

Preschool *Policy Matters*

Issue 8 / August 2004

Who Goes to Preschool and Why Does It Matter?

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In a world shaped by global competition, preschool programs play an increasingly vital role in child development and school readiness. And, there is growing awareness that early learning's impacts persist across children's lifespans, affecting educational achievement, adult earning and even crime and delinquency.

The national trend toward more preschool education could reduce educational inequality in the U.S.

Preschool education has come to be seen as a middle-income essential.¹ By 2002, two-thirds of 4-year-olds and more than 40 percent of 3-year-olds were enrolled in a preschool education program. This represents a substantial increase over earlier decades. The evidence indicates the increase in enrollment has not reached all segments of the population equally and there are variations in participation rates regionally within the U.S. This report seeks to identify these important differences and shed light on how income, education, ethnicity, family structure, maternal employment and geography relate to preschool program participation.

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What We Know:

- **The preschool participation picture is complex and dynamic, with children attending a patchwork quilt of public and private programs that serve varying and multiple purposes.**
- **Long-term increases in preschool participation owe more to increased demand for education than increased demand for child care.**
- **Preschool attendance rates remain highly unequal and many of those who might benefit most from preschool participation do not attend.**
- **Targeted programs appear to have improved access to preschool education for children from lower-income families, but fall short of their intended goals. Less than half of children in poverty attend preschool at ages 3 and 4.**
- **Families with modest incomes, slightly below the average, participate less in preschool education than families in poverty. The children with the least access to preschool education are those whose family incomes rest somewhat above the eligibility levels for targeted programs.**
- **Existing data sources on preschool participation are far from ideal. Different surveys define programs in different ways and there is no national reporting system to provide an unduplicated count of participation, even for public programs.**

Policy Challenges:

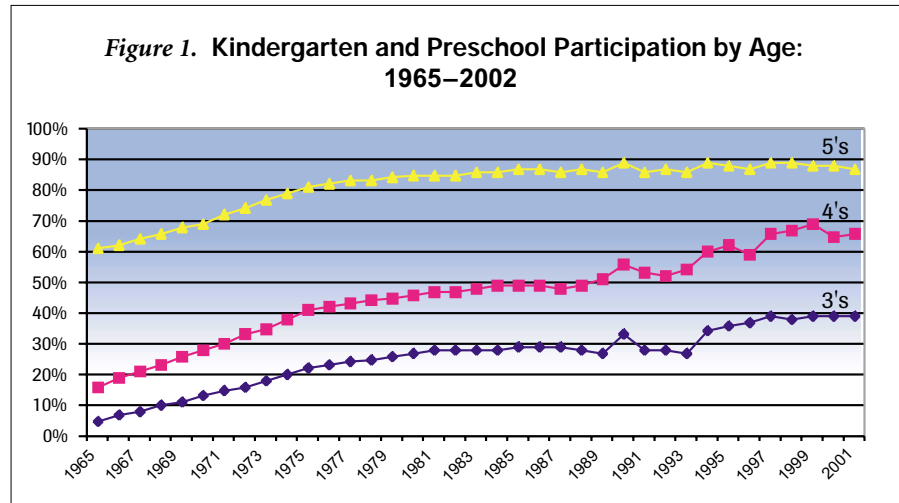
- **Federal and state policies need to finish the job of reaching disadvantaged children with high-quality preschool education. This will require expansion and greater coordination of federal and state programs.**
- **Policymakers should consider strategies that build upon and move beyond targeting to increase access to middle-income families who find it difficult or even impossible to purchase a high-quality preschool education, given other expenses.**
- **Federal and state policy initiatives should address regional imbalances in preschool access. The federal government could offer matching funds as an incentive for states to create and expand preschool programs.**
- **As access is increased, quality must be raised, too. Yet, expanding access while maintaining or increasing quality presents challenges. There are limits to how fast the supply of good teachers and good facilities can be increased and policy changes may be needed to increase capacity.**
- **Accurate data on participation by type of program, child's age and length of enrollment are needed. Thoughtful coordination among researchers, state and federal agencies responsible for preschool programs, and data collection could produce much more useful information.**

Long-Term Trend: Preschool Education is on the Increase

Preschool program participation in the United States has increased steadily for many decades. Today, the vast majority of children spend time in a classroom before they enter kindergarten. In effect, many children attend “school” for one or even two years before they enter kindergarten. This represents a profound change in American education.

Over the past half century, the way America educates its young children has changed substantially. Data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) describe the enrollment of young children in “school” (as reported by parents) over 40 years. In 1965, only 60 percent of 5-year-olds were in school. This rose to 85 percent by 1980 and stayed in the high 80’s thereafter. Participation of younger children was far lower in 1965, only 5 percent of 3-year-olds and 16 percent of 4-year-olds. These percentages increased rapidly through 1980 and have continued to increase since. In 2002, 42 percent of 3-year-olds and 67 percent of 4-year-olds attended school according to the CPS. The trend over time for each age group is displayed in Figure 1.

For more than two decades the overwhelming majority of American children have begun school no later than age 5, and kindergarten is widely seen as the first year of school. Most public schools begin with kindergarten. The U.S. Bureau of the Census has documented this trend, but still classifies kindergarten as “preprimary education.” Clearly, this is an anachronism. As shown in Figure 1, two-thirds of today’s children begin school at age 4, though the vast majority do not attend public school.² At both 3 and 4, children attend a complex patchwork of public and private programs that go by a variety of names including: preschool, prekindergarten (pre-K), 4-year-old



Source: October Current Population Survey (C.P.S.) 1965-2002.

Note: Some children enter Kindergarten at age 6 and are not include here.

kindergarten (4K), Head Start, child care, day care, and nursery school. In this brief we use the term “preschool” as inclusive of all the others for lack of a better choice.

The many names for programs young children attend reflect the diverse auspices and dual purposes of preschool programs. The federal government provides Head Start to children in poverty. State and local education agencies offer preschool and prekindergarten programs. Private for-profit, nonprofit, and faith-based organizations operate programs under all of these names. All of these programs vary in the extent to which they are designed to meet: (1) the educational needs of young children and (2) the child care needs of parents.

Although preschool programs can serve both education and care purposes well, they do not always do so. First, families vary in their child care needs and many families desire a good education for their child, but do not seek long hours of child care in a classroom setting. Some programs specialize in serving children in these families. Second, the

educational effectiveness and hours of a program both increase its costs. Thus, government agencies, private organizations, and families paying for preschool programs may trade educational quality for hours of care when they need long hours of care.

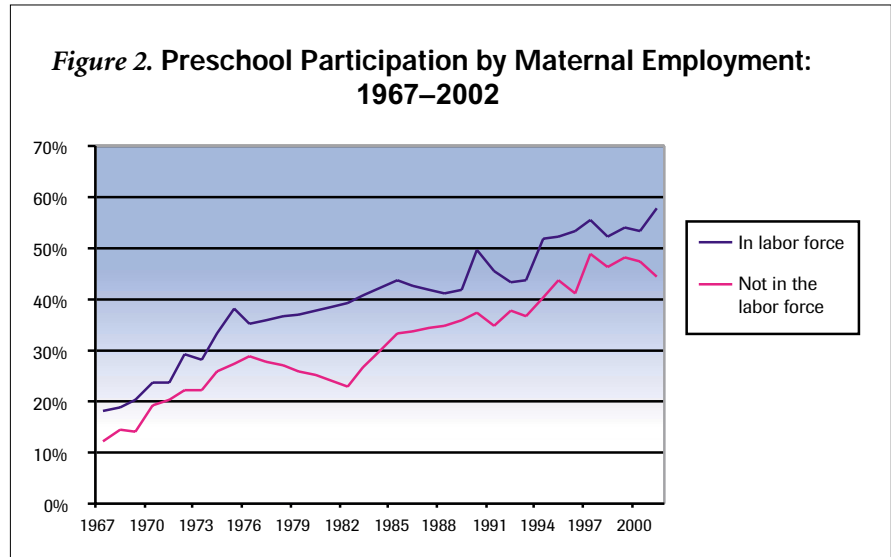
Our Data Sources

Multiple data sources are employed to look at preschool participation, including the Current Population Survey (CPS), Census 2000, and National Household Education Survey (NHES). Each source has unique advantages and limitations. Together, they enable us to develop a much more thorough understanding of trends and relationships than would be possible using just one of these sources. The CPS provides data back to 1965, Census 2000 is the only source of state-by-state participation rates, and the NHES permits detailed statistical analyses of the relationships of family characteristics to preschool participation over the decade.

The extent to which programs emphasize education or hours of care is often reflected in program names. Programs called child care and day care generally are designed to meet the needs of working parents, providing as many as 10 hours per day and even offering weekend and evening hours in some cases. Preschool, prekindergarten and nursery school programs tend to emphasize their educational aspects and may offer each child as little as 2-3 hours per day, for 2 or 3 days a week. Head Start is a child development program that provides a broad range of services to meet the educational and other needs of young children in poverty and their families.

Despite these generalizations, program names are not a highly reliable guide to either educational effectiveness or hours of care. Nearly all classrooms for young children are considered to offer education by the providers and parents. Child care programs can deliver an effective education and provide long hours of care, given sufficient resources. Some state education agency preschool programs operate up to 10 hours per day and many offer wrap-around care to extend hours. Head Start programs can be part-day or full-day and offer wrap-around care. Educational quality varies considerably under every name.³ Unfortunately, true high quality is not the norm for the nation's preschool programs. This report makes no attempt to differentiate program participation on the basis of quality.

Discussion of the dual purposes of preschool programs raises the question of the extent to which one or the other has driven growth in participation. This question is answered in Figure 2. Over the past half century, preschool participation has increased at the same pace for children whether or not their



Source: Current Population Survey (C.P.S.) 1967-2002

Data for the following years have been interpolated: 1977–1981, 1983, 1984 and 1986

mothers are employed outside the home. The primary source of growth is increased demand for the education of young children by all parents. As children with employed mothers are more likely to enroll in a preschool classroom, the growth of maternal employment has played some role in increased participation rates, but child care demand is of secondary importance to education.

Recent Trends

More information about preschool participation is provided by a data source for recent years. Beginning with 1991, the National Household Education Survey (NHES) obtained information on the education and child care experiences of young children and on the characteristics of these children and their families. The NHES provides a much more detailed picture of who attends preschool programs than does the CPS. It describes participation in all types of classroom programs whether or not parents view

them as “school” and in child care provided in other settings including family home day care and care in the child's own home. The NHES provides a basis for statistical analyses that seek to find the reasons that some children attend preschool programs while others do not. The NHES collected data on preschool children in 1991, 1993, 1995, 1999, and 2001.

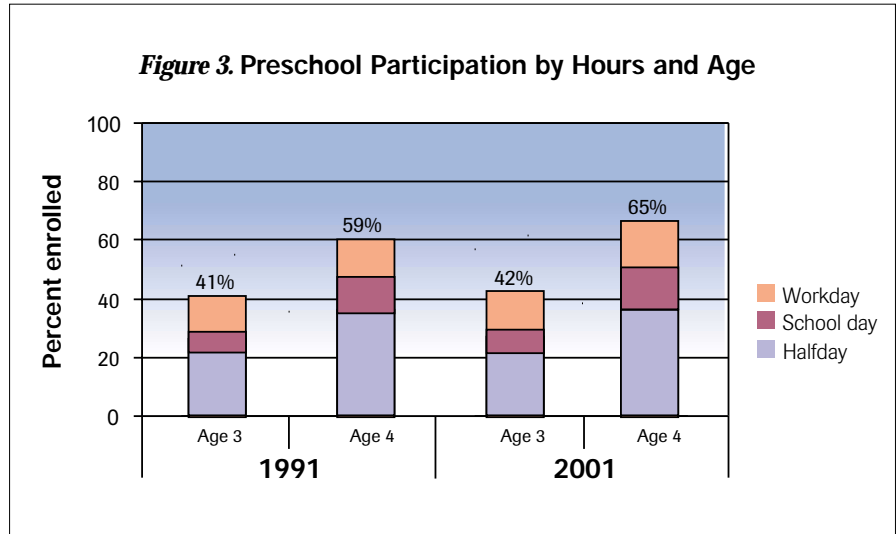
Based on the NHES data, this brief reports on how preschool attendance varies with key characteristics of the children and family. These are age, ethnicity, income, parental education levels, parental labor force participation, and region of the country. For the most part, change is not rapid from one year to the next and patterns of preschool participation within the population have changed slowly over the past decade. Thus, preschool program participation is broken down for each child and family characteristic in graphs that compare only the years 1991 and 2001, focusing on change over the decade.

Measuring the Changes in Participation

The NHES permits preschool program participation to be defined in various ways. The definition employed in this brief includes any participation in a classroom whatever the name or expressed purposes attached to that classroom.⁴ Virtually all such programs are educational to some extent, and it is unclear that parents can effectively differentiate those that offer a sound education from those that are educationally ineffective. This is slightly broader than the “school” definition employed by the U.S. Bureau of the Census in both the CPS and the decennial census.

The definition of preschool programs employed here *excludes* educational programs delivered to children only by home visitors and child care delivered in the child’s home or another home. Our rationale for excluding these other arrangements is that they are different types of activities and are not generally found to be educationally effective.⁵ We do report some analyses conducted using NHES data on participation in all types of non-parental child care for comparison with those for classroom programs alone.

The NHES data suggest less rapid change over the decade than indicated by the CPS. One reason is that in both surveys 1991 appears to have an unusually high participation rate and 2001 an unusually low participation rate compared to surrounding years.⁶ Another reason is that the NHES shows considerably higher rates for 1991 than does the CPS, while the rates for 2001 correspond quite closely between the NHES and CPS. No simple explanation is apparent for this difference, but the 1991-2001 NHES comparisons may give conservative estimates of change as a result.⁷



Source: NHES 1991 and 2001.

Definitions: Workday (>35 hours), School Day (21 – 35 hours), Half-day (up to 20 hours)

Age

The child’s age is a powerful predictor of preschool participation. As Figure 1 showed, children have been much more likely to attend preschool at age 4 than at age 3, at least back to 1965. This remains true even with the higher levels of attendance achieved in the last decade. Polls reveal that Americans tend to believe that preschool education outside the home is more appropriate at age 4 than age 3. Data on participation in any kind of child care shows similar patterns indicating that Americans’ preference for parental care alone is higher for 3s than 4s, but the size of the difference by age is smaller for all types of non-parental child care than for preschool.

According to the NHES, 65 percent of 4-year-olds and 42 percent of 3-year-olds were enrolled in some type of preschool program in 2001 compared to 59 percent and 41 percent a decade earlier (Figure 3).⁸ For 4-year-olds, there was a shift in attendance toward

longer days, especially from half-day to school-day preschool programs, between 1991 and 2001.



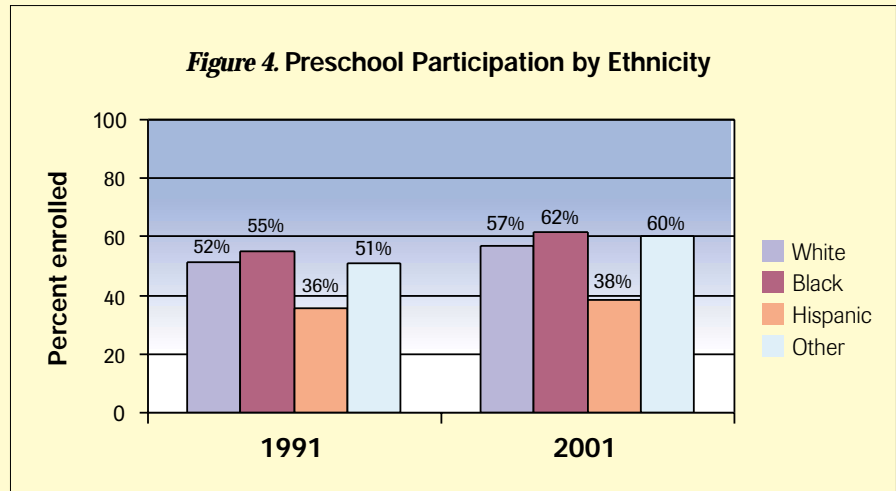
Ethnicity

Figure 4 presents preschool participation rates for 2001 and 1991 by ethnicity. African-American children have the highest preschool participation rates. White non-Hispanic children and the “other” category (which includes Asians and Native Americans) have participation rates that are only slightly below those of African-American children. Hispanic children have by far the lowest preschool participation rates. From 1991 to 2001, participation rates increased for all ethnic groups, though the increase was least for Hispanic children. Attendance patterns by ethnicity are similar for 3- and 4-year-olds when considered separately.

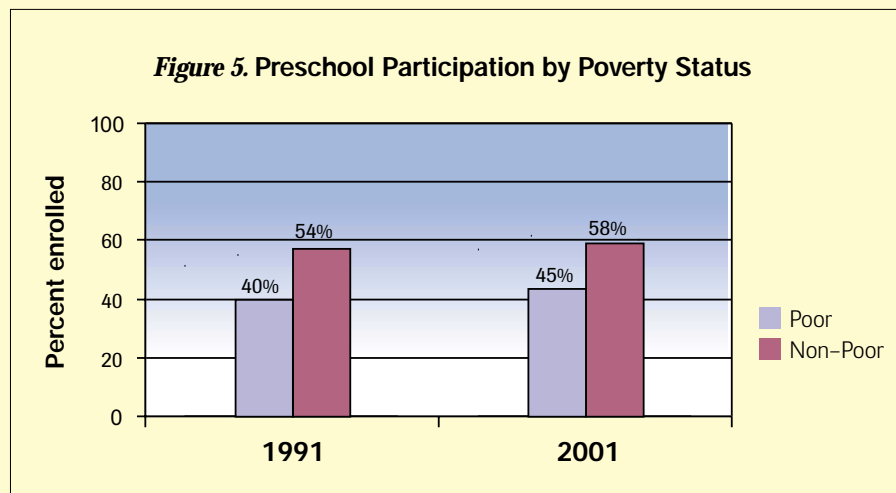
Differences among ethnic groups in preschool attendance are not necessarily due to cultural differences in attitudes toward preschool programs. Ethnic groups differ from each other in many other ways that can influence preschool participation including average income, family size and structure, parental education levels, and where they live. Statistical analyses that examine all of these characteristics together and attempt to sort out the unique effect of ethnicity are presented later in this brief. However, for public policy purposes it useful to know how attendance varies by ethnic group even if the differences result from other factors.

Income

Family income has two very different effects on participation in preschool programs. On the one hand, families with higher incomes are better able to purchase high-quality preschool education and child care. On the other hand, the federal Head Start program, the vast majority of state preschool



Source: NHES 1991 and 2001.



Source: NHES 1991 and 2001.

programs, and government child care subsidies target lower-income families. On the whole, government policy does not fully offset the effects of income. However, government policy does seem to increase participation rates for many low-income families.

Figure 5 displays preschool participation rates for poor and non-poor families. Overall, children in poverty have lower participation rates than others despite the compensatory efforts

of government. Increases in preschool participation from 1991 to 2001 were essentially the same for families in and out of poverty, so that poor families did not gain relative to others. The expansion of Head Start and state preschool programs over the decade seems to have just kept poor families from falling further behind.

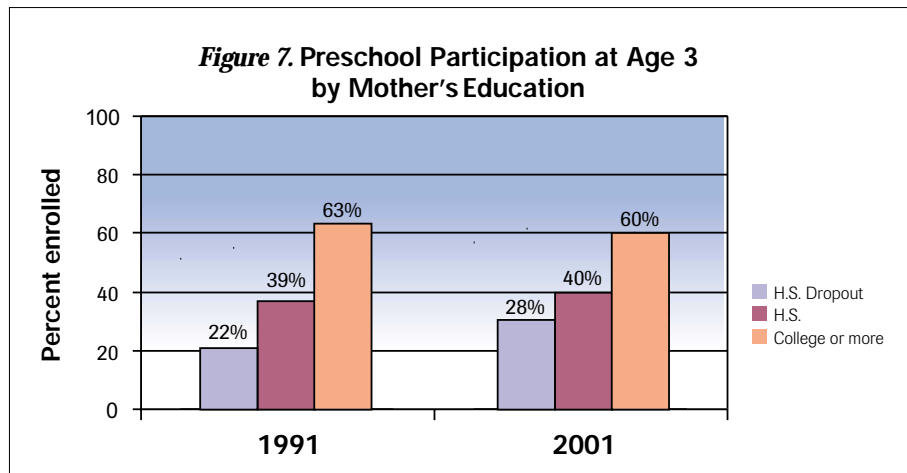
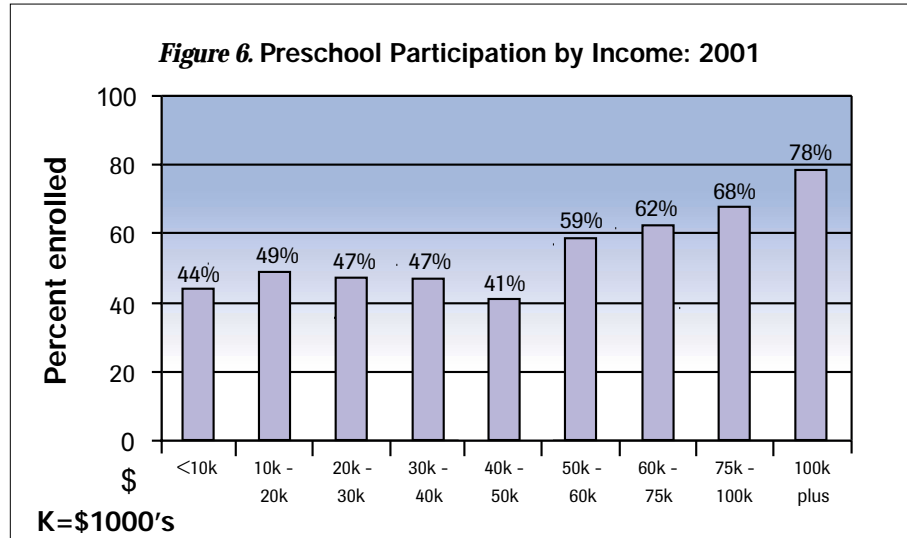
Predictors: Role of Income and Mother's Education

Figure 6 charts preschool participation in 2001 against finer gradations of family income in order to provide a more detailed picture of the relationship with income. Preschool participation rates vary relatively little over the bottom half of the income distribution. They dip a bit for families with annual incomes below \$10,000 per year and dip even more for families with annual incomes between \$40,000 and \$50,000. Preschool enrollment rises sharply with income thereafter and reaches nearly 80 percent for families with annual incomes over \$100,000.

The participation pattern by income suggests that public policies raise preschool participation rates for low-income families. However, young children in poverty still have much lower rates of preschool enrollment than children whose families have higher-than-average incomes. Preschool education opportunities may be least available to children in families with modest incomes who are ineligible for direct subsidies. These families may face the greatest difficulties in obtaining high-quality preschool education for their children.

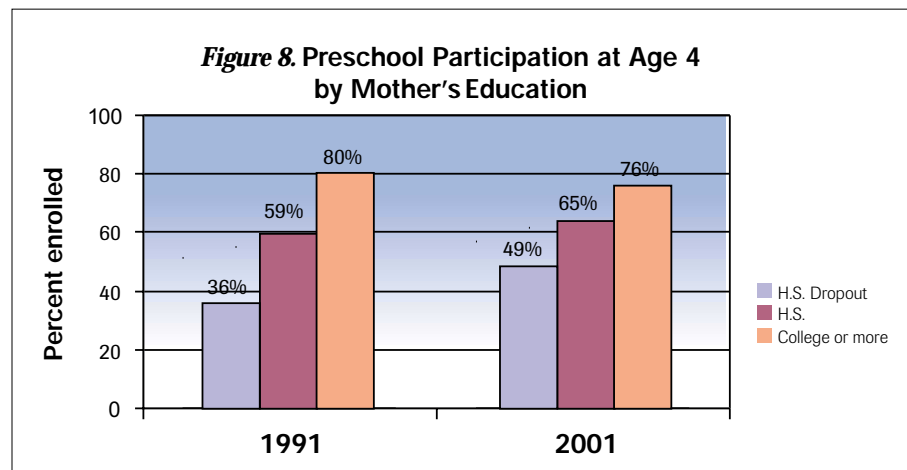
Mother's Education

Mother's education is highly predictive of a young child's educational experiences in and out of the home. Preschool participation rates rise as mother's educational attainment increases as shown in Figure 7 (age 3) and Figure 8 (age 4). The highest participation rates are for children whose mothers have a four-year college (BA) degree—over 75 percent at age 4 and 60 percent at age 3 in both 1991 and 2001. The data suggest that as a larger portion of the population acquired a college degree over the decade, participation rates for this category may have declined slightly. Children of mothers



Source: NHES 1991 and 2001.

Note: In a small number of cases the child's mother was not present and the education of the father or other primary caregiver is substituted.



Source: NHES 1991 and 2001.

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with at least a high school diploma, but not a BA degree, have lower rates of attendance—65 percent at age 4 and 40 percent at age 3. This reflects an increase in participation for 4-year-olds over 1991. Children of high school dropouts have the lowest participation rates: 49 percent at age 4 and 28 percent at age 3. Attendance rates for children of dropouts rose over the decade, so that this represents a clear improvement over 1991. Nevertheless, children whose parents have the least education remain by far the least likely to attend preschool at ages 3 and 4.

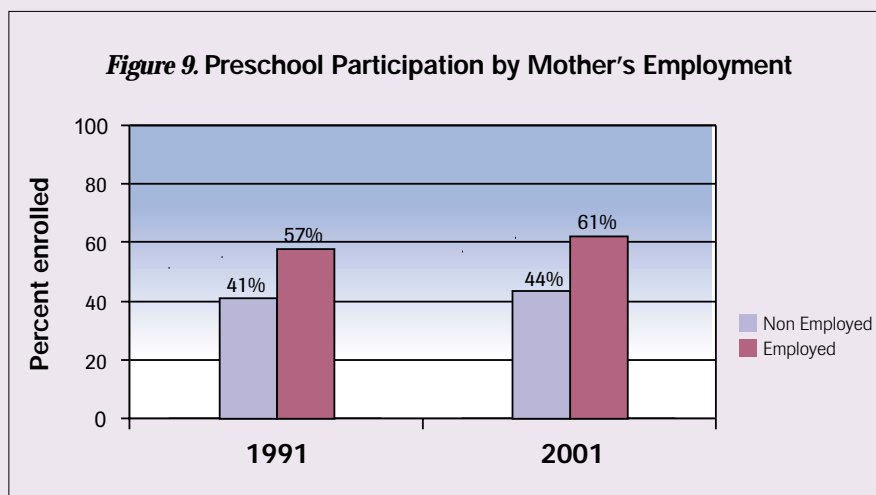
The strong link between preschool participation and parental education raises serious policy concerns. Parental education is an important influence on education in the home, and those children whose parents have the least education have the least opportunity for quality education outside the home. Parental education is also a powerful predictor of abilities at school entry and subsequent educational success or failure. Thus, the children who may be expected to gain the most from high-quality preschool programs are the least likely to attend a preschool

program. The persistence of this strong link between parental education levels and preschool participation is remarkable given the extent to which federal and state programs target disadvantaged children. It suggests that programs targeted by family income level are less effective at reaching children with the least educated parents.

Mother's Employment

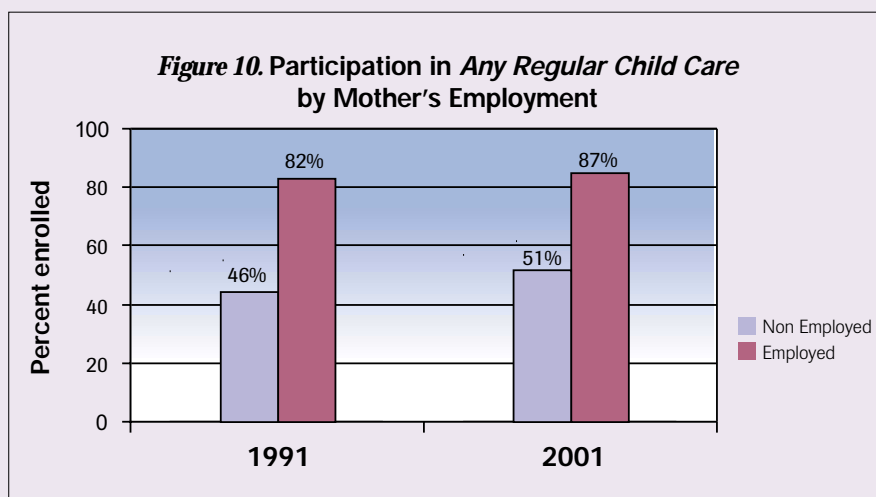
As discussed above and shown in Figure 2, the long-term trend toward increased preschool attendance is not primarily driven by rising maternal employment. However, at any point in time preschool program participation is related to maternal employment. As shown in Figure 9, in 2001 preschool participation rates were 61 percent for 3- and 4-year olds with employed mothers compared to 45 percent for those with mothers who were not formally employed. In 1991, the corresponding figures were 57 percent and 41 percent, respectively.

The difference in participation rates associated with mother's employment is much smaller for preschool classrooms than it is for participation in all types of child care. Figure 10 displays participation rates for all types of non-parental child care by mother's employment status. In 2001, rates were 87 percent for children with mothers in the labor force and 51 percent for children with mothers at home. In 1991, these rates were 82 percent and 46 percent. One of the questions raised is the extent to which this may reflect barriers to using classroom-based programs that provide a good education as child care. For example, many preschool programs operate for only a half day and high-quality preschool classrooms that operate for a full day are more expensive than some other child care arrangements.



Source: NHES 1991 and 2001

Note: In a small number of cases, the mother is not the primary caregiver and the father or other primary caregiver's employment status is substituted.



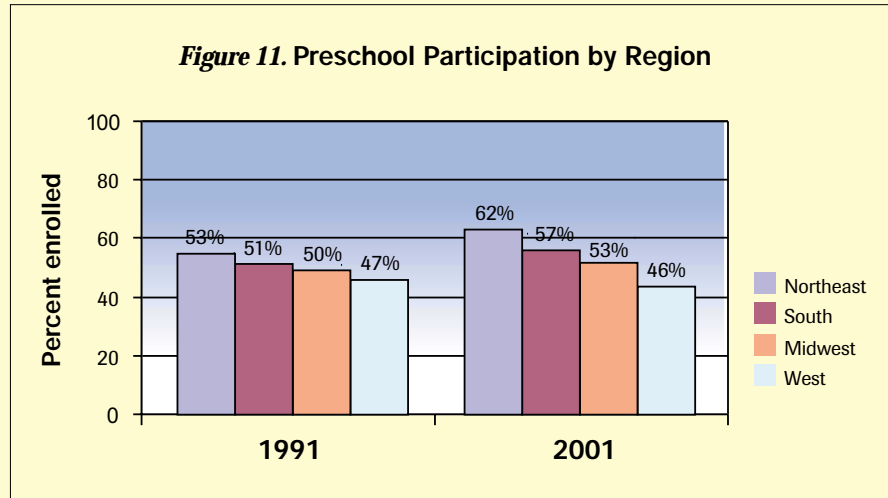
Source: NHES 1991 and 2001

Note: In a small number of cases, the mother is not the primary caregiver and the father or other primary caregiver's employment status is substituted.

Accounting for Regional Variations

Preschool participation rates vary substantially from one region to another and state-by-state. Figure 11 displays preschool participation rates by region for 1991 and 2001. It appears that regional differences increased over the course of the decade. Most notably, the West began with the lowest participation rate and made no progress over 10 years while the rest of the nation moved ahead.⁹ Progress was most conspicuous in the Northeast and South. While regional differences in preschool participation may reflect differences in populations, there is reason to believe that differences in state policies also play an important role. These regional differences correspond to what is known about the growth of state preschool programs over the last decade and are not explained by regional differences in family size or structure, maternal employment, education, income or ethnicity.

The 2000 Decennial Census is a unique source of information on preschool participation by state that provides further detail and added insight into regional differences. For each state, Figure 12 lists the percentage of 3- and 4-year-olds “enrolled in school” in 2000. The average for the nation as a whole is 49 percent, somewhat lower than estimates from the NHES, due to the difference in definitions. Nevertheless, the differences among states are highly informative. Preschool participation rates by state vary from a high of 63 percent (NJ) to a low of 34 percent (ND). These state data reinforce the picture obtained from the NHES by region. Only two western states (Hawaii and Colorado) have participation rates in the top half, and western states account for 8 of the bottom 10 states.



How much of the state and regional variation is due to state policy differences is difficult to assess. However, there is no denying that it is easier to obtain a preschool education in some states than others and that state policy can change participation rates

dramatically. Universal preschool programs in Oklahoma and Georgia have made preschool education programs available to all, or nearly all, children at age 4. Twelve states (7 are in the West) offer no state-funded preschool program at all.



Figure 12. Percent of Population Ages 3 and 4 who are Enrolled in School: Census 2000**2000 State-by-State Census Data on Early Education and Care Enrollment**

Children ages 3 and 4	7,701,024	100.0%
Enrolled in school	3,795,049	49.3%

Recently, the U.S. Census Bureau released data on early education and care enrollment taken during the 2000 census. It shows 49.3 percent of America's 3- and 4-year olds were "enrolled in school" in the year 2000. This is similar to the finding of the National Household Education Survey (NHES) that 49.6 percent of 3- and 4-year olds were in nursery school programs in 1999. Both Census and NHES are useful sources of information, but only the Census allows for state-by-state comparisons.

Note that the Census does not report the percentage of children in any type of classroom, but only in classrooms considered to be "school." Some idea of how much difference this makes can be obtained from the NHES where both types of information are available. For example, in the 1999 NHES, parents reported 57 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds to be in a classroom when child care centers are included, compared to 49.6 percent in nursery school and preschool (see note).

All States by Rank

Rank	State	Percent Enrolled	Rank	State	Percent Enrolled
1	New Jersey	63.2	26	Tennessee	46.0
2	Connecticut	61.1	27	California	45.8
3	Massachusetts	59.5	28	Oklahoma	45.5
4	Maryland	57.7	29	Minnesota	45.3
5	New York	57.6	30	Arkansas	45.2
6	Georgia	55.9	31	Washington	45.2
7	Louisiana	55.7	32	Texas	45.1
8	Florida	54.9	33	Wisconsin	44.9
9	Delaware	54.5	34	Nebraska	44.6
10	South Carolina	54.0	35	Iowa	44.5
11	Illinois	52.5	36	Maine	44.4
12	Rhode Island	52.4	37	Kentucky	44.0
13	Virginia	52.3	38	Wyoming	43.5
14	Mississippi	52.2	39	Montana	42.0
15	North Carolina	51.1	40	Oregon	41.3
16	New Hampshire	51.0	41	New Mexico	40.4
17	Hawaii	49.9	42	Utah	40.3
18	Colorado	49.8	43	Alaska	40.1
19	Vermont	49.1	44	Arizona	40.0
20	Pennsylvania	49.0	45	South Dakota	39.9
21	Michigan	48.9	46	Indiana	39.7
22	Alabama	48.9	47	Idaho	36.9
23	Kansas	47.3	48	West Virginia	36.8
24	Ohio	47.3	49	Nevada	36.3
25	Missouri	47.2	50	North Dakota	34.4

Source: Analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census, Summary File 3, Table PCT23.

Note: The Census Bureau asks, "At any time since February 1, 2000 has this person attended regular school or college," inclusive of nursery school, preschool, kindergarten and possibly higher grades. A very small number of 3- and 4-year-olds are enrolled in Kindergarten or higher. Private homes in which custodial care is provided are not considered nursery schools. Children enrolled in Head Start programs or similar programs sponsored by local agencies to provide preschool education to young children are counted under nursery school. The terms "nursery school or preschool" are defined as a group or class that is organized to provide educational experiences for children during the year or years preceding kindergarten. School includes child care programs where "instruction" is an important and integral phase of the program.

Influences on Preschool Participation

To more fully understand how preschool participation varies with child and family characteristics, we conducted statistical analyses to estimate the “effect” of each while controlling for the others. This allows us to take into account overlap among these characteristics. For example, average income is lower in some regions than others and families with higher levels of education also tend to have higher incomes. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 1 using NHES data from several points across the decade: 1991, 1995, 1999, and 2001. Each of the factors discussed above remains important after taking into account the others and a few additional family characteristics such as family composition. Moreover, the pattern (except for the effect of region) is quite consistent across the decade. In the case of region, the pattern appears to change so that in 1991 and 1995 there was no difference in participation by region after taking family characteristics into account, but there was in 1999 and 2001. As noted earlier, policy differences among the states may have produced this difference over the decade.

For the most part, the findings are what one would expect from looking at each factor in turn. Children are more likely to attend a preschool program:

- *At age 4 than at age 3.*
- *At higher levels of family income.*
- *At higher levels of maternal education.*
- *When the mother is employed outside the home.*
- *When there are fewer children in the family.*
- *If they are African-American.*
- *If in 1999 or 2001 they did not live in the West.*

Two “negative” findings might be considered somewhat less expected. First, Hispanic children are not found to be significantly less likely to attend preschool than white non-Hispanic children, after controlling for education, income, employment, family structure, and region. Apparently, these other factors play a substantial role in the low participation rates of Hispanic children. Second, children of single parents are neither more nor less likely to attend preschool programs than children in two-parent households, other things being equal. Other analyses show that children in single-parent households are significantly

more likely to be enrolled in *some type* of child care (for years after 1991). This suggests that single parents have as much interest in obtaining preschool education for their children as other parents, but have greater needs for non-parental child care that are met through other types of care. It is notable that the vast majority (77percent) of 3- and 4-year-olds live in two-parent households.



Table 1. Logistic Regression Predicting Preschool Participation at ages 3 and 4

	NHES: 1991		NHES: 1995		NHES: 1999		NHES: 2001	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Income								
< \$25,000	-0.91 ***	0.11	-1.18 ***	0.15	-0.62 ***	0.14	-0.60 ***	0.14
< \$25,000-\$50,000	-0.72 ***	0.09	-0.92 ***	0.14	-0.50 ***	0.12	-0.72 ***	0.12
Household Size	-0.23 ***	0.04	-0.31 ***	0.05	-0.24 ***	0.05	-0.21 ***	0.05
Race-Ethnicity								
African American	0.62 ***	0.10	0.44 *	0.17	0.86 ***	0.17	0.45 **	0.17
Hispanic	-0.15	0.11	-0.29	0.16	-0.03	0.13	-0.22	0.14
Other Non-White	0.16	0.18	0.03	0.28	0.31	0.22	0.13	0.21
Western vs. Other Regions	-0.07	0.11	-0.14	0.12	-0.37 **	0.12	-0.36 **	0.13
Educational Attainment	0.42 ***	0.04	0.31 ***	0.06	0.37 ***	0.04	0.24 ***	0.06
Mother Employed	0.32 ***	0.07	0.24 *	0.1	0.27 **	0.08	0.40 ***	0.10
Single Parent	-0.11	0.13	0.39 **	0.12	0.22	0.12	-0.01	0.13
Age (3 vs.4)	0.87 ***	0.08	1.15 ***	0.1	1.09 ***	0.09	1.02 ***	0.09
Constant (Intercept)	-3.11 ***	0.33	-3.49 ***	0.43	-3.85 ***	0.37	-3.35 ***	0.4
Cox & Snell R² (N)	0.15 4425		0.18 3025		0.16 3145		0.15 2801	

*p< .05 **p< .01 ***p< .001

Logistic regression conducted using WesVarPC, a special purpose software program for the analysis of survey data based on complex sampling designs.

B = Standardized logit coefficients, also called standardized effect coefficients or beta weights, are analogous to standardized regression coefficients and can be used to compare the relative strengths of the independent variables on preschool participation.

SE= Standard Error. WesVarPC estimates standard errors using a Jackknife replication procedure that properly reflects complex sampling procedures used in the collection of NHES survey data.

N= Sample size

Data Source: National Household Education Survey: 1991-2001 National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

- * Statistically significant at p<.05
- ** Statistically significant at p<.01
- *** Statistically significant at p<.001

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Participation in preschool education has grown steadily over the past several decades in the United States. Most American children spend time in a preschool classroom at age 4 and many attend at age 3, as well. This trend contributes to the development of the nation's children and has the potential to substantially reduce educational inequality in the United States. Yet, preschool participation in the United States remains highly unequal, with many children starting out behind before they begin kindergarten. This inequality in preschool participation seems likely to exacerbate rather than ameliorate educational inequality. The rising tide of preschool participation has not lifted all boats equally and the factors that predicted inequality in 1991 still predicted inequality in 2001. In addition, regional differences in preschool participation became apparent by the end of the decade, with young children in the West falling farther behind.

The children least likely to attend preschool are those whose parents have the least education and least income, whose mothers do not work outside the home, and who live in the western region of our country. Thus, preschool program participation is unequal, and it is especially low for children who would benefit most from going—those from low-income and less-educated families. Hispanic children appear to be particularly disadvantaged as they have a much lower rate of preschool participation than other children but apparently not because cultural values lead them to avoid such programs. African-American children have somewhat higher rates of participation than might be expected given their family resources and location.

In the most educated families, preschool participation rates at age 4 have been almost as high as kindergarten participation rates for at least a decade. Over that decade, there has been some progress in closing the attendance gap for children of less-educated parents. This good news likely reflects the growth of Head Start and state preschool programs. However, these targeted programs have not fully accomplished their goals with respect to access. Taken as a whole, targeted programs have enrolled far more children than the number who are in poverty or whose mothers are high school dropouts. However, policy makers and policy analysts should not assume targeted programs in fact reach all, or even the vast majority, of those eligible. Evidence presented here indicates the contrary.

By 2001, targeted programs in the United States were already large enough to enroll all of the children in poverty or with parents who were high school dropouts. Yet, they failed to accomplish these goals, perhaps in large part due to the dynamic nature of the population. There are numerous reasons eligible families are missed, including difficulties in identification, frequent changes in eligibility, and geographic mobility in the target population. Also, targeted programs do not effectively address issues of access for children whose families have modest incomes and have lower participation rates than even children in poverty.¹⁰



In addition to the inequalities in overall access just noted, it is apparent that inequality in access to preschool is greater at age 3 than age 4. Moreover, improvements in access for the most disadvantaged children from 1991 to 2001 seem largely limited to 4-year-olds. Thus, more advantaged children are not just more likely to go to preschool before they enter kindergarten, they are likely to have started at an earlier age. Although this could, at least in part, reflect differences in attitudes about the appropriate time for children to enter preschool programs, public policy in the United States undoubtedly plays some role. Head Start serves considerably fewer children at 3 than at 4. Most state preschool programs serve only or primarily 4-year-olds. The consequences are readily apparent.

How might public policy in the United States decrease inequities in preschool participation at ages 3 and 4? One approach would be to expand targeted programs. This would mean increased funding for Head Start, state preschool programs, and child-care subsidies, including tax credits for families with moderate incomes. Greater attention could be focused on funds to expand the enrollment of children at age 3. For most state preschool programs, serving equal numbers at age 3 would essentially require doubling the size of the programs. Western states, in particular, might improve equality in access by investing more in state-funded preschool programs. An alternative approach would be to offer preschool programs to all children. A preschool program for all children would cost the public more, but the added benefits from serving more children could more than justify the added costs. In addition to reaching previously underserved disadvantaged children, newly served children from families

that are not currently eligible also would benefit in ways that can contribute to the public good, such as increased school readiness and achievement.

Finally, the data reviewed in this report focus on whether a child goes to a preschool program but not on the quality of the programs themselves. Other studies have found that inequalities in access extend to quality as well as quantity. As highlighted in a recent NIEER report on state preschool

programs, quality and adequate funding continue to be major issues.¹¹ The nation and its children will not benefit if quality is sacrificed to increase participation rates. Instead, the promised benefits will be lost and America will have only the illusion of progress in preschool education. Higher standards and added resources for quality are essential components of any effort to increase equality of access to effective preschool education.



Endnotes:

- ¹ Warren, E. & Tyagi, A.W. (2003). *The two-income trap. Why middle-class mothers and fathers are going broke*. NY: Basic Books.
- ² One of the complications of research on preschool programs is that it is generally conducted by age, whereas most research on schools is by grade. Although we focus on 3- and 4-year-olds in this report, the total preschool population includes 5-year-olds not yet in kindergarten. The percentage of all children who attend a preschool program prior to kindergarten is slightly higher than the percentage of 4-year-olds enrolled. Magnuson and colleagues (2004) estimate a preschool participation rate of 72% for the cohort of children who entered kindergarten in 1998 based on the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort. Magnuson, K.A., Meyers, M.K., Ruhm, C.J., & Waldfogel, J. (2004). Inequality in preschool education and school readiness. Submitted to *American Educational Research Journal*. Available on line at <http://www.uncg.edu/eco/cjruhm/papers/aerj.pdf>.
- ³ Barnett, W.S. (2003). Better teachers, better preschools: Student achievement linked to teacher qualifications. *Preschool Policy Matters*, Issue 2. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research. Espinosa, L. M. High quality preschool: Why we need it and what it looks like. *Preschool Policy Matters*, Issue 1. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.
- ⁴ This definition includes all private and public child care and preschool programs, not including 4-year-olds in kindergarten. It results in slightly higher rates of participation than are reported in the CPS which is less inclusive and relies on a parental definition of "school."
- ⁵ Behrman, R.E. (Ed.) (1993). Home visiting. *The Future of Children*, 3 (3). ; Denton, K.L., West., & Reaney, L.M. (2001). The kindergarten year: *Findings from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten class of 1998-99*. NCES 2001-023. Washington, DC: National Center for Educational Statistics. ; Layzer, J.I., Goodson, B., Bernstein, L., & Price, C. (2001). *National evaluation of family support programs, Volume A: The meta-analysis. Final report*. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates.; Magnuson et al. (2004); NICHD Early Childcare Research Network, (2002). Child-care structure, process, outcome: Direct and indirect effects of child care quality on young children's development. *Psychological Science*, 13 (3), 199-206.
- ⁶ Fluctuations in economic conditions and public policies undoubtedly influence preschool participation from year to year. However, the influences are not always obvious. For example, 1991 was a worse year for economic growth than 2001, even though 2001 was a recession year.
- ⁷ Perhaps parents were less likely to consider preschool programs as school in 1991 than 2001. This could reflect a change in perceptions or a real change in the orientation of preschool programs. Alternatively, the NHES and CPS survey procedures may have been more similar in 2001 than in 1991.
- ⁸ A small number of 4-year-olds attend kindergarten and are not included in these figures. In addition, about 1/4 of 5-year-olds attend preschool, but our analyses focus only on 3's and 4's.
- ⁹ Regions are as defined by the U.S. Census. West: AK, AZ, CA, CO, HI, ID, MT, NM, NV, OR, UT, WA, WY. Northeast: CT, MA, ME, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT. South: AL, AR, DC, DE, FL, GA, KY, LA, MD, MS, NC, OK, SC, TN, TX, VA, WV. Midwest: IA, IL, IN, KS, MI, MN, MO, ND, NE, OH, SD, WI.
- ¹⁰ Barnett, W.S., Brown, K., & Shore, R. (April, 2004). The universal v. targeted debate: Should the United States have preschool for all? *Preschool Policy Matters*, Issue 6. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.
- ¹¹ Barnett, W.S., Robin, K., Hustedt, J., & Schulman, K. (2003). *The state of preschool: 2003 state preschool yearbook*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.



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This document was prepared with the support of The Pew Charitable Trusts. The Trusts' *Starting Early, Starting Strong* initiative seeks to advance high quality prekindergarten for all the nation's three- and four-year-olds through objective, policy-focused research, state public education campaigns and national outreach. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Pew Charitable Trusts.



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