

Early Childhood Programs' Scarcity Undermines America's Rural Communities

Quality early care and education can bolster public safety, the economy, and national security



Acknowledgements

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Supported by tax-deductible contributions from foundations, individuals, and corporations.

Authors:

Sandra Bishop, Ph.D., Research Director
Dianne Browning, Director, Federal Policy

Contributors:

Josh Spaulding, National Director, Fight Crime: Invest in Kids
Nancy Fishman, Co-Global Director, ReadyNation
Daniel Frank, Co-Global Director, ReadyNation
Ben Goodman, National Director, Mission: Readiness
Eoin Dillon, Director of State Policy, State Operations
Tom Garrett, Director, Communications
Barry Ford, President and CEO
Mariana Galloway, Art Director

November 2020

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25%
of young children in
rural America live in
poverty.

Child poverty in rural America is both more severe and more persistent than in non-rural areas, and there are also large racial and ethnic disparities. Overall, one-quarter of rural children under age 5 live in poverty. Counties with persistently high child poverty rates are disproportionately populated with children of color, and these children have a poverty rate more than double that of non-Hispanic white children in those same counties. At the same time, children in rural communities often lack resources and supports, including quality early childhood care and education, which research shows can strengthen the current and future workforce, contribute to a strong economy and public safety, and enhance national security in the long run. Policymakers must support tailored investments for children in rural communities to help ensure the future strength of our nation.

“ High-quality early childhood education is critical to public safety because it lays the foundation for future learning and teaches children how to interact with others.”



Jimmy Macon
Chief of Police,
Harpersville, AL

Children and families in rural America face many challenges

Poverty

Rural America has higher rates of both child poverty and persistent child poverty, and poverty rates have increased in rural areas in recent years. Rural children have a poverty rate of 22.4 percent, compared to 17.3 percent of metro children.¹ The difference for young children (under age 5) is even larger: 25 percent poor for rural versus 18.6 percent metro.

More than three-fourths of counties with persistent high child poverty are nonmetro. These counties are **located primarily in Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, the Southeast, the Southwest, and Great Plains areas near Native American reservations.** The demographics of children in these locations vary. However, racial and ethnic poverty gaps are prominent in rural communities: counties with persistently high child poverty rates are disproportionately populated with children of color, and these children within such counties have higher rates of poverty (45 percent) than non-Hispanic white children (22 percent) in those same counties.

Finally, in rural communities, unlike metro communities, rates of poverty increased for families with children from 2004 to 2015.² This increase in rural child poverty was due mainly to a decrease in parents' earnings.

Declines in population and employment

From 2010 to 2016, rural areas lost population for the first time, due in large part to out-migration, particularly of young people.³ Fewer births and an aging population also contributed to the loss.⁴ In part as a result of population loss, employment growth in rural areas has been lower than in metro areas. In fact, employment in rural communities

remains one percent below the pre-Great Recession level, whereas in metro areas, it has exceeded that level by more than nine percent.⁵ Population loss has also been the result of changes in employment, as both agriculture and coal mining have declined.⁶

What is “rural?”

There are different definitions of what constitutes a rural community. The U.S. Census Bureau defines as rural locations with fewer than 2,500 residents. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has a more nuanced nine-category Rural-Urban Continuum Codes system:

1. Metro-counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
2. Metro-counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population
3. Metro-counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population
4. Nonmetro-urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to metro area
5. Nonmetro-urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to metro area
6. Nonmetro-urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to metro area
7. Nonmetro-urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to metro area
8. Nonmetro-completely rural or urban population less than 2,500, adjacent to metro area
9. Nonmetro-completely rural or urban population less than 2,500, not adjacent to metro area

Approximately 14 percent of the U.S. population resides in nonmetro areas. Although “nonmetro” is not identical to “rural,” many data sources and studies use this distinction; this report does as well.

Sources: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-continuum-codes/>; <https://data.ers.usda.gov/reports.aspx?ID=17854>

Health Issues

Population loss, in turn, brings other problems, such as a decrease in services such as health care and hospital closings.⁷ Not surprisingly, this has an impact on health, and **rural residents are increasingly more likely to die from preventable causes such as cancer, heart disease, and respiratory disease.**⁸ Rates of child and adolescent obesity are higher in rural populations⁹ and substance abuse is also a problem.¹⁰ Although rural areas were not hit hard early in the COVID-19 pandemic, their share of cases is growing: from about four percent in April 2020 to about 11 percent in September.¹¹

Challenges in rural America can impact our nation's strength

The talents of all of our nation's residents, rural and metro, are needed to build a strong workforce that will contribute to a vibrant national economy. Similarly, our national security relies on a large, robust pool of potential recruits, including from rural areas (about nine percent of enlisted service members come from rural areas).¹² Law enforcement agencies in rural areas typically recruit locally, making out-migration of young people problematic. For these and many other reasons, we must invest in our rural communities, particularly in children and youth.

Quality early childhood care and education can help address challenges in rural communities

Early care and education (ECE) can strengthen the current and future workforce, contribute to a strong economy and public safety, and enhance national security. Two-thirds of parents of children under age 6 are in the workforce.¹³ **Of children under age 6 with**

“Early childhood programs help develop youth who are more likely to be healthy and fit, do well in school, graduate, and be well-prepared for many life options after graduation, including military service if they choose that path.”



Bill Libby

Major General, U.S. Army (ret.),
former Maine Adjutant General

working parents with low incomes, about 16 percent—more than 776,000 children—live in nonmetro areas.¹⁴ Working parents depend on ECE so they can go to work, remain productive, and build successful careers to better support their families. Children, meanwhile, need nurturing, stimulating environments for healthy brain development during the first five years of life, both at home and in ECE while their parents work. Further, early childhood is a time when children acquire the foundation of many skills needed for 21st-century jobs, including both cognitive and character skills.¹⁵ Quality ECE can help build these skills and contribute to educational success.

For example, a longitudinal study of more than 1,300 children found that children in higher-quality child care were better prepared for school at age 4 compared to children in lower-quality child care. At age 15, they were still performing slightly above their peers.¹⁶ A large study of children in rural counties found that **children who participated in higher-quality child care had better language skills at age 3, which, in turn, resulted in better academic and social skills in kindergarten.**¹⁷

Research has also shown that preschool can increase rates of on-time high school graduation among participants.¹⁸ An economic analysis of Head Start found that the program increases high school

graduation, college attendance, and the chances of receiving a postsecondary degree or certificate.¹⁹ Quality ECE supports the workforce and helps build a strong economy, both now and into the future.

However, the considerations around high-quality ECE transcend even impressive educational outcomes. Our national security relies on qualified young adults who are ready, willing, and able to serve in the U.S. military. However, educational deficits (lack of a high school diploma or failure on the military's entrance exam), behavior problems (crime and substance use), and health issues (particularly obesity) currently prevent 71 percent of American youth from qualifying

Calvert's ABC Preschool and Nursery Aberdeen, MS

Calvert's ABC Preschool and Nursery is a licensed child care and preschool program in rural Monroe County that serves over 180 children from infancy through age 12. Founded in 1991 by Jennifer Calvert, the program serves a variety of families and accepts Mississippi Department of Human Service (MDHS) child care subsidies. Calvert's participates in the MDHS quality rating and improvement system and has achieved the highest 5-star quality rating.

Calvert's preschool classes focus on both basic skills, including learning the alphabet, identifying shapes, and hand washing, as well as incorporating real-life experiences such as meeting local first responders and taking a field trip to the zoo. By communicating with kindergarten teachers and school principals for feedback on how former preschool students do in kindergarten, Ms. Calvert and her colleagues can continually improve their program to help ensure students' success.

Calvert's is the lead partner for the Monroe County Early Learning Collaborative (ELC), one of the 18 collaboratives in Mississippi's state-funded pre-K program. The Monroe ELC is a partnership of school districts, Head Start programs, and child care centers. Mississippi's ELCs are recognized as one of the highest quality preschool programs in the nation, scoring a perfect 10 on the National Institute for Early Education's (NIEER) quality standards checklist.

for service.²⁰ Early development sets the stage for children’s future success, and the foundation of lifelong health is established early in life. In addition to its educational benefits, ECE programs that emphasize healthy eating and physical activity can help reduce children’s risk of obesity. For example, a study of the Abecedarian ECE program found that girls who participated were less likely to become obese as adults, and boys had fewer risk factors for heart disease, stroke and diabetes.²¹ In addition to providing early education, Head Start offers preventative health care, including immunizations and dental care, and connects families to other services. This comprehensive approach is invaluable, given the health care shortages often found in rural areas. Without access to high-quality ECE, our nation risks having an even smaller recruiting pool in the future.

Further, our nation’s correctional system is full of people serving time for serious and costly crimes. It doesn’t have to be that way. Providing children with high-quality early learning opportunities can set them on the path to success in school, so they will be ready for college and careers, and less likely to later engage in criminal activity.²² The aforementioned longitudinal study of more than 1,300 children found that children in higher-quality child care had significantly lower levels of behavior problems at age 15 compared to children in lower-quality child care.²³ Students who participated in Alabama’s pre-K program were about half as likely to have a behavioral infraction in school as those who did not receive First Class Pre-K.²⁴ Further, the differences between the two groups were larger in middle school and high school, when the rates of infractions increase.

Children who live in rural areas have less access to quality early care and education

Despite the proven impact of high-quality ECE on various child outcomes, children in rural communities are less likely to have access to these vital programs than children in non-rural areas. **While 51 percent of Americans live in a child care “desert,” where there are more than three children under age 5 for each licensed child care slot, in rural communities the figure is 60 percent.**²⁵ Rural areas are the most likely (compared to urban and suburban areas) to be classified as child care deserts. Families in rural areas more frequently use home-based child care options (family child care homes or family, friend, and neighbor care), which serve smaller numbers of children than child care centers.²⁶ This is particularly true for preschool-aged children, with 40 percent of rural preschoolers attending home-based child care, versus 31 percent of non-rural preschoolers. It is also true for families who access child care using subsidies.²⁷ The choice to use home-based care is largely driven by the lack of child care centers in rural areas,²⁸ particularly for infants and toddlers.²⁹ However, the number of family child care providers has dropped 20 percent around the nation in recent years, contributing to the shortage of child care in rural areas.³⁰

60%
of rural children
live in a child care
“desert.”

“High-quality early childhood education supports the workforce today and helps prepare the workforce of tomorrow.”



Thomas Dempster

Director, IFAM Capital,
four-term South Dakota
State Senator

Children in rural communities are also less likely to live near public preschool programs (17 percent versus more than one-third of children living in high- or moderate-density urban areas).³¹ However, compared to high-density urban areas, more centers in rural areas were administered by a public school or received funding through Head Start or public preschool.³² Head Start, in particular, plays a vital role in rural communities, with programs in 86 percent of rural counties and in some counties serving as the only ECE provider.³³

Policymakers must enhance early childhood care and education programs for children in rural areas

To meet the needs of children living in rural communities, policymakers should adapt

Sierra Cascade Family Opportunities Quincy, CA

Sierra Cascade Family Opportunities (SCFO) is a private non-profit that has provided services to children and families for over 30 years. SCFO runs Head Start, Early Head Start and state preschool programs in the rural counties of Lassen, Modoc, Plumas and Sierra in Northeastern California. They operate eight center-based sites for Head Start and Early Head Start, with seven of these sites also offering state preschool. In addition, SCFO runs two stand-alone state preschool sites. Early Head Start is offered in two center-based sites (3 classrooms) as well as 28 home-based slots. Although there is a great need for more infant-toddler slots, SCFO has difficulty recruiting enough staff to expand services. In 2018-19, SCFO served 146 Head Start, 52 Early Head Start, and 32 state preschool children and their families. Twenty-nine percent of the children served in SCFO Head Start are Hispanic.

Observations using the CLASS instrument demonstrate the quality of SCFO classrooms: Scores on all aspects of quality were at or above national Head Start average scores. This quality pays off: Tracking of student progress indicates that children make substantial gains throughout the school year.

Sources: <http://headstart4u.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/2019-Community-Wide-Strategic-Planning-and-Needs-Assessment.pdf>; <http://headstart4u.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/18-19-Annual-Report-FINAL.pdf>

and modernize federal early care and education programs and supports. There are several approaches to address the topic in a meaningful way.

For example, given the prevalence of child care deserts in rural communities, increasing the number of child care options is imperative. The federal government supports child care for children from low-income, working families through the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF). Several adaptations to this program could better serve rural children and families including, but not limited to, the following:

- incentivize states to recruit and train child care providers, and invest in child care small business start-ups, including child care co-ops, home-based child care, and child care centers;
- support existing child care providers in managing the business aspects of providing care through home-based child care networks or one-on-one consulting;
- require states to assist child care providers in meeting regulations, by providing technical assistance and training;
- foster more Early Head Start - Child Care Partnerships by prioritizing rural programs for investment.

Similarly, increasing the supply of preschool programs will help improve rural children's school readiness and long-term academic outcomes. Congress should prioritize Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five (PDG B-5) grants to serve rural areas where there are shortages. Legislators should also fund innovative delivery models, including home-based or mobile programs.

Recruitment and training of Head Start teachers and staff present yet another challenge in rural areas. The federal government should develop a dedicated fund for teacher pay and retention incentives, rather than having to use quality improvement funds. Likewise, transportation remains an issue for Head Start in rural America. While quality improvement funds may be used for transportation, this need is competing with other eligible uses. Congress should establish dedicated transportation reimbursement rates for rural Head Start programs.³⁴

Finally, states also have an important role to play and must continue to invest in child care subsidies and preschool, despite state budget crunches due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

High-quality early childhood care and education programs can help ameliorate the challenges faced by American children living in rural communities. These programs also strengthen the current and future workforce, contribute to a strong economy and public safety, and enhance national security in the long run. Policymakers must support tailored investments for children in rural communities to help ensure the future strength of our nation.

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1212 New York Avenue NW / Suite 300 / Washington, DC 20005 / 202.464.7005

