

# Head Start May Offer Next-Generation Benefits, Researchers Say

By Marva Hinton on September 22, 2017 5:30 PM

A **new study** now awaiting publication says the benefits of Head Start extend well beyond the children enrolled in the federal early-childhood program. The researchers say they have found a connection between students' participation in Head Start and positive outcomes for their own children in the future.



The study, which is undergoing the formal peer-review process by a leading economic journal, found, for example, that the children of Head Start students were more likely to go to college and avoid teenage parenthood and crime than their low-income peers.

The study was co-written by researchers Andrew Barr, an assistant professor of economics at Texas A&M University, and Chloe R. Gibbs, an assistant professor of

economics at the University of Notre Dame. They were looking at data for some of the earliest Head Start students. The preschool program began in 1965 as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty.

The study used data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1979 Cohort and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth Children and Young Adults Survey conducted in the same year. The researchers focused on children whose grandmothers didn't graduate from high school, since in the early years of Head Start maternal educational attainment of program participants was very low (60-75 percent didn't have a high school diploma).

The researchers keyed in on the children whose mothers lived in counties where the program first launched and compared them to children whose mothers didn't have the option to participate in Head Start. The researchers didn't have the information necessary to determine whether these women actually took part in the program.

The researchers found that the generation that followed these students had a 12 percent higher high school graduation rate and a 17 percent higher college attendance rate. This second generation also had a nearly 9 percent lower rate of teenage parenthood, while criminal activity fell 15 percent among this group.

"This is a proof of concept that societal investments in these early programs can disrupt intergenerational transmission of the effects of poverty," said Barr. "We both thought that there likely would be an effect given that there's a lot of evidence of strong correlations between parental outcomes and [children's] outcomes. The size of the effect is perhaps larger than we initially would have expected."

The study stresses that Head Start has changed from its earliest days when the program served a much more impoverished population and focused on providing comprehensive services to students and their families, including health care and job training. Today there's more of an emphasis on preparing students for the rigor of kindergarten, so it's unclear if the same intergenerational effects would be found.

*Photo: Ja'Malachi Server-Walker, 4, (left), Julian Aguilar-Gasga, 4, (right) and their classmates offer books to be read by teacher Ytashia Harris at the Skelly campus of the Community Action Project, a Head Start center in Tulsa, Okla. (Shane Bevel for Education Week-File)*