

Staff Shortages in Early Head Start Programs

Staff Turnover and Vacancies after the COVID-19 Pandemic

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In 2022, EHS programs on average reported an **annual turnover rate of 29 percent** and a **vacancy rate of 9 percent** for their education and child development staff.

Staff turnover rates differed across states, with the highest turnover in Kentucky, Alaska, and Montana, and the lowest in Hawaii, Rhode Island, and Mississippi.

One out of four EHS teachers and home visitors who left their positions in 2021–22 reported **leaving for higher compensation**.

ADDITIONAL READING

Turnover Patterns among Early Head Start Teachers and Home Visitors: A Snapshot before and after the Height of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The federally funded Early Head Start (EHS) program provides early education and other comprehensive services to children under age 3 and during pregnancy in center- and home-based settings across the country. In light of research evidence showing that the first three years are critical for long-term development, EHS was launched in 1994 to offer essential services to support the health, development, and well-being of infants, toddlers, and pregnant women.

A key component to delivering high-quality EHS services is a stable and healthy workforce. However, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the already-persistent problem of high staff turnover in the child care and early education field.¹ Historically, infant-toddler teachers have received lower pay and shown higher turnover than teachers serving preschoolers,² raising additional concerns for EHS programs.

In this fact sheet, we present national estimates of program-level turnover and vacancy rates among EHS education and child development staff in 2022. We analyzed data from the 2021–22 Head Start Program Information Report (PIR), collected from every EHS program as well as Head Start programs serving children ages 3 to 5. The PIR collects information on the number of education and child development (ECD) staff (i.e., teachers, assistant teachers, home visitors, and family child care providers) who left their positions during the last program year, and of those, the number that left for primary reasons listed on the PIR (e.g., higher compensation). The PIR also collects information on the number of staff vacancies during the program year, defined as positions that remained unfilled for a period of three or more months. For programs with both EHS grants and Head Start grants, the data are reported for all program staff across age groups, so turnover and vacancy rates could reflect Head Start positions, EHS positions, or both. For this analysis, we calculated turnover and vacancy rates for each program and then calculated average turnover and vacancy rates across programs nationally. We then calculated a total turnover rate for each state.³

STAFF TURNOVER AND VACANCY RATES

About 9,600 ECD staff across EHS programs nationally left their positions during the 2021–22 program year. On average, EHS programs reported a turnover rate of 29 percent. The most common reason staff left their jobs was a desire for higher

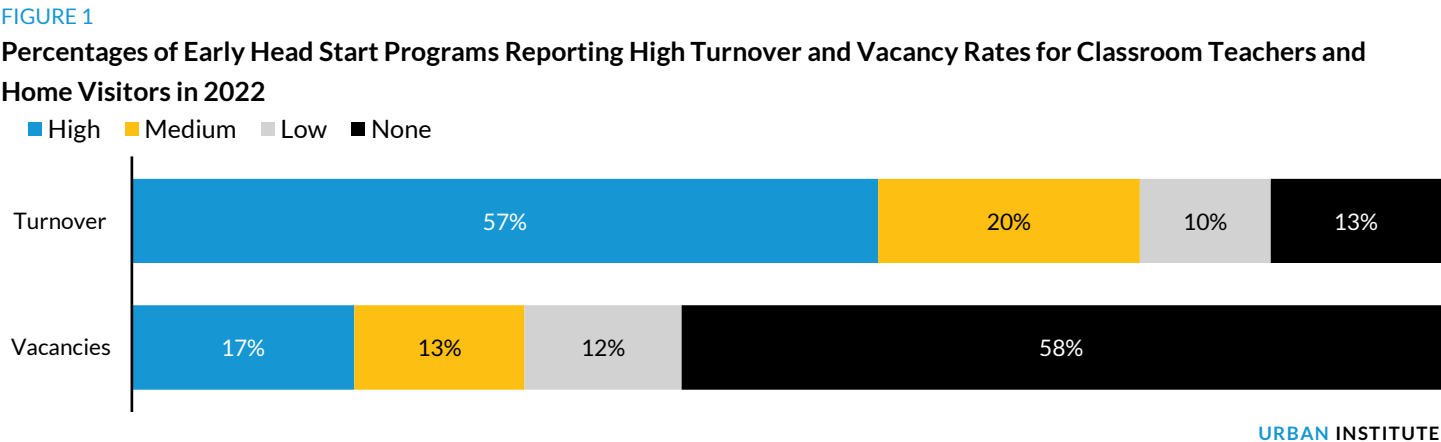
¹ Christina Weiland et al., “Historic Crisis, Historic Opportunity: Using Evidence to Mitigate the Effects of the COVID-19 Crisis on Young Children and Early Care and Education Programs” (Washington DC: Urban Institute; and Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, Education Policy Initiative, 2021), <https://edpolicy.umich.edu/sites/epi/files/uploads/EPI-UI-Covid%20Synthesis%20Brief%20June%202021.pdf>.

² Daphna Bassok, Anna J. Markowitz, Laura Bellows, and Katharine Sadowski, “New Evidence on Teacher Turnover in Early Childhood,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 43, no. 1 (2021): 172–80, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.3102/0162373720985340>.

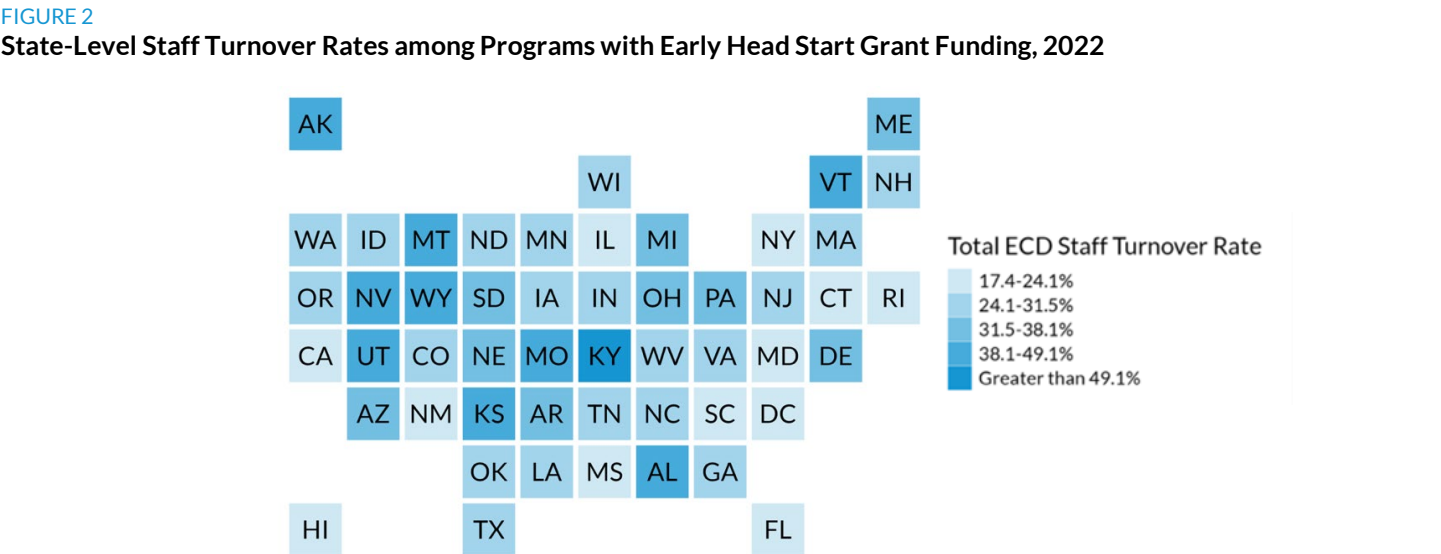
³ We removed a small number of programs from our calculations that had only family child care providers and no classroom teachers or home visitors, as these programs stood out as being different in structure. Therefore, the turnover and vacancy rates primarily capture teacher and home visitor positions, which are most common in EHS programs. However, estimates were similar with or without these programs.

compensation (24.4 percent). Other reasons captured on the PIR included retirement or relocation (7.3 percent) and involuntary separation (9.5 percent). Write-in responses for “other” reasons commonly included health or medical concerns. More than half (57 percent) of programs reported high turnover, and another 20 percent had medium turnover (figure 1). Some states experienced higher rates of staff departures than others (figure 2). Although states varied in their number of EHS programs and staff sizes, several states in the West and Midwest appeared most impacted.

Across programs with EHS grant funding, 8.8 percent of teacher and home visitor positions remained vacant for three or more months. Seventeen percent of programs reported “high” rates of vacancies, with more than 20 percent of ECD positions left vacant. As EHS programs strategize to recruit and retain new staff, they will need to address low compensation and other key drivers of turnover.



Source: Authors’ analyses of Head Start PIR, 2021–22.
Notes: Programs labeled “high” included programs with turnover and vacancy rates of more than 20 percent; “medium” included programs with turnover and vacancy rates of 10 to 20 percent; and “low” included programs with turnover and vacancy rates of less than 10 percent but greater than 0 percent.



Source: Authors’ analyses of Head Start PIR, 2021–22.
Notes: ECD = Education and Child Development Staff. Estimations are based on dividing the total number of ECD staff departures reported across Early Head Start programs in 2022 by the total number of ECD staff that held a position in the 2021–22 program year.