## Changes in Head Start Eligibility Requirements Over Time

*Broadening the Criteria for a More Inclusive Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Requirement</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td><strong>Income eligibility:</strong> At least 90% of Head Start participants served at each program site must be children from families with incomes below the federal poverty line (FPL).</td>
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<td>1966</td>
<td><strong>Age eligibility:</strong> Children are to be below the age of compulsory school attendance.</td>
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<td>1969</td>
<td><strong>Over-income eligibility:</strong> Over-income (above 100% FPL) children allowed to participate in Head Start as long as families pay for the services provided.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td><strong>Disabilities:</strong> 10% of national Head Start enrollment opportunities must be for children with disabilities.</td>
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| 1974 | **Income eligibility:** Income eligible children defined as –  
  - Children in families with income below the poverty line.  
  - Children in families who are receiving public assistance.  
  - Children in families who would potentially be eligible for public assistance in the absence of child care.  
  **Over-income eligibility:**  
  - Over-income children allowed to participate in Head Start without paying for services received.  
  - Participation allowed "to a reasonable extent" for children who are over-income.  
  **Disabilities:** 10% of Head Start enrollment opportunities in each State must be for children with disabilities. |
| 1978 | **Geographic access:** Head Start programs in very small low-income communities with no access to childcare or medical services may determine their own eligibility requirements.  
  **Age eligibility** Children are to be between the age of three years old and the age of mandatory school attendance. |
| 1992 | **Over-income eligibility:** Participation of over-income children is capped at 10% per Head Start program.  
  **Foster children** are categorically eligible (previously subject to income requirements). |
| 1994 | **Over-income eligibility & geographic access:** American Indian/Alaska Native Head Start programs that enroll all income-eligible children in the community served by the tribe and still have remaining project funds may use the excess to enroll children who are over-income, as long as the programs predominantly serve income-eligible children.  
  **Duration of eligibility:** Head Start programs are allowed to provide more than 1 year of services to eligible children ages three to five.  
  **Early Head Start program is created.**  
  **Early Head Start age eligibility:** Limited to pregnant women and children under three.  
  **Early Head Start income eligibility:** Income-eligible pregnant women and children defined as –  
  - Living in a family with an income below the poverty line.  
  - Living in a family accepting public assistance.  
  - Living in a family that would potentially be eligible for public assistance in the absence of child care. |
**Income eligibility:** Income eligibility may be determined by either:
- Using the 12 months of family income preceding the month of application, or
- Using family annual income in the year preceding the year of application.

Programs may use whichever measure is thought to better reflect the family’s need.

**Duration of eligibility:** An income-eligible child participating in Head Start is considered eligible through the end of the succeeding program year.

**Immigration status:** Head Start programs are not required to verify child immigration status.  

**Disabilities:** 10% of children currently enrolled under each Head Start agency must be children with disabilities. Since each agency can oversee multiple centers, some centers may have more or less than 10% enrollment as long as children with disabilities continue to comprise at least 10% of overall agency enrollment.

**Near-poor eligibility:** Up to 35% of children participating in a Head Start program may be from families with incomes between 100% and 130% of the poverty line, as long as the program prioritizes children meeting the basic income eligibility requirements.

**Duration of eligibility:** Any child participating in Head Start is considered eligible through the end of the succeeding program year.

**Homelessness:** Homeless children are categorically eligible.

Source & notes:
- Ibid.