Bureau, 2021, American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates (S1701).

³Duncan G. J., Magnuson K., Kalil A., & Ziol-Guest K. (2011). The Importance of Early Childhood Poverty. *Social indicators research*. 2012;108(1):87-98. doi:10.1007/s11205-011-9867-9

⁴Close the Gap Foundation, 2023, <https://www.closesthegapfoundation.org>.

⁵Melnick, H., Tinubu Ali, T., Gardner, M., Maier, A., & Wechsler, M. (2017). Understanding California's early care and education system. *Learning Policy Institute*. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/>

Research Overview

In August 2022, Head Start California, a Head Start advocacy organization, partnered with students at the USC Sol Price School of Public Policy to research **1) the extent to which the supply of Head Start services meets the estimated demand** and **2) the extent to which Head Start-eligible families in California are aware of the program**. Head Start’s recent expansion of its categorical eligibility to include CalFresh recipients, who can uniquely earn up to 200% FPL, prompted the research.⁶ Also important to Head Start California and its members, the study aims to test the hypothesis that Head Start is a “well-kept secret” among eligible families in California and identify factors that influence parental ECE decision-making.

Scope and Methods

Spatial Analysis: ArcGIS mapping of Head Start locations and enrollment slots, children living in or near poverty, and accessibility to Head Start programs in California.

Survey Analysis: An anonymous survey was sent to California-based parents and guardians examining ECE program choice and influential factors, Head Start familiarity, and how respondents heard of Head Start.

Spatial Analysis: Key Findings

Figure 2: Potential Demand to Head Start Enrollment Slots in California

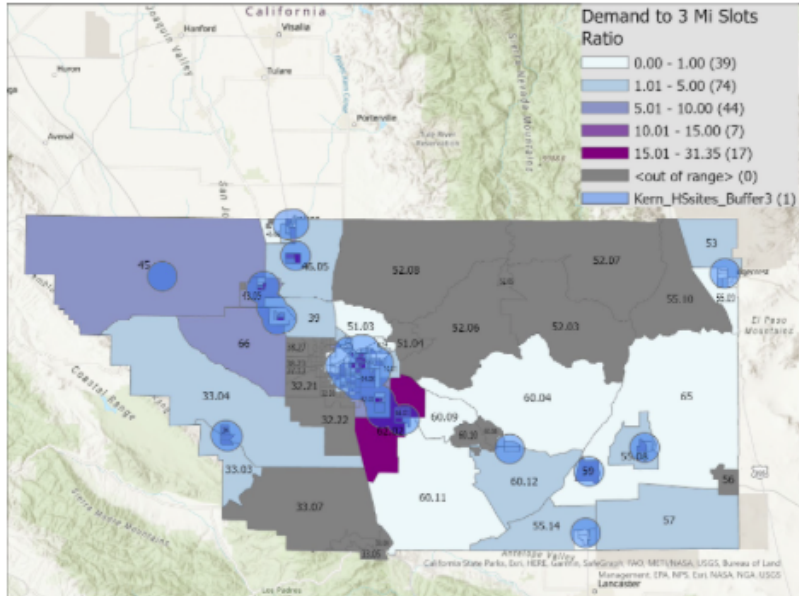


Source: Analysis of ACS, 1- and 5-year estimates and Head Start California data.

Head Start services in California meet some ECE needs, but not all. The expansion of Head Start’s categorical eligibility doubled the number of eligible children in California. The number of eligible children for Head Start outnumbers the supply by a magnitude greater than eight. Some Head Start sites are **unevenly distributed** across California counties and census tracts, offering inequitable access to households needing these subsidized ECE services (see Figures 2 and 3).

⁶*SNAP Eligibility for Head Start Services*. (2022). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Head Start. <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/eligibility-ersea/article/snap-eligibility-head-start-services>.

Figure 3: Kern County Demand to Enrollment Slots (3 Miles)



Source: Analysis of ACS, 2021, 1- and 5-year data and Head Start California data.

- Many counties in California have high proportions of children under five living in or near poverty (some as high as 70 percent)
- Eligible children living in urban counties in California generally have better access to Head Start sites within 3 and 8 miles compared to rural counties. Consequently, eligible children and families in rural counties encounter higher levels of competition for Head Start enrollment slots

Survey Analysis: Key Findings

Head Start does not appear to be a “well-kept secret,” according to the 251 parent and guardian survey respondents. Most participants (98%) reported baseline awareness of the program. However, **knowledge disparities emerged** along the indicators of poverty status (above or below 200% FPL), race/ethnicity (white or non-white), geographic area (rural or urban), and state region (Northern or Southern California).

- White and rural participants and participants under 200% FPL and Northern Californians reported higher levels of familiarity and more Head Start connections
- Social network sites (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn) surfaced as the most common way that the sample learned about Head Start (see Figure 4 below)
- Program quality stood out as the most important ECE decision-making factor

Figure 4: How Participants Learned About Head Start

	White	Non-White	Below 200%	Above 200%
Social network sites	82%	39%	72%	47%
Friends/Family	27%	34%	33%	26%
Google/other search engine	30%	22%	26%	26%
Flyers/newspaper ads	27%	18%	26%	19%
Organization near me	23%	19%	23%	18%
Head Start Near Me	22%	16%	16%	33%

Source: Analysis of USC Parental Survey Findings

Recommendations

Head Start program sites in California provide essential services to children living in poverty across the state, but **opportunities for improvement exist**.

1. **Share findings** with Head Start providers and relevant stakeholders to inform efforts to relocate or establish new program sites. This data would be essential for counties with the highest demand-to-supply ratios and in census tracts without reasonable access or increased competition.
1. **Conduct additional research** on community-specific needs. Significant gaps in servicing are more visible at the granular level (census tract) compared to the aggregate level (county).
2. **Conduct additional research** to understand the availability of other ECE programs in California, such as Transitional Kindergarten, preschool, and daycare. Measuring the supply of alternative programs will paint a complete picture of where access to ECE services is most inequitable in California and could enable ECE providers to more intentionally establish new program sites where few alternatives exist.

While data collected from this survey sample is only suggestive, three recommendations for Head Start California emerged from survey analysis:

1. **Make a greater effort to reach households of color.** This effort could occur by partnering with organizations like the California WIC Association, which provides a non-competing service to many minority families. Another approach could be to explore opportunities for diversifying the Head Start employment pipeline of staff, as “friends and family” surfaced as a primary way households of color heard about Head Start.
2. **Leverage social networking sites.** Social network sites like Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn were the most common way survey participants heard about Head Start. Head Start California could capitalize on this by leveraging these sites extensively to market the recent categorical eligibility for CalFresh recipients.
3. **Administer parental surveys regularly.** The project team recommends that Head Start California administer this or a similar survey regularly to test the applicability of these findings on other sample populations and gauge whether knowledge disparities grow or shrink in the coming years.