

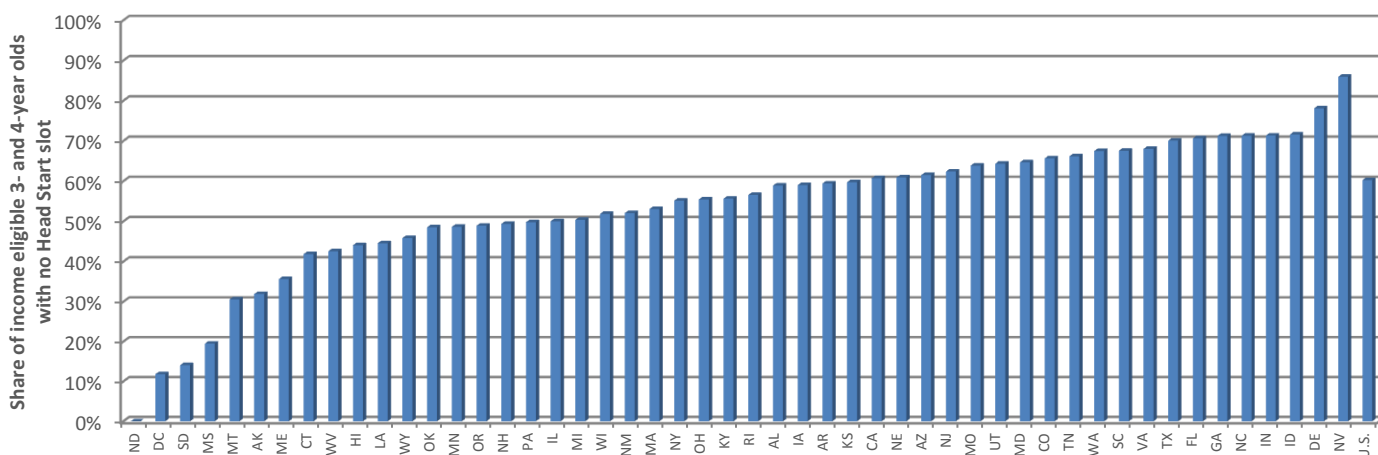


## Head Start's Capacity to Serve Eligible Low-Income Children

Head Start is a discretionary program, not an entitlement, and consequently there is generally not enough funding allocated to serve all eligible children. As a result, there is a significant portion of children who are eligible for and potentially need Head Start services but who do not have a corresponding slot available to them.

The chart below depicts state variation in the access to Head Start services among income-eligible<sup>1</sup> three and four-year olds in 2010. If the program had the capacity to serve all eligible children, the chart below would be at zero percent for all states. However, the level of service capacity varies across the country, as different states have different child populations and levels of fiscal investment in Head Start services. For example, in North Dakota Head Start has the capacity to serve all income-eligible children, while in Nevada Head Start has the capacity to serve only 14% - in other words, 86% of income-eligible children do not have access to a corresponding Head Start slot. Nationwide, Head Start's limited capacity leaves 60% of income-eligible children without an available slot.

Share of income-eligible three- and four-year olds with no corresponding Head Start slot, by state (2010)<sup>2</sup>



Head Start's capacity to serve eligible three- and four-year olds may actually be lower than depicted in this chart for at least two reasons. First, the income eligible population does not include five-year olds because many children enter kindergarten at age five. However, this may result in an underestimation of five-year olds who have not entered kindergarten yet but may not have access to Head Start. Secondly, the Head Start income-eligible population only consists of children in families with incomes under the poverty line; however the program does include additional eligibility criteria that allow a small proportion of over-income children to participate. Any potential need for Head Start services among these children and the competition they may present for income-eligible children are not captured in this chart.

On the other hand, because this chart does not take into account [other early childhood programs](#) that provide slots to low-income children such as state pre-k or preschool programs accepting child care subsidies, it only measures *Head Start's* capacity to serve low-income children, not the capacity of the early childhood education (ECE) system as a whole. Head Start capacity issues could

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potentially be addressed by other programs if eligible children are receiving quality early childhood care and education services through other avenues. Unfortunately, due to the fragmented nature of the U.S. early childhood education system, it is difficult to measure true ECE system-wide capacity in a way that includes slots from all possible programs that are available, prioritized, or reserved for low-income and vulnerable children.

#### Sources & notes:

<sup>1</sup> 'Income eligible' refers to children who are eligible for Head Start services because their family income is below 100% of the federal poverty line.

<sup>2</sup> Authors' calculations using 2010 American Community Survey microdata and 2010-2011 Program Information Report survey data. The chart presents the total Head Start slots available to 3-5 year olds as a portion of the total income-eligible population. Slots refer to funded enrollment as reported in the Head Start Program Information Report (PIR) survey completed annually by all Head Start grantees. Funded enrollment is defined as "the total number of enrollees [...] the program was funded to serve for the enrollment year" (2011-2012 PIR survey form). The total number of slots includes all slots in traditional Head Start preschool programs, as well as an estimate of slots for 3- to 5-year-olds in Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs (estimated using cumulative enrollment). Early Head Start slots are not included in this number.

**For more information on the calculations of this chart and to see the data in table format, please see [Appendix 6](#).**