



Research Within Reach, Ep. 4: Intergenerational Impacts of Head Start

Does Head Start help families break the cycle of poverty?

Introduction

While Head Start has evolved dramatically over the past 52 years, its goal is the same: break the cycle of poverty by addressing the needs of children, families, and communities. Yet when evaluating its effectiveness, research often focuses on short term outcomes for attendees, like 3rd grade reading scores. Groundbreaking new research from Andrew Barr and Chloe R. Gibbs tackles a question not asked enough about the effectiveness of Head Start: *Does Head Start help families break the cycle of poverty?*

The Basics:

Researchers Andrew Barr and Chloe R. Gibbs, from Texas A&M University and University of Notre Dame respectively, use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to determine the impact of Head Start on intergenerational poverty. Rather than studying children who attended Head Start, they evaluate the children of children who once attended Head Start. In other words, they ask, "Are the effects of Head Start 'transmitted' from mother to child?" If Head Start successfully breaks the cycle of poverty, children of Head Start attendees should show improved lifelong outcomes.

By measuring outcomes strongly associated with long-term success (increased educational attainment, decreased rates of teen pregnancy, and reduced criminal behavior) Barr and Gibbs find that children whose mothers had access to Head Start fare significantly better than children whose mothers did not.

The Results:

Barr and Gibbs calculated the impact of Head Start separately based on maternal education levels, as research suggests Head Start has a larger effect on children whose mothers did not finish high school. Since the authors looked at the outcomes of the *children* of mothers with access to Head Start, the high impact group is made up of children whose *grandmothers* have less than a high school education.

For the "higher impact" population, the children of mothers who had access to Head Start are:

- 8.6 percentage points less likely to be teen parents.
- 15.6 percentage points less likely to be involved with the criminal justice system.
- 12.7 percentage points more likely to graduate high school.
- 16.9 percentage points more likely to enroll in college.
- 0.47 standard deviations better off on Barr and Gibbs' "summary index" of adult outcomes.

For the "lower impact" group, the children of mothers who had access to Head Start are:

- 5.8 percentage points less likely to be teen parents.
- 6.3 percentage points less likely to be involved with the criminal justice system.
- Results for education attainment were not statistically significant.
- 0.22 standard deviations better off on Barr and Gibbs' "summary index" of adult outcomes.

The Implications:

Much research today focuses on the effects of Head Start directly on the children who attend it. This new research, however, is unique in that it focuses specifically on whether Head Start breaks the cycle of poverty between parents and their children. The findings from this report are really the first to give us a picture of the extent to which Head Start achieves that goal. The results also suggest that most current research on the impact or effectiveness of Head Start is missing a critical component of the program's success: positively influencing future generations and breaking the cycle of poverty.

The Limitations:

- Barr and Gibbs were not able to determine which mothers attended Head Start, just whether or not Head Start was available when a mother was the appropriate age. The authors explore the impacts and implications of this in the report and remain confident in their findings.
- As a result of the research design, this study focuses only on the first few years of Head Start. Head Start has evolved greatly since its creation, so the effects today could be much different.

The Methodology:

The Sample:

- A nationally representative sample of females born between 1960 and 1964 and the children born to these women. (Data taken from the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.)

The Measures:

- Rates of high school graduation, college attendance, teen pregnancy, and criminal involvement determined by questions from the NLSY79.
- Head Start availability determined by county-by-year data from the National Archives and Records Administration on levels of Head Start funding.
- Individual demographics and county-level fixed effects were held constant.

The Analysis:

- The relationship between the availability of Head Start and the subsequent child's life outcomes was measured using OLS regression (holding constant demographics, birth year, and county.)
- When the authors created the summary index of adult outcomes, the individual outcome results were each normalized to have a mean of zero, a standard deviation of one, and a positive sign.

Do you have any questions, comments, or new ideas? E-mail vjones@nhsa.org

Looking for research NHSA has covered previously? Please visit <http://www.nhsa.org/content/research-topic>



Our mission is to coalesce, inspire, and support the Head Start field as a leader in early childhood development and education.