



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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January 2024

Early Head Start is a federally funded program for pregnant women and families with low incomes who have children under age 3. With an enrollment of 192,000 children and pregnant women in 2022,¹ Early Head Start provides essential services in center-based and home-based settings to support early learning and development, health, and family well-being. A healthy and stable workforce is key to delivering high-quality Early Head Start services; however, high staff turnover is common in the early childhood field—a crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Caven et al. 2021; Weiland et al. 2021). Historically, programs serving infants and toddlers have had higher staff turnover rates than those serving older children, raising additional concerns for programs serving this age group (Bassok et al. 2021). This past evidence motivated us to examine how the pandemic affected turnover rates among Early Head Start teachers and home visitors.

This brief includes findings from our analyses of Head Start Program Information Report (PIR) data that illustrate national trends in teacher and home visitor turnover before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. We first present results from our descriptive analyses of changes over time. We then turn to our multivariate regression analysis, which examined program- and community-level characteristics associated with staff turnover during the 2021–22 program year. For these analyses, we merged county-level data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on the percentage of the COVID-19-vaccine-eligible population fully vaccinated with data from the American Community Survey (ACS) on urban or rural status. We also merged ACS data at the zip-code level on the local poverty rate with data on the median earnings for female workers. These merged variables captured

community characteristics that we hypothesized may shape workplace experiences and be associated with staff turnover. See table 1 for a full list of variables.

Key findings include the following:

- The average program-level turnover rate for Early Head Start teachers and home visitors spiked after the pandemic, rising from about 19 percent in 2019 to nearly 29 percent in 2022.
 - » The share of Early Head Start programs with high turnover rates—defined as a rate of more than 20 percent—increased from 38 percent to 57 percent.
 - » The need for higher compensation was the most common reason for staff departures in both years, reported for 25 percent of teachers and nearly 20 percent of home visitors in 2019 and 24 percent for teachers and home visitors combined in 2022.
- The average program-level staff vacancy rate for Early Head Start teachers and home visitors combined quadrupled, rising from slightly more than 2 percent in 2019 to nearly 9 percent in 2022.
- Turnover rates varied by the ages of children the programs served, program agency type, and community setting.
 - » In 2019, programs with funding to serve only children under age 3 and pregnant women had significantly higher turnover (23 percent) than programs that also had Head Start funding to serve preschoolers (17 percent). This difference disappeared in 2022.
 - » In both 2019 and 2022, the turnover rate in school systems was significantly lower than the turnover rates in both community action agencies and private and public nonprofits.
 - » In 2022, programs that identified as community action agencies also had significantly higher turnover than programs in government agencies and private and public for-profits.
 - » Programs in rural areas had a turnover rate (20 percent) similar to programs in urban areas (19 percent) in 2019. However, in 2022, programs in rural areas reported significantly higher turnover—35 percent—compared with 27 percent in urban areas.
- When examining the associations between Early Head Start teacher and home visitor turnover during the 2021–22 program year and various program and community characteristics, we found three significant predictors. Receiving both Head Start and Early Head Start funding, being embedded in a school system, and being in an urban rather than a rural county each predicted lower turnover.

TABLE 1

Measures of Early Head Start Staff Turnover and Vacancy Rates and Program and Community Characteristics

Construct	Data source	Variable definition
Outcome variable		
Turnover rate	Head Start Program Information Report (PIR)	A turnover rate was calculated for each Early Head Start program by dividing the total count of education and child development (ECD) staff (i.e., teachers, home visitors, and family child care providers) who left their positions during the program year (including turnover that occurred while the program was not in session, e.g., summer months) by the total count of ECD staff employed in that program that year. ² Program-level rates were then averaged across all programs nationally. For 2019, the turnover count did not include family child care providers, but in 2022 it did. Therefore, for 2022, we removed a small number of programs with only family child care providers (no classroom teachers or home visitors), so turnover estimates could be comparable with 2019. The remaining programs included a small number with family child care providers on staff, in addition to teachers, home visitors, or both, equating to less than 1 percent of programs.
Vacancy rate	Head Start PIR	A vacancy rate was calculated for each Early Head Start program by dividing the number of vacant ECD positions that remained unfilled for a period of three months or longer by the total count of ECD staff in that program that year. Program-level rates were then averaged across all programs nationally. For 2019, the vacancy count did not include family child care providers, but in 2022 it did. Therefore, for 2022, we removed a small number of programs with only family child care providers (no classroom teachers or home visitors), so vacancy estimates could be comparable with 2019. The remaining programs included a small number with family child care providers on staff, in addition to teachers, home visitors, or both, equating to less than 1 percent of programs.
Program characteristic		
Head Start/Early Head Start grants	Head Start PIR	Programs that receive Head Start and Early Head Start grants were coded as 1, whereas programs that receive only Early Head Start grants were coded as 0.
Funded enrollment	Head Start PIR	Funded enrollment represents the number of slots for children and pregnant women funded by the program.
Program agency type	Head Start PIR	Program agency represents the type of agency, such as a community action agency, government agency, school system, nonprofit, or for-profit.
Share of staff who identified as Black/African American	Head Start PIR	The share of ECD staff who identified as Black/African American was calculated by dividing the total count of ECD staff that identified as Black or African American on the PIR by the total EDC staff in each program. The rate for each program was then averaged across all programs nationally.
Teacher and home visitor salaries	Head Start PIR	Salary data were available at the state level. This included the average salary for an Early Head Start classroom teacher and the average salary for an Early Head Start home visitor. We adjusted for cost of living in each state using the US Bureau of Economic Analysis regional price parities for states. ^a

Construct	Data source	Variable definition
Community characteristic		
Poverty rate	2022 American Community Survey (ACS), five-year file	Poverty rate is calculated from the total number of people in a zip code living below the federal poverty level out of the total population for that zip code.
Urban/rural status	2022 ACS, five-year file	Urban and rural status is determined by the population size for that county.
Female earnings	2022 ACS, five-year file	Female earnings is the median earnings for female, full-time, year-round workers in that zip code.
COVID-19 vaccination rate	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	The COVID-19 vaccination rate is calculated from the total number of vaccine-eligible people who completed a primary series and have received at least one booster dose out of the total vaccine-eligible population for that county.

Source: Authors' analyses.

^a"Regional Price Parities by State and Metro Area," US Bureau of Economic Analysis, December 15, 2022, <https://www.bea.gov/data/prices-inflation/regional-price-parities-state-and-metro-area>.

Findings from Descriptive Analyses

Head Start Program Information Report (PIR) data are collected annually from every Head Start and Early Head Start program (except in the 2019–20 fiscal year because of the pandemic). PIR data is due to the federal government at the end of August each year and reflects services and activities in the past 12 months. We analyzed and compared PIR data from 2018–19 and 2021–22 to examine changes in the size of the Early Head Start workforce and reported staff turnover rates, vacancy levels, and reasons for staff departures before and after the pandemic.

Size and Composition of the Early Head Start Workforce

The size of the Early Head Start workforce of teachers and home visitors remained relatively stable over time, with 33,748 workers nationally in 2019 and 34,696 workers nationally in 2022. When we disaggregated by staff position, some differences between classroom teachers and home visitors emerged. We observed a 5 percent increase in the number of Early Head Start teachers (from 27,818 to 29,135) and a 6 percent drop in the number of Early Head Start home visitors (from 5,930 to 5,561).

Staff Turnover and Vacancy Rates

The PIR collects information on the number of education and child development (ECD) staff (i.e., teachers, assistant teachers, family child care providers, and home visitors) who left their positions during the preceding program year. It also asks for the number of staff who left for primary reasons listed on the PIR (e.g., higher compensation). The PIR also tracks the number of staff vacancies during the program year, defined as positions that remained unfilled for three or more months.³

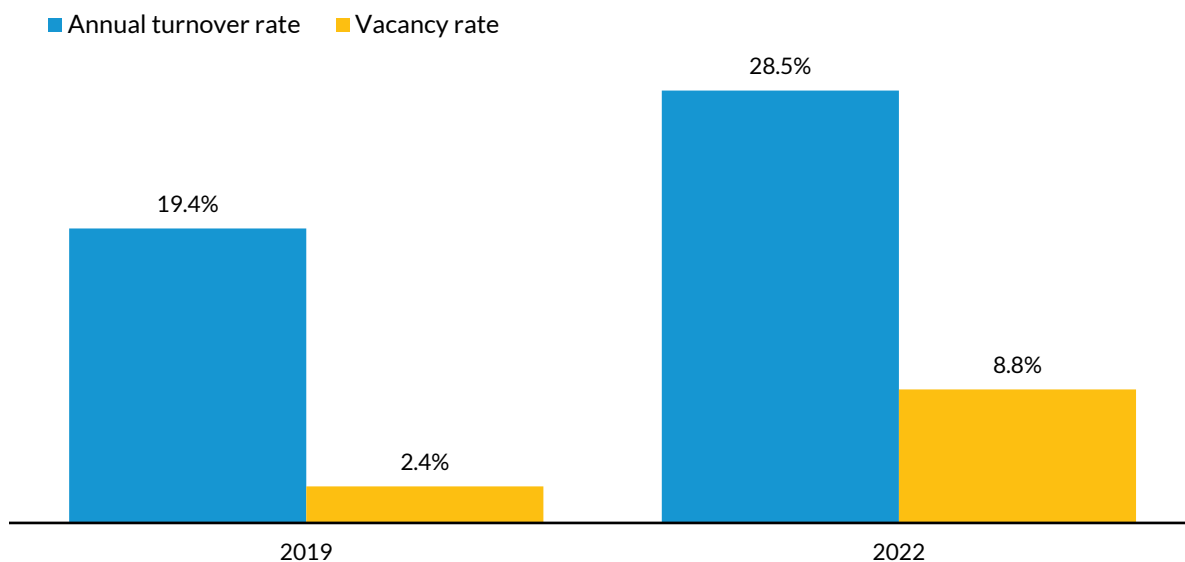
In 2019, the average program-level turnover rate for teachers and home visitors was nearly 20 percent (figure 1). For teachers, 25 percent cited obtaining higher compensation or benefits in the same

field as their reason for leaving (e.g., a teacher moving to a school system for higher pay). Another 23 percent cited a change in their job field (table 2). For home visitors, the turnover rate was slightly lower than for teachers leaving, at 19 percent. Higher compensation or benefits was the second most common reason for home visitors, at 20 percent, whereas the top reason, at 29 percent, was leaving for a different job field.

In 2022, the average program-level turnover rate was much higher, at 29 percent, for teachers and home visitors combined. (The 2021–22 PIR counted staff departures for all ECD staff, whereas the 2018–19 PIR counted teachers and home visitors separately.) Slightly more staff left for higher compensation in 2022 than in 2019 (24 percent) (table 3). Other common reasons captured on the 2021–22 PIR included retirement and relocation (7 percent) and involuntary separation (10 percent), which may relate to workers’ responses to the pandemic.

In 2019, programs generally reported small vacancy rates for classroom teachers (3 percent) and home visitors (2 percent). After the height of the pandemic in 2022, the vacancy rate reported for ECD staff was nearly four times higher, at 9 percent.

FIGURE 1
Program-Level Turnover and Vacancy Rates for Early Head Start Classroom Teachers and Home Visitors Increased from 2019 to 2022



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Sources: Head Start Program Information Report (PIR), 2018–19 and 2021–22.

Notes: In 2022, the PIR captured staff turnover and vacancy counts only once for all education and child development staff in a program, which included teachers, assistant teachers, family child care providers, and home visitors. We removed from the sample programs that had only family child care providers to make the 2022 rates comparable with the 2019 rates, which were calculated by combining turnover counts for teachers and home visitors. For this analysis, the sample size of the 2019 cohort was 1,472 programs and the sample size of the 2022 cohort was 1,535 programs.

TABLE 2

Reasons for Early Head Start Teacher and Home Visitor Turnover by Staff Position, 2019

	Classroom teachers	Home visitors
Desire higher compensation/benefits in the same field	25.0%	19.7%
Change in job field	22.7%	29.1%
Other	52.3%	51.3%

Sources: Head Start Program Information Report (PIR), 2018–19 and 2021–22.

Notes: The 2019 PIR form requested the number of staff departures due to the reasons listed in this table. When selecting “other,” programs had the option to write in other reasons staff left their positions not listed on the form. In the 2019 PIR, the most-cited reasons listed in the “other” category were moving, retirement, termination or discharge, and health, illness, or other medical issues. For this analysis, the sample size of the 2019 cohort was 1,475 programs.

TABLE 3

Reasons for Early Head Start Teacher and Home Visitor Turnover, 2022

	Classroom teachers and home visitors
Higher compensation	24.4%
Retirement/relocation	7.3%
Involuntary separation	9.5%
Other	54.9%

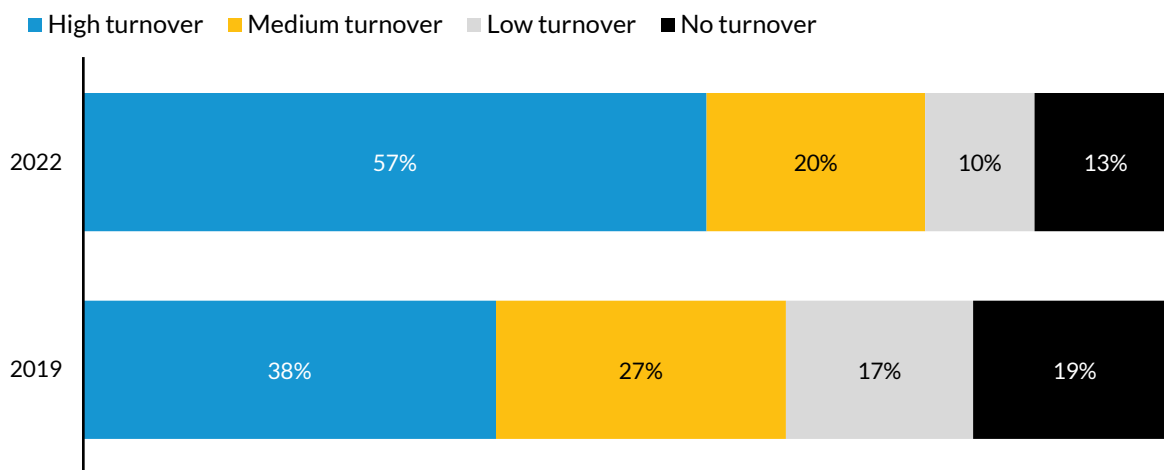
Sources: Head Start Program Information Report (PIR), 2018–19 and 2021–22.

Notes: The 2022 PIR form requested the number of staff departures due to the reasons listed in this table. When selecting “other,” programs had the option to write in other reasons staff leave their positions not listed on the form. In 2022, the PIR captured reasons for departures across all education and child development staff in a program, as opposed to collecting reasons for departures for teachers and home visitors separately, as was done in 2019. When selecting “other,” programs had the option to write in other reasons staff left their positions not listed on the form. Common reasons listed under “other” related to health concerns and medical issues. For this analysis, the sample size of the 2022 cohort was 1,541 programs.

We also examined program-level variation in turnover, grouping programs into high, medium, low, and no turnover groups. Figure 2 shows that the share of programs with no, low, and medium turnover decreased from 2019 to 2022, while the share of programs with a high turnover rate of more than 20 percent increased from 38 percent to 57 percent.

FIGURE 2

The Rate of Early Head Start Programs Reporting High Turnover of Classroom Teachers and Home Visitors Increased from 2019 to 2022 to More Than Half



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Sources: Head Start Program Information Report (PIR), 2018–19 and 2021–22.

Notes: In 2022, the PIR captured staff turnover counts only once for all education and child development staff in a program, which included teachers, assistant teachers, family child care providers, and home visitors. We removed programs that had only family child care providers from the sample to make the 2019 rates comparable with the 2022 rates. Threshold groups were determined using the same standards adopted for the 2019 National Survey of Early Care and Education and are as follows: high turnover comprised programs with more than 20 percent turnover; medium turnover, 10 to 20 percent; low turnover, less than 10 percent but greater than 0. For this analysis, the sample size of the 2019 cohort was 1,472 programs and the sample size of the 2022 cohort was 1,535 programs.

Variation in Turnover Rates by Program and Community Characteristics

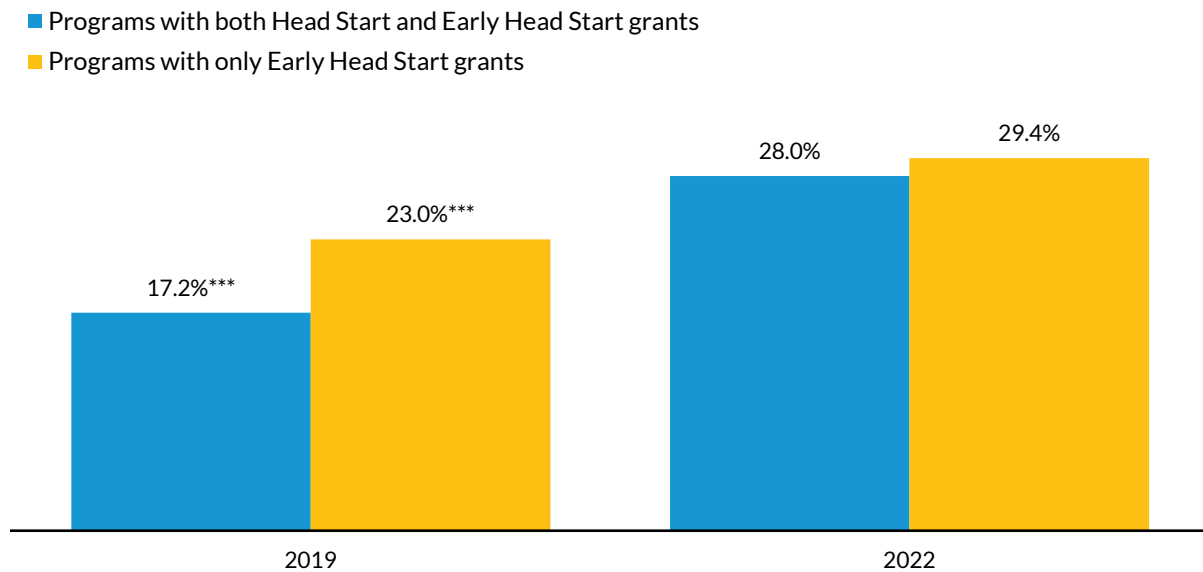
We examined variations in average program-level turnover rates by several salient program and community characteristics that may contribute to teachers’ and home visitors’ career paths and job turnover. These include program funding, agency type, urbanicity, and the share of program staff that identify as Black/African American. We ran statistical tests to identify significant differences in turnover rates by program characteristics at each time point and used descriptive analyses to identify any changes or patterns over time.

HEAD START GRANT FUNDING

In 2019, the turnover rate for programs with both Head Start and Early Head Start grants⁴ was significantly lower than for programs with only Early Head Start funding (17 percent versus 23 percent) (figure 3). That means that programs with funding to serve only children under age 3 and pregnant women had significantly more teachers and home visitors leave their positions than programs that also had Head Start funding to serve preschoolers. The turnover rates rose for both groups of programs in 2022 and to a similar rate of 28–29 percent. The difference in rates was no longer significant.

FIGURE 3

Early Head Start-Only Programs No Longer Show Significantly Higher Turnover Rates Than Programs with Both Early Head Start and Head Start



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Sources: Head Start Program Information Report (PIR), 2018–19 and 2021–22.

Notes: In 2022, the PIR captured staff turnover counts only once for all education and child development staff in a program, which included teachers, assistant teachers, family child care providers, and home visitors. We removed programs that had only family child care providers from the sample to make the 2019 rates comparable with the 2022 rates, which were calculated by combining turnover counts for teachers and home visitors. Programs that received both Head Start and Early Head Start grants reported staff turnover across all classroom teachers and home visitors. For this figure, we were unable to show turnover for only Early Head Start teachers in programs receiving both grants. The turnover rate includes Early Head Start staff and Head Start staff working with preschool-age children. For this analysis, the sample size of the 2019 cohort was 1,472 programs and the sample size of the 2022 cohort was 1,535 programs.

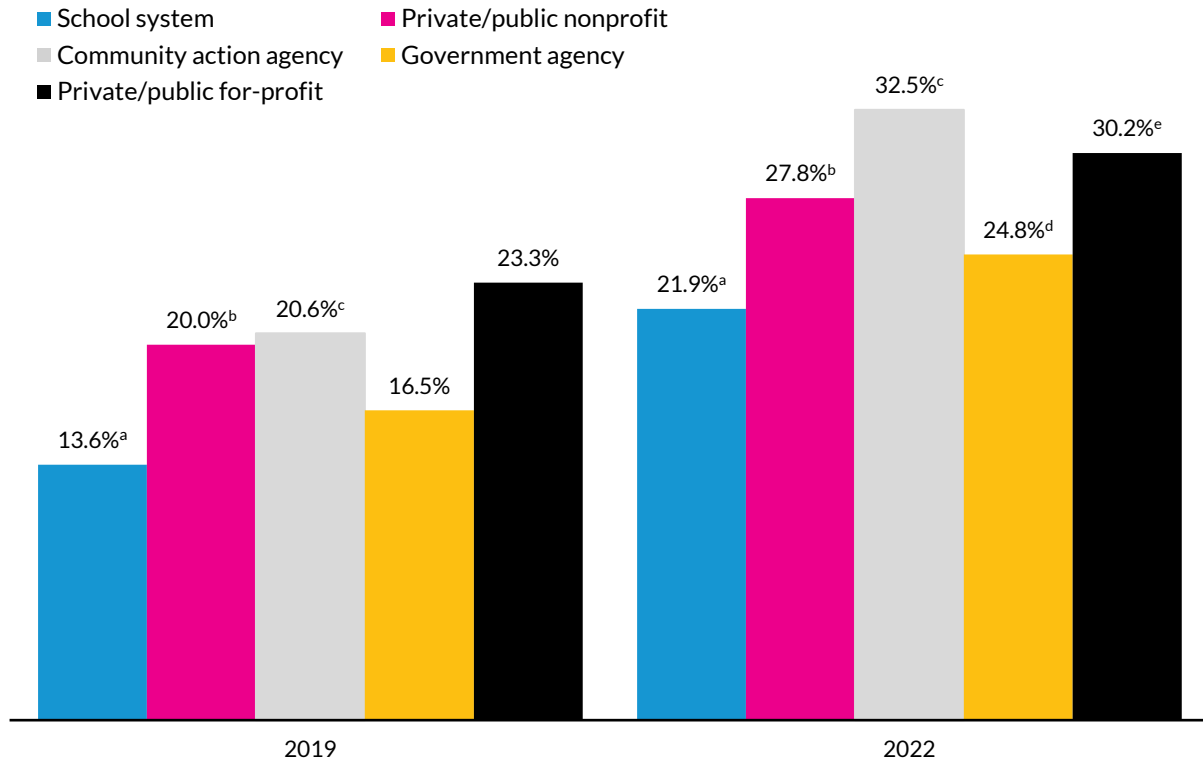
*** $p < .001$.

AGENCY TYPE

Head Start agencies operate as the body that receives the Head Start grant and include community action agencies, government agencies, private and public for-profit organizations, private and public nonprofit organizations, and school systems. Turnover rates increased across agency types from 2019 to 2022. Community action agencies had the highest spike in average turnover rate, from 21 percent to 33 percent. The 2022 rate for community action agencies was significantly higher than for government agencies and private and public for-profits (figure 4). In both years, the turnover rate in programs embedded in school systems was the lowest across agency types. In 2019, this rate was significantly lower than the turnover rates in both community action agencies and private and public nonprofits. This was also the case in 2022.

FIGURE 4

Turnover Rates Increased by Each Type of Early Head Start Program Agency in 2019 and 2022



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Sources: Head Start Program Information Report (PIR), 2018–19 and 2021–22.

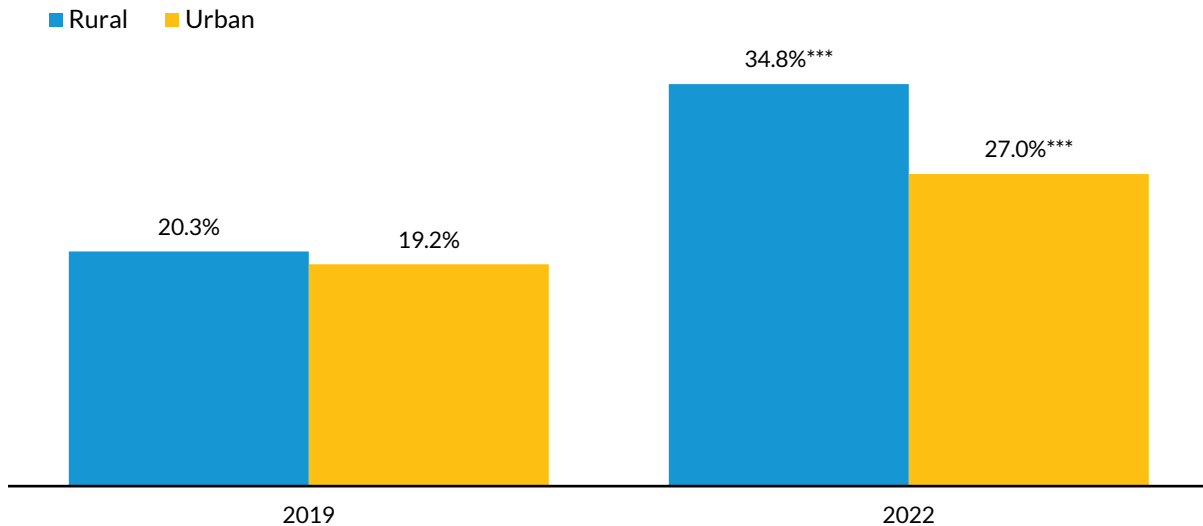
Notes: In 2022, the PIR captured staff turnover counts only once for all education and child development staff in a program, which included teachers, assistant teachers, family child care providers, and home visitors. We removed from the sample programs that had only family child care providers to make the 2019 rates comparable with the 2022 rates, which were calculated by combining turnover counts for teachers and home visitors. In 2019, ^a is significantly lower than ^b and ^c at $p < .01$. In 2022, ^a is significantly lower than ^b ($p < .05$) and ^c ($p < .001$), while ^c is significantly higher than ^d ($p < .05$) and ^e ($p < .01$). For this analysis, the sample size of the 2019 cohort was 1,472 programs and the sample size of the 2022 cohort was 1,535 programs.

URBANICITY

To explore urbanicity, we merged 2022 ACS data with program-level PIR data to determine which Early Head Start programs were located in rural counties. We found that programs in rural areas had an average turnover rate of 20 percent in 2019—comparable with the rate of 19 percent in urban areas (figure 5). However, in 2022, programs in rural areas reported significantly higher turnover than programs in urban areas (35 percent versus 27 percent).

FIGURE 5

Early Head Start Programs in Rural Counties Experienced Higher Turnover of Teachers and Home Visitors in 2022 Than Programs in Urban Counties but Had Similar Rates before the Pandemic



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Sources: Head Start Program Information Report (PIR), 2018–19 and 2021–22; 2022 American Community Survey data.

Notes: In 2022, the PIR captured staff turnover counts only once for all education and child development staff in a program, which included teachers, assistant teachers, family child care providers, and home visitors. We removed from the sample programs that had only family child care providers to make the 2019 rates comparable with the 2022 rates, which were calculated by combining turnover counts for teachers and home visitors. Urban and rural distinctions refer to the county in which the Early Head Start program was located and were determined by merging county-level data from the 2022 American Community Survey to each Early Head Start program. For this analysis, the sample size of the 2019 cohort was 1,466 programs and the sample size of the 2022 cohort was 1,528 programs.

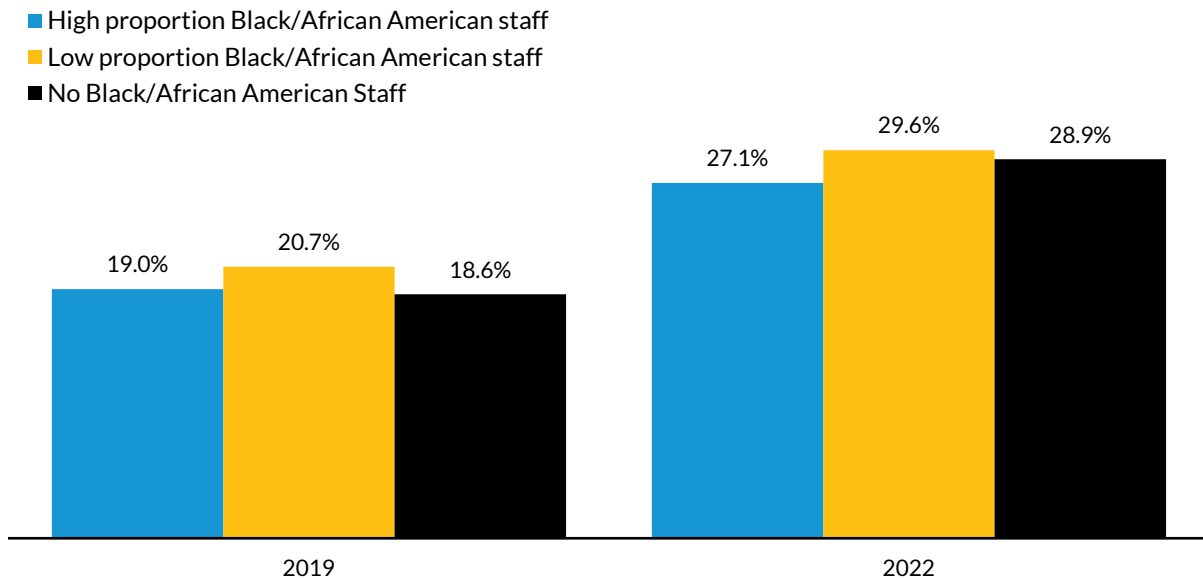
*** $p < .001$.

RACE OF PROGRAM STAFF

The pandemic’s disproportionate effect on Black/African American women who have historically faced structural racism, including lower pay (Austin et al. 2019), motivated our examination of turnover in Early Head Start programs with a high share of Black/African American teachers and home visitors. Across Early Head Start programs nationally in 2022, 26 percent of program staff identified as Black/African American. We grouped programs by whether they had a high share of Black/African American staff (at or above the approximate program-level median of 34 percent), a low share (below the median), or no Black/African American staff, and we compared turnover rates (figure 6). The average turnover rates in 2019 were similar regardless of whether programs had a high or low share of or no Black/African American staff. Similarly, in 2022, we observed no differences in turnover rates by this program characteristic. From 2019 to 2022, turnover rates rose to a similar level across these program groups. The increase in turnover rates for programs with a high share of Black/African American staff from 2019 to 2022 was similar for programs with a low share of or no Black/African American staff.

FIGURE 6

Turnover Rates Were Similar across Early Head Start Programs with High and Low Shares of Black/African American Staff in Both 2019 and 2022



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Sources: Head Start Program Information Report (PIR), 2018–19 and 2021–22.

Notes: In 2022, the PIR captured staff turnover counts only once for all education and child development staff in a program, which included teachers, assistant teachers, family child care providers, and home visitors. We removed from the sample programs that had only family child care providers to make the 2019 rates comparable with the 2022 rates, which were calculated by combining turnover counts for teachers and home visitors. A high share of Black/African American staff was defined as 34 percent or more of child development staff, which was the approximate median observed nationally across Early Head Start programs in 2019 and 2022. Low share was defined as less than 34 percent but greater than 0. For this analysis, the sample size of the 2019 cohort was 1,472 programs and the sample size of the 2022 cohort was 1,535 programs.

Findings from Multivariate Regression Analyses

After finalizing our descriptive analyses, we turned to our multivariate regression analyses to examine factors associated with ECD staff turnover in programs with Early Head Start funding in 2022. We hypothesized that characteristics of Early Head Start programs, such as funding, agency type, and staff race, might relate to turnover as observed in most cases in the descriptive analyses. We also hypothesized that features of the communities in which Early Head Start teachers and home visitors work—such as the COVID-19 vaccination rate, the poverty rate, the earnings potential among female workers in the area, and whether it is urban or rural—might relate to the local job market and the annual rate of staff leaving their positions.

We merged county-level data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on the percentage of the vaccine-eligible population fully vaccinated for COVID-19 and data from the 2022 ACS on urban or rural status, local poverty rate, and the median earnings for female workers. We employed a multilevel modeling approach with programs nested within states to account for state-level

effects and the wide variation in teacher and home visitor salaries by state. We ran a multivariate regression model with program-level turnover rate among teachers and home visitors as the outcome. Predictors included the following:

- average state-level salaries for Early Head Start classroom teachers and home visitors
- program characteristics (receipt of Head Start and Early Head Start grants or only Early Head Start, total funded Early Head Start enrollment, share of Black/African American staff, and program agency type)
- community-level characteristics of interest (full COVID-19 vaccination rate, poverty rate, median female earnings, and rural or urban status).

BOX 1

Early Head Start Staff Salaries by State and Position Type

A growing body of evidence suggests that a primary driver of staff turnover in early childhood programs is low wages.^a The PIR data provide state-level information on staff salaries by position.

In 2022, the average classroom teacher salary was \$33,062 across Early Head Start programs in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, the Northern Mariana Islands, and Puerto Rico. When we adjusted wages for cost of living,^b the highest-paid classroom teachers lived in Rhode Island and Minnesota and the lowest paid lived in Georgia and New Jersey.

The average Early Head Start home visitor salary was higher than the average classroom teacher salary at \$36,920 across 49 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. When we adjusted wages for cost of living, the highest-paid home visitors lived in North Dakota and Minnesota and the lowest paid lived in Alaska and Hawaii.

^a Caven et al. 2021; Phillips, Austin, and Whitebook 2016; Whitebook, Phillips, and Howes 2014.

^b Classroom teacher wages were adjusted for cost of living using the US Bureau of Economic Analysis regional price parities for states ("Regional Price Parities by State and Metro Area," December 15, 2022, <https://www.bea.gov/data/prices-inflation/regional-price-parities-state-and-metro-area>).

Several significant associations emerged in the final analytic model. Being in an urban area ($\beta = -3.61, p < .05$) and embedded in a school system ($\beta = -7.80, p < .01$) were both associated with lower staff turnover (table 4). Receiving both Head Start and Early Head Start grants was also slightly related to lower turnover ($\beta = -2.29, p < .10$). All other variables, including average statewide salaries, were not significantly related to the outcome.

TABLE 4

Multilevel Model Regression Results Predicting Turnover of Early Head Start Teachers and Home Visitors in 2021–22 Program Year

	Coefficient (SE)
Level 1: State Level Variables	
Average statewide Early Head Start teacher salary	-.0003 (.0003)
Average statewide Early Head Start home visitor salary	.0001 (.0002)
Level 2: Program Level Variables	
Program characteristics	
Receive both Head Start and Early Head Start grants	-2.286* (1.348)
Number of funded enrollment slots	-.0068 (.0064)
Share of Early Head Start staff that are Black/African American	-3.748 (2.408)
Program agency type	
<i>(reference group is private/public nonprofit)</i>	
1. Community action agency	2.145 (1.542)
2. Government agency	.5205 (2.859)
3. Private/public for-profit	3.381 (4.718)
4. School system	-7.795*** (2.169)
Community characteristics	
Percent of county fully vaccinated for COVID-19	.0055 (.0737)
Poverty rate (full population, zip code level)	-.1121 (.0897)
Median earnings among female workers (zip code level)	-.0001 (.0001)
Urban/rural county (urban = 1, rural = 0)	-3.605** (1.707)
Obs.	1,339

Sources: Authors' analyses of Head Start Program Information Report, 2021–22, with merged Centers for Disease Control and American Community Survey data on community characteristics.

Notes: Program and community characteristics are modeled as program-level variables.

* $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

Conclusion

Although the size of the nation's Early Head Start workforce remained relatively stable during the pandemic, turnover increased afterward for both teachers and home visitors in Early Head Start. The share of programs with high levels of turnover (more than 20 percent of staff left their positions) increased to more than half of programs in 2022. Our analyses also revealed that roughly one-quarter of teachers and home visitors who left the Early Head Start workforce in 2022 did so because of compensation. A growing body of research has linked higher wages with lower turnover (Bryant et al. 2023; Caven et al 2021).

Before the pandemic, programs funded to serve only Early Head Start reported significantly higher rates of turnover than programs that received both Early Head Start and Head Start grants, but this difference narrowed after the pandemic. This pattern is in line with recent research showing that turnover rates were higher in early childhood education settings serving children from birth to age 5 than in settings serving children ages 3 to 5 (Caven et al. 2021). Yet other research has shown that infant-toddler teachers largely report a commitment to and joy in their work as a reason for staying in the workforce (Kwon et al. 2020). In the wake of the pandemic, more research is needed to better understand how patterns and motivations for turnover may be different for the infant-toddler workforce than for preschool teachers.

Early Head Start programs embedded in school systems consistently reported the lowest turnover rates among all types of Head Start agency, while community action agencies reported the highest after the pandemic. This is in line with recent findings that early childhood teachers in school-based settings have the lowest turnover rates among all early care and education settings (Bassok et al. 2021; Caven et al. 2021). Early childhood teaching positions in school-based settings typically offer the highest pay and have more resources and supports for staff because of their colocation. Indeed, evidence suggests that turnover in Head Start programs is predicted by how much support teachers receive (such as appropriate help for new teachers and support for teamwork) (Markowitz and Bassok 2018). We also found that programs located in more rural areas reported greater rates of turnover in the wake of the pandemic, and being a rural program predicted higher rates of turnover when accounting for other program and community characteristics in our multivariate analyses. Together, these findings highlight how Early Head Start programs in urban areas and colocated in school systems may be better able to retain teachers and home visitors, whereas programs in rural areas and other agency types may be facing greater challenges and need additional support.

Early Head Start programs may have been more resilient to turnover in the wake of the pandemic than other early childhood education settings, but little research exists on this topic or on Head Start turnover and compensation (Weiland et al 2021). As Early Head Start programs strategize ways to support staff recruitment and retention, they will also need to address low compensation and other key drivers of turnover.

Notes

- ¹ “Head Start Program Facts: Fiscal Year 2022,” Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, accessed November 9, 2023, <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/data-ongoing-monitoring/article/head-start-program-facts-fiscal-year-2022>.
- ² Eight percent of Early Head Start programs ($N = 114$) in 2022 had fewer than five ECD staff members. We conducted a sensitivity test that excluded these small programs from our analyses. Our concern was if a program had four teachers, for example, and one left their job, the program would have a turnover rate of 25 percent and be coded as “high turnover” in our analysis (i.e., greater than 20 percent). The resulting staff turnover estimates were largely the same when including or excluding these small programs with fewer than five staff. Accordingly, we retained these programs in all analyses to be more inclusive of Early Head Start programs nationally. However, we note that future research on turnover should account for staff size.
- ³ For programs with both Head Start and Early Head Start grants, the data are reported for all program staff across age groups. For this analysis, we used programs solely funded by Early Head Start as well as those funded by both Head Start and Early Head Start, and then calculated turnover rates and vacancies within each program before calculating the average turnover rate by year.
- ⁴ Programs that received both Head Start and Early Head Start grants included both Head Start and Early Head Start teachers in their reported turnover counts. As such, the count of staff in these programs includes Head Start classroom teachers who left.

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Acknowledgments

This brief was prepared with grant funding from the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award (Grant # 90YR0134) totaling \$100,000 with 100 percent funded by ACF/HHS. The contents are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by ACF/HHS, or the US Government. For more information, please visit the ACF website, Administrative and National Policy Requirements (<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/administrative-and-national-policyrequirements>). We are grateful to ACF and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute's funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples.



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