

# Aligning and Investing in Infant and Toddler Programs

By Maryam Adamu, Katie Hamm, Tim Vance, and Farah Ahmad

October 2014

Center for American Progress



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# Introduction and summary

The fact that the United States is undergoing major racial and ethnic change is well documented.<sup>1</sup> By 2043, demographers estimate that there will be no majority race or ethnicity for the first time in U.S. history.<sup>2</sup> The leading edge of this transformation is America's youngest citizens. Already, children of color comprise a majority of children under age 2.<sup>3</sup> This is also the first school year in which the majority of children attending public schools are children of color.<sup>4</sup>

Over the past few decades, immigration from Asian and Latin American countries, high birth rates among women of color, and an aging, predominantly non-Hispanic white population have led to a seismic demographic shift in the nation. Non-Hispanic white Americans made up 80 percent of the population in 1980.<sup>5</sup> Today, they comprise about 65 percent of the population.<sup>6</sup>

This demographic upheaval is mirrored in the U.S. economy. As the nation is experiencing greater diversity, the gulf between the wealthy and the rest of society is growing wider.<sup>7</sup> While rising inequality and racial and ethnic diversity have played prominently in national policy discussions, the population most affected by these changes has been largely absent from those conversations: children under the age of 3, collectively referred to as infants and toddlers. This age group is the most likely to be poor, experiencing poverty at the highest rate of any age group.<sup>8</sup> And, for the first time in U.S. history, it is comprised mostly of children of color.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, a significant number of these youngest Americans are being raised in households experiencing severe financial pressure, thanks in large measure to the 2008 global financial crisis, which exacerbated the long-term trend of rising economic inequality. U.S. unemployment doubled from 2007 to 2009, pushing many American families into poverty.<sup>10</sup> Today, too many families are still living paycheck to paycheck. Moreover, one-third of women live in poverty or on the brink of it—just one illness or broken down car away from financial disaster.<sup>11</sup> Even middle-class families are experiencing the financial crunch, feeling the squeeze of the rising costs of everyday necessities, including health care and child care, while their wages have remained largely stagnant.<sup>12</sup>

Because families are still working to recover from the recession, today's infants and toddlers are especially at risk. In terms of human development, infants and toddlers are at a critical stage requiring significant investments of time and resources to produce positive outcomes. Unfortunately, the cost of high-quality care and education that produce such results is still out of reach for most families.

This report explores how shifting economic and social trends are affecting infants and toddlers. It also makes a case for why policymakers should respond to these trends by increasing investments in this age group. The current approach to service delivery for young children is fragmented and under-resourced. Growing poverty and diversity demands another look at how infants and toddlers and their families are served. It also demands a greater effort to align and expand the current patchwork of social support programs to serve young children in a cohesive way that best sets them up for success now and in the future. To provide this more robust and seamless approach to service delivery, considering growing diversity and poverty among our youngest children, this report offers the following policy recommendations:

- Increase funding for infants and toddlers consistent with the cost of providing quality care and education.
- Create single entry points for early childhood programs serving infants and toddlers.
- Allow states to apply for federal infant and toddler funds through a single application with the goal of aligning services.
- Invest in developing more evidence-based programs for diverse populations.
- Enhance outreach efforts to all communities.

Today's infants and toddlers provide a glimpse of what is on the horizon. In order to move toward closing the racial income and achievement gaps, policymakers must first close the school-readiness gap. This requires investing in the nation's most valuable resource: America's youngest citizens—our infants and toddlers.

# Growing diversity and disadvantage among today's infants and toddlers

Although cohorts of young children have been steadily growing more diverse for the past few decades, the current cohort of infants and toddlers is unique in American history. The tipping point occurred in July 2011 when the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that 50.4 percent of the nation's population under age 1 were children of color.<sup>13</sup> At that time, the overall child population under age 5 was just on the brink of becoming majority children of color at 49.7 percent.<sup>14</sup> For the three following years, these trends have continued. Today, these numbers have increased significantly and have changed the landscape of the entire youth population. In fact, for the first time in history, the public school K-12 population in the 2014-15 school year is projected to be majority students of color, according to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics.<sup>15</sup>

But these demographic changes all began with infants. Census population estimates from 2011 revealed that, among the children of color under the age of 1—the new majority for this age cohort—Hispanic children made up 26.3 percent of that population, African American children were 13.7 percent, and Asian Americans 4.4 percent.<sup>16</sup> Projections show that Hispanic children will comprise 40 percent of the population of infants and toddlers by 2060, while non-Hispanic whites will comprise one in three children in that age group.<sup>17</sup> Much of this growth in the Hispanic child population can be attributed to varying birth rates. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' National Center for Health Statistics found that the birth rate for Hispanics was 17.1 births per 1,000 people in 2012, compared with the white birth rate of 12.1.<sup>18</sup> During this same period, the African American rate was 14.7, the American Indian and Alaska Native rate was 10.5, and Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders had a birth rate of 15.1.<sup>19</sup>

Growing diversity and poverty are interrelated: People of color experience poverty at higher rates than their white counterparts.<sup>20</sup> While the Great Recession affected most Americans, people of color were hit particularly hard. Moreover, young children have long experienced poverty at higher rates than adults, making infants and toddlers of color among the nation's most vulnerable populations.

The proportion of economically disadvantaged infants and toddlers has only risen since the recession.<sup>21</sup> Today, nearly half of all infants and toddlers live in a low-income household and more than one-quarter live in poverty.<sup>22</sup> One in three preschoolers of color, those ages 3 to 5, live in poverty.<sup>23</sup> The U.S. child poverty rate continues to be an outlier in the developed world, with the second-highest rate of child poverty in the developed world—higher than Hungary and Slovakia.<sup>24</sup> In cities such as Detroit, Michigan, and Cleveland, Ohio, more than half of all children live in poverty.<sup>25</sup> Despite its wealth, the United States still feels the staggering effects of economic inequality, and too often, children of color pay the price.

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### Focusing policy on the shifting demographics among young children

Demographic shifts among young children are an important bellwether for how the country will look in just a few decades. To understand the far-reaching implications of investments in the youngest Americans, one must understand how the nation's future workforce and economy rely on this generation of children.

Today's children of color will be tomorrow's adults. Over the next 30 years, the majority of the U.S. population will become people of color, compared with just 36 percent of the population in 2010.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, as our nation grows more diverse, communities of color will make up a larger share of the labor force. This is good news since the U.S. job market is also undergoing significant change. Baby Boomers—individuals who were born between 1946 and 1964 and make up the largest generation in our nation's history—have recently begun to retire.<sup>27</sup> Nearly 10,000 Baby Boomers will retire each day for nearly the next two decades, and as this mass retirement occurs, a record number of jobs held by the Baby Boomer generation will have to be filled by younger workers.<sup>28</sup> This younger generation of workers will be more diverse than at any other time in our nation's history. By 2050, Hispanics alone will make up 30 percent of the U.S. labor force.<sup>29</sup>

This younger generation of workers will need public investments, particularly in the area of education, if it is to remain competitive with the rest of the world. While the United States as a whole has become an increasingly educated country over time,<sup>30</sup> very significant educational disparities exist between whites and people of color. Recently, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights examined data from every public school in the country and found racial disparities in education along many different indicators, ranging from access to advanced courses in high school to the level of disciplinary action in preschool.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, among 25- to 29-year-olds, 37 percent of whites had a bachelor's degree or higher in 2012 compared with only 17 percent of African Americans and 13 percent of Hispanics.<sup>32</sup> Many Asian American and Pacific Islander sub-groups, such as Cambodian-Americans and Hmong Americans, have similarly low educational attainment rates.<sup>33</sup> Such racial and ethnic disparities will be difficult to course correct in the future if policymakers do not begin by investing in infants and toddlers.

These low rates of educational attainment are problematic and underscore an important challenge for the U.S. economy. Over the next decade, the economy will produce an additional 24 million jobs, while Baby Boomer retirement will simultaneously open up 55 million existing positions.<sup>34</sup> Two-thirds of these jobs will demand some postsecondary education.<sup>35</sup> Current educational attainment rates will not suffice—and the mismatch between job requirements and an adequately skilled labor force is expected to leave 5 million of these jobs unfilled.<sup>36</sup>

Closing educational gaps between communities of color and non-Hispanic whites is very possible through policies that increase access and equity. Since the majority of infants are children of color, improving the continuum of early childhood programs available to children under age 3 and their families provides an opportunity to stifle these disparities before they begin. If measures such as these are taken to close racial gaps, the gains for individuals and the economy will be widespread. A recent economic analysis found that if the United States had closed racial gaps in income in 2011, average personal incomes would have been 8 percent higher; the national gross domestic product, or GDP, would have increased \$1.2 trillion; 13 million people would have been lifted out of poverty; and an additional \$192 billion in tax revenue would have been generated.<sup>37</sup>

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## Changing families

In addition to greater racial and ethnic diversity, families are also increasingly diverse in their structure and household characteristics. Serving young children well requires a deeper understanding of these shifting family variables. Many infants and toddlers are growing up in households that are quite different than those of previous generations. Three of these changing variables in family structure are closely linked to rising inequality and demographic diversity: families headed by parents who are born outside the United States; families headed by a single mother; and families headed by same-sex couples.

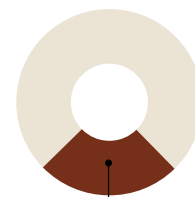


A large share of infants and toddlers has at least one parent born outside the country, even though the vast majority of children are U.S.-born citizens.<sup>38</sup> These families are both linguistically and culturally diverse, and a unique set of challenges and advantages comes with this diversity. Many children live in homes where English is not the primary language. As a result, these children have an opportunity to learn multiple languages, but they also might be at risk of not receiving the services they need if their parents have limited English proficiency. These families are also more likely to be poor and Hispanic.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to the country's growing diversity and economic inequality, family structures have continued to change. Four out of five American adults were married in 1970; now, only about half of all adults are married.<sup>40</sup> With that shift, the number of children in single-parent households—predominately headed by single mothers—has risen. One in four children is now raised in a single-parent household.<sup>41</sup> Often, women also balance breadwinning and caregiving. In total, 68 percent of mothers are in the workforce, with 4 in 10 acting as the household's sole or primary breadwinner.<sup>42</sup> Still, one in three women live in poverty, bearing the responsibility for 28 million children.<sup>43</sup> While the vast majority of children under age 2 still live in two-parent households, those who do not are disproportionately low income and African American, American Indian and Alaska Native, or Hispanic—with single-parent rates at 52 percent, 41 percent, and 27 percent, respectively.<sup>44</sup> Children in single-parent households face additional risk factors in part because they lack the combined resources of a two-parent household—including time and material resources—that advantage children on a range of economic, social, and educational measures.<sup>45</sup> On average, children living with single mothers or nonmarried, cohabitating couples—relationships that tend not to last for the duration of a child's early years—are in household conditions with less economic support, very few financial assets, and high family instability.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, as more data become available on same-sex parents, the picture of their demographic characteristics is becoming clearer. One in 10 same-sex households has a child under age 5.<sup>47</sup> Recent research has established that children raised by same-sex parents are no more likely to display negative cognitive, behavioral, or emotional outcomes than children of heterosexual couples.<sup>48</sup> However, these parents often face many forms of discrimination, including job discrimination, which have a profound effect on their economic well-being and that of their children. Children raised in same-sex households are almost twice as likely to be poor and significantly more likely to be low income than children in married, different-sex households.<sup>49</sup> Children in the first years of life are especially at risk: Almost 25 percent children under the age of 5 living with a male same-sex couple and roughly 20 percent of children living with a female same-sex couple live in poverty.<sup>50</sup>

**FIGURE 1**  
Young children of immigrants



They make up  
**25 percent**  
of all children under age 3.

Of these:  
**60 percent**  
are Latino.

**90 percent**  
are U.S. citizens.

**50 percent**  
live with parents who have  
limited English proficiency.

**25 percent**  
live in homes where  
English is not regularly spoken.

**1 in 13**  
live in homes where  
neither parent speaks English well.

Sources: David Murphey, Mae Cooper, and Nicole Forry, "The Youngest Americans: A Statistical Portrait of Infants and Toddlers in the United States" (Bethesda, MD: Child Trends, 2013), available at <http://documents.mccormickfoundation.org/pdf/Child-Trends-2013.pdf>; Hannah Matthews, "Reaching All Children? Understanding Early Care and Education Participation Among Immigrant Families: A Brief" (Washington: Center for Law and Social Policy, 2006), available at <http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/publication-1/0273.pdf>.

There is also overwhelming evidence to suggest that same-sex couples of color—particularly African Americans in same-sex couples—face the additional barrier of racism. African American children in same-sex-couple-led households live in poverty at higher rates than they do in different-sex-couple-led households, at 18 percent and 8 percent, respectively.<sup>51</sup> African American female partners are three times more likely to be poor than their non-Hispanic white counterparts. African American males in same-sex couples are six times more likely to be poor than non-Hispanic white males in same-sex couples.<sup>52</sup> As a result, more than half of all children in African American same-sex male households are in poverty, representing the highest poverty rate of any household type.<sup>53</sup>

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## Early years and the school-readiness gap

Changing socioeconomic trends that leave infants and toddlers and their families more vulnerable, especially those of color, should be of particular concern to policymakers, given the importance of the first three years of life to future success. Many social issues with which policymakers struggle—from high school achievement gaps to unintended pregnancy and juvenile delinquency—have their roots in developmental progress during a child’s first three years of life. A growing body of research shows that a child’s early years are critical for building a strong cognitive and social-emotional foundation that sustains ability and growth later in life.<sup>54</sup> Over the past decade, states and cities have risen to the challenge by creating and expanding early education initiatives for preschoolers. However, programs specific to infants and toddlers—children under 3 years old—remain comparatively underdeveloped. An economic analysis of education spending shows that the rate of return in terms of skill attainment decreases substantially over the course of a lifetime.<sup>55</sup> It is not surprising then that high-quality early childhood programs are more effective at improving a wide range of important skills for at-risk children than corrective programs aimed at closing the achievement gaps later in life.<sup>56</sup> Yet, the per-capita public spending on infants and toddlers is less than 10 percent of the funding spent on K-12 students.<sup>57</sup> (see Figure 3)

Over the past couple of decades, developments in neurobiology indicate that extraordinarily rapid brain development occurs in the first three years of life.<sup>58</sup> This development is also incredibly responsive to a child’s immediate environment.<sup>59</sup> As a result, access to cognitively stimulating environments and stable, nurturing relationships becomes critically important.<sup>60</sup> A family’s ability to cultivate a healthy environment is highly contingent on external factors, and poverty greatly undermines this ability. Low-income parents struggle to afford quality health and

child care, learning materials, stimulating activities for their child, and nutritionally adequate food—any one of which contributes to suppressed development. Low-income children are also at heightened risk of experiencing so-called “toxic stress,” which occurs when a child experiences periods of uninterrupted or frequent hardship, including the stress and instability associated with living in poverty and a lack of consistent adult support.<sup>61</sup> When stress reaches such high levels, it measurably changes a child’s brain structure, inhibiting proper cognitive and emotional development.<sup>62</sup> These early experiences manifest far into adulthood.

Since family economic conditions can significantly affect the environments to which children are exposed during their formative early years, it is not surprising that the roots of the educational achievement gaps are already detectable at the early stages of life. A 2013 study conducted by Stanford University psychologists found significant differences in cognitive abilities in young children at age 18 months.<sup>63</sup> By 36 months, a six-month gap between low-income children and their higher-income peers in processing skills critical to language progress was already present.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, the majority of the ability gaps at age 18, which determine a range of labor-market outcomes, are determined far earlier in life, and many are present before a child enters kindergarten.<sup>65</sup>

# Federal programs aimed at infants and toddlers

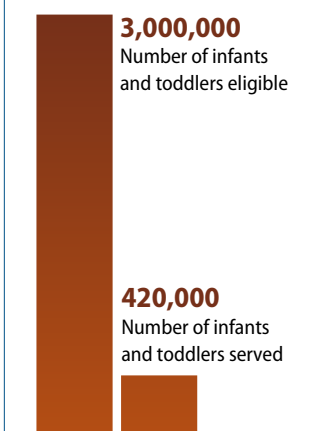
While many young children increasingly face the challenges associated with poverty, a number of federal programs are available to address the needs of this population. This section explores the major federal initiatives that invest in young children and the effect of these efforts on vulnerable families.

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## Child Care and Development Block Grant

The Child Care and Development Block Grant, or CCDBG, program is the primary federal funding source that provides child care assistance for families. Under the program, states receive a block grant to subsidize child care for low-income, working families, usually through vouchers or certificates to be used at a program that the family selects.<sup>66</sup> While the program has increased college enrollment and participation in job-training programs for low-income parents, it has been less successful in supporting child development.<sup>67</sup> The cost associated with providing high-quality care far exceeds the reimbursement offered through CCDBG. This effectively discourages program administrators offering high-quality care from filling slots with low-income children, pushing these children into lower-quality settings. In order for CCDBG to benefit both parents and children, the subsidy must be structured to promote access to quality care and include standards regulating the quality of programs that are eligible for subsidies.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Child Care and Development Block Grant, fiscal year 2009**



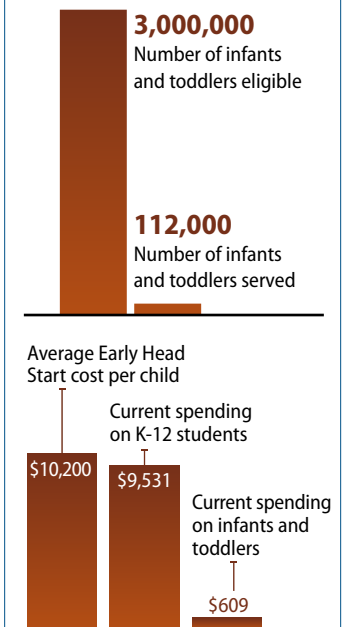
Sources: Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, *Estimates of Child Care Eligibility and Receipt for Fiscal Year 2009* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012), Figure 1, available at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/12/childcareeligibility/ib.pdf>; Hannah Matthews and Rhiannon Reeves, "Infants and Toddlers in CCDBG: 2012 Update" (Washington: Center for Law and Social Policy, 2014), available at <http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/publication-1/Infants-and-Toddlers-in-CCDBG-2012-Update.pdf>.

## Early Head Start

Through Early Head Start, or EHS, the federal government offers child-development programs equipped to offer comprehensive services to low-income infants and toddlers. Each of these services supports prenatal health and the social, cognitive, and emotional development of infants and toddlers, including early learning experiences, home visitation, health screenings, doctor referrals, parent support, and nutritional programs. While Head Start, which serves preschoolers, is much larger than EHS—serving nearly 1 million children and their families, compared with the 156,000 children served by EHS<sup>68</sup>—the growing understanding of the importance of the first years of life in determining outcomes over the course of a lifetime resulted in EHS funding being doubled in the 2010 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.<sup>69</sup> This year, Congress provided \$500 million to expand EHS through partnerships with child care providers in order to increase access to programs that meet the EHS standards and provide a full working day for parents.<sup>70</sup>

Research on the effectiveness of EHS shows positive effects on development for infants and toddlers, including a wide range of cognitive and social-behavioral outcomes, and on child-rearing practices for mothers. These beneficial effects were markedly large for African American children, including an increase in parental support for early language and literacy, daily reading, and teaching activities through age 5.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, EHS participants were significantly more likely to take part in center-based prekindergarten at ages 3 and 4.<sup>72</sup>

**FIGURE 3**  
**Early Head Start, FY 2012**



**If we were to spend the same amount of money on infants and toddlers that we spend on older students, we could put 93 percent of all infants and toddlers in Early Head Start.**

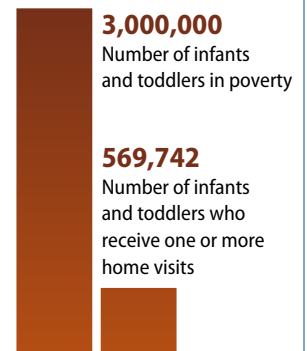
Sources: Zero to Three, "Fact Sheet: Early Head Start" (2013), available at <http://rally4babies.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/EHS-Fact-Sheet.pdf>; America's Edge, "Head Start and Early Head Start: A Proven Investment," available at <http://www.americasedge.org/head-start-and-early-head-start-a-proven-investment/> (last accessed October 2014); RWJF Commission to Build a Healthier America, "Time to Act: Investing in the Health of Our Children and Communities" (Princeton, NJ: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2014), Figure 8, available at <http://www.rwjf.org/-content/dam/farm/reports/reports/2014/rwjf409002>. Author's calculations are based on data from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and ReadyNation, of which America's Edge is now a part. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation data are based on data from the 2006 American Community Survey. ReadyNation data are from 2008.

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## Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting program

Through the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting, or MIECHV, program, expectant parents and parents of children up to age 5 can volunteer for home visitations from trained professionals, including social workers and nurses.<sup>73</sup> The program aims to prevent child neglect and support child development and school readiness by educating parents about the importance of developmentally stimulating interactions, such as reading regularly to their child. Enacted in 2010, MIECHV now operates in 544 communities in 50 states and the District of Columbia and serves slightly more than 15,000 families.<sup>74</sup>

**FIGURE 4**  
**Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program, FY 2012**



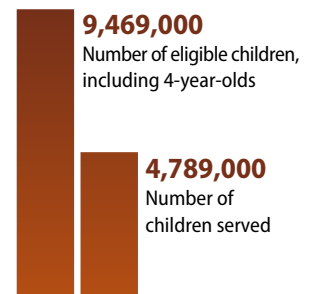
Sources: Author's calculations are based on data from Zero to Three and Child Trends. See Zero to Three, "Fact Sheet: Early Head Start" (2013); David Murphey, Mae Cooper, and Nicole Forry, "The Youngest Americans: A Statistical Portrait of Infants and Toddlers in the United States" (Bethesda, MD: Child Trends, 2013).

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## Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

Since the 1970s, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, or WIC, has provided funds to states to ensure that low-income pregnant or postpartum women with children up to age 5 have access to food assistance, health care referrals, and nutrition education.<sup>75</sup> Poor prenatal nutrition can lead to low birth weight, premature birth, and developmental defects.<sup>76</sup> Informed by child development research, the crucial nutrition assistance is designed to supplement the nutritional needs of women and children by providing essential foods that their diets might lack. WIC manages to reach a large share of population that is generally at greater risk for negative birth-related outcomes. WIC served slightly more than 8 million women and young children in fiscal year 2013.<sup>77</sup>

**FIGURE 5**  
**Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, 2009**

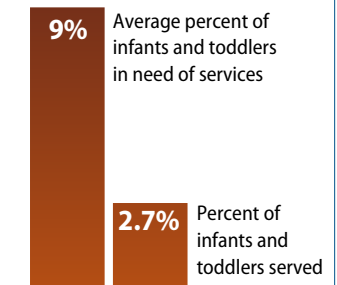


Source: Michael Martinez Schiferi, "WIC Participants and Their Growing Need for Coverage" (Washington: Urban Institute, 2012), available at <http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/412549-WIC-Participants-and-Their-Growing-Need-for-Coverage.pdf>.

## IDEA Part C: Early Intervention Program for Infants and Toddlers

Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, is a federal grant program that aims to improve outcomes for infants and toddlers with disabilities.<sup>78</sup> Since early detection of developmental delays increases the chance of improving children's outcomes, the screening of young children is a critical part of this program and a service that is offered at no cost to parents. IDEA Part C requires that infants and toddlers be tested for the presence of delays in five domains: cognitive development, motor development, communication development, social or emotional development, and adaptive behavior.<sup>79</sup> If developmental delays are discovered, families receive an Individualized Family Service Plan that details child outcomes and services available based on the assessment.<sup>80</sup> Targeted services typically involve speech language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and early childhood education.<sup>81</sup> Although it is a federal program, eligibility requirements—as well as the type and intensity of services—differ by state, and there is no standard prescription that informs states' requirements.

**FIGURE 6**  
**Early Intervention Program for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities, Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2010**



Source: Steven A. Rosenberg and others, "Part C Early Intervention for Infants and Toddlers: Percentage Eligible Versus Served," *Pediatrics* 131 (1) (2013): 38–46, available at <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/131/1/38.full.pdf+html>.

# Recommendations: Envisioning a better system

While existing federal policies demonstrate the potential to improve outcomes for infants and toddlers, they fall short in their scope and quality. The nation's current approach to its youngest citizens squanders the tremendous opportunity presented during children's first three years. Too many of the infant and toddler programs that are available to families are of poor to mediocre quality, which is particularly problematic when research suggests that attending poor-quality child care can actually inhibit a child's development.<sup>82</sup> Most young children lack consistent access to early childhood programs that could help them reach their full potential. As a result, many at-risk infants and toddlers lack essential developmental support during their critical early years of life. In light of the potential effects of poverty on young children's development, it is imperative that policymakers take specific steps to both expand efforts to address the needs of infants and toddlers with culturally responsive service delivery and align systems to provide services on a continuum until children begin preschool.

Nearly all the programs described above are severely underfunded, serving only a fraction of eligible children and typically providing services for only a short span of time. If the United States wishes to close the achievement gap and foster a globally competitive workforce, it must start investing in the first few years of life in order to put infants and toddlers on the path to future success.

It is a given that achieving this future success requires sustained investment. As research from Early Head Start demonstrates, children make the greatest gains when they attend programs for multiple years. Based on that knowledge, the following five recommendations would promote a comprehensive system of services for infants and toddlers that is responsive to growing diversity.



## Increase funding for programs serving infants and toddlers

Federal spending for infants and toddlers is well below the level of spending on older children, including preschoolers. (see Figure 3) Given the importance of these early years, policymakers must invest additional funds to reach all eligible children. If the United States spent the same amount on infants and toddlers as it spends on older children, 93 percent of infants and toddlers could attend Early Head Start, compared with the less than 5 percent who are currently served.<sup>83</sup> States and communities cannot be expected to create a constant stream of supports for young children and their families when resources reach so few children. While early childhood advocacy has long called for further investments for young children, the United States is approaching a critical time when failure to invest could compromise the nation's future workforce and global competitiveness if this cohort of children is forced to live out the effects of poverty.

## Create single entry points for early childhood programs serving infants and toddlers

Families often must piece together the patchwork of early childhood programs available to infants and toddlers by visiting multiple state or community agencies. Far too often, this only results in being put on a waiting list. A common application and screening process that streamlines eligibility requirements for all available programs in the community could identify all the early childhood programs for which a child might be eligible, taking into consideration which programs would best meet the family's needs, including child care subsidies, Early Head Start, IDEA Part C, and home visiting. While single-entry-point approaches have been tested in social service programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF,<sup>84</sup> this approach has been largely absent in the early childhood community. A single entry point for early childhood programs would ideally connect families with other social supports that aim to strengthen a families' overall economic footing, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP. These applications should be available in places that families with young children frequent, including WIC offices, pediatricians' offices, and hospitals. Although infant- and toddler-specific single entry points are crucial because of the absence of ways for families to find out about these programs, they should not be limited to infant and toddler programs. For parents looking to continue quality of care once a child becomes of preschool age or for parents who might also have preschoolers, the screening process should include program eligibility through 5 years old. Since this would be a very new approach to service delivery, dedicated federal funds to pilot such an approach would be a good first step.

## Allow states to apply for federal infant and toddler funds through a single application

Major funding for programs targeting infants and toddlers is currently split between at least three different federal agencies, including the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the U.S. Department of Education, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Funding streams could retain their own authorizations, but further coordination at the federal level could incentivize additional state planning and reduce the paperwork burden. As it now stands, some programs go out by formula to states, while others require a competitive application. Most require a state-specific plan or application before funds can actually be drawn down. A single application led by a single federal agency—but reviewed by all relevant agencies—would force state policymakers to think about how programs work together and complement one another and determine how children will receive a continuum of services from birth through preschool. This application should align programs in geographic areas and smooth transitions for families moving from one program to another—home visiting to child care, for example. Since Early Head Start sits outside the state infrastructure, including this program in the proposed application process might be difficult. However, as currently designed, each state has a dedicated person to facilitate Head Start collaboration. The application could thus address how the state will work with local Early Head Start programs to improve collaboration and alignment.

The application should also require states to report on metrics that encapsulate not only the percentage of eligible populations that states serve, but also the outcomes measures associated with the programs. These measures should capture family outcomes, such as poverty rates, and child outcomes, such as children's cognitive, health, and socioemotional development. These results should be made widely available to create public accountability for states in enhancing the well-being of young children. Too often policymakers focus on outcomes in the third grade as the first indicator of a child's success. In reality, outcomes in the third grade are significantly dependent on children's experiences in the first few years of life. Finally, to ensure that metrics capture outcomes for all populations, states should report based on race, ethnicity, and income.

## Invest in developing more evidence-based programs for the full range of populations

A growing number of federal policies use evidence of effectiveness as a criterion for awarding federal resources to programs. Often, these are the programs that are best able to garner bipartisan support. MIECHV is a good example of one such program. Rigorous evaluation of the program has shown evidence of better birth outcomes for pregnant women, increased school readiness for children, and fewer interactions with the social welfare, mental health, and juvenile correction systems.<sup>85</sup> To ensure that some families are not left out of these programs and to expand the base of knowledge about how to effectively serve all types of family structures with all types of ethnic and racial makeups, policymakers should invest in evaluating programs that serve families from a range of backgrounds. This is particularly important for populations that might not be sufficiently large to be well represented in national studies, such as Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Native Americans and Alaska Natives, and same-sex households.

## Enhance outreach efforts to include all communities

Serving diverse populations requires training service providers to be responsive to community-specific needs and intentional outreach to ensure that communities are aware of the resources available. Creating a network of community outreach specialists who are known and trusted by target populations is an essential component of reaching families most in need.

It is also critical that these outreach specialists have the language skills needed to communicate with the populations they serve. Even in cases where this is not possible, service delivery staff should support the parent's language and culture by encouraging parents to engage children in their native language rather than exclusively promoting English language acquisition. Moreover, parents may need support in improving their language and reading skills in their native language.

Many states already include outreach staff in their child care resource and referral agencies, which are supported by CCDBG. For example, the Oklahoma Child Care Resource and Referral Association includes a Hispanic outreach coordinator who is responsible for identifying the needs of Hispanic children and families and facilitating participation in high-quality child care and early learning programs.<sup>86</sup>

Particularly where there are large populations of ethnic groups with specific language needs, CCDBG should require outreach to these traditionally underserved populations through resource and referral agencies.

Outreach strategies must also take into consideration where potential participants may be slipping through the cracks in traditional outreach efforts. Same-sex male couples and adoptive parents, for example, might be missed if recruitment for a program designed to focus solely on mothers or limited to a hospital.

## Conclusion

Unprecedented racial and ethnic diversity is on the near horizon—a demographic shift that is already exemplified in our nation’s infants and toddlers. Today’s infants and toddlers are in a critical stage of their development: birth through age 3—a crucial point in a child’s life that requires significant investments of time and resources for success. However, too many of these youngest Americans live in families that are still struggling to recover from the recession, which means important resources that are key to development are missing or severely lacking. Moreover, it is vital for policymakers to recognize that investing in infants and toddlers is not only an investment in these children and their outcomes, but also an investment in a brighter future for the country as a whole. By expanding the scope and resources of existing programs that serve infants and toddlers—and aligning these programs to create seamless service delivery for children in the first three years of life—the nation can move closer to making this crucial investment a reality.

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