

Head Start and
the Changing
Demographics of
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Immigrants
Raising Citizens:
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During the past decade, immigration has been a major contributor to America's rapidly changing demographics and to the diversity of young children and vulnerable families served by Head Start and Early Head Start providers. This Dialog Brief contains two papers exploring the implications of diversity and immigration for the Head Start community. Olivia Golden describes the increasing diversity of America's young children and their families and makes recommendations about how Head Start and Early Head Start practitioners can best address the changing backgrounds and experiences of these children. Using data from his new book, *Immigrants Raising Citizens: Undocumented Parents and Their Young Children*, Hirokazu Yoshikawa recounts the experiences of undocumented parents and their young children, explores the implications of these experiences for their children's development, and presents recommendations for early childhood education practitioners and policy makers.

Head Start and the Changing Demographics of Today's Young Children

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Introduction

Today, the portrait of our nation's children is changing rapidly. Results recently released from the 2010 Census show a dramatic change in the racial and ethnic composition of children, particularly increases in Hispanic and Asian children and declines in white children (and a slight decline nationally in the number of black children) (Frey, 2011). Other recent national surveys show a sharp increase in the proportion of children, and young children in particular, whose parents are immigrants. Where young children live has also changed, with some northeastern

and Midwestern states losing children while southern and southwestern states are rapidly gaining (Fortuny, Hernandez, & Chaudry, 2010; Frey, 2011).

Head Start and Early Head Start programs have always understood that high-quality services are grounded in a thorough understanding of the children and families in their communities. This article briefly summarizes the major changes in the population of young children and makes four recommendations for local programs.

Who Are America's Children?

The U.S. child population, especially young

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children, has changed dramatically in the past two decades. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of Hispanic children grew by 4.8 million while the number of white children declined by 4.3 million. The share of Asian children also increased rapidly, though the absolute numbers were smaller. As a result, in 2010, Hispanics represented almost a quarter (23 percent) of all children and whites just barely half (53 percent). While the child population as a whole is becoming more diverse, though, Hispanic and black children continue to live in segregated neighborhoods—more segregated, in fact, than the neighborhoods of Hispanic and black adults (Frey, 2011).

The past twenty years have also seen a large increase in the number and share of children, whose parents are immigrants, a trend that is particularly pronounced among young children. Currently, 8.7 million U.S. children age 0 to 8 have at least one foreign-born parent, more than double the 4.3 million in 1990. This amounts to one in four children aged 0 to 8, and it means that all the growth in children in this age group between 1990 and 2010 is from children of immigrants (Fortuny, Hernandez, & Chaudry, 2010).

Of particular importance to early childhood programs is the language environment for young children. Among all young children of immigrants, about a third live in linguistically isolated households, meaning that no one age 14 or older is proficient in English. For children themselves, at age 5, about 35 percent are reported as bilingual (meaning that they speak English very well and another language) and a similar share, 37 percent, are English language learners; by the time children are 8, about half are bilingual and a fifth are English language learners (Fortuny, Hernandez, & Chaudry, 2010).

While more than 90 percent of young children of immigrants are citizens, about half live in families with no citizen parent (Fortuny, Hernandez, & Chaudry, 2010). Not all

these noncitizen parents are unauthorized immigrants, but many are, meaning that they may be subject to detention and deportation. Researchers found that parent-child separations as a result of immigration enforcement led to damaging consequences for children, including economic hardship and widespread changes in child behavior (such as changes in eating and sleeping and behavioral and emotional changes such as withdrawal, anxiety, and anger). New humanitarian guidelines issued by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement reduced the frequency of family separation, but the guidelines did not apply to all situations. The researchers also found that parents credited schools with providing a stable and safe environment that supported their children's recovery (Chaudry et al., 2010).

Where children live is also changing. The 2010 Census reveals that 24 states lost child population after 2000, as did nearly a third of large metropolitan areas. New England, New York, Michigan, Ohio, North Dakota, and Louisiana had the largest percentage declines in children, while the west and southeast had the largest gains. Nevada, Arizona, Utah, Idaho, Colorado, Texas, Georgia, and North Carolina all increased their child population over the decade by more than 10 percent. Among the metropolitan areas, Raleigh, Provo, Cape Coral, Las Vegas, Austin, Charlotte, and McAllen all had more than a one-third increase in children. Children's changing ethnic make-up contributed to these geographic changes, since Hispanics typically accounted for most of the growth in areas that gained children (Frey, 2011).

In many states and communities with large increases in children, the existing public and private programs for children may not be prepared. The recession and the slow economic recovery may have worsened this lack of preparedness, as state budgets shrink and workers are furloughed at the same time that families feel the burden of unemployment, lost

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hours, and stagnant wages. Thus, Head Start programs in these communities have a crucial role in addressing children's needs.

Recommendations for Local Head Start and Early Head Start Programs

How can Head Start and Early Head Start practitioners respond best to these rapid changes in the backgrounds and experiences of young children?

1. **Collect and analyze up-to-date information about the young children in your community.** A current and careful needs assessment has never been more important. Most likely, the demographic make-up of young children, the neighborhoods where they live, and the languages they speak are different than five or ten years ago.

A good needs assessment may also identify other ways to strengthen services to meet these families' needs.

For example, effective outreach may require building connections with organizations that serve new immigrant communities, bringing on board bilingual and bicultural staff, and addressing misconceptions. Parents and immigrant-serving organizations may not understand that Head Start eligibility is not restricted by immigration status (Matthews & Ewen, 2010). Engaging parents, a historic strength of Head Start, may require practitioners to understand the cultural, language, and practical factors that affect immigrant parents' choices about how to support their children's education (Crosnoe, 2010).

2. **Seek out the professional development you and your staff need to provide high-quality services—in particular, to support language acquisition for young children who are dual language learners.** A 2010 roundtable convened by the Urban Institute highlighted the crucial importance of the years from age 3 to age 8 for learning English in a way that supports academic

achievement. While researchers have identified several strong approaches, including dual language strategies that build on children's first language, participants in the roundtable highlighted the need for professional development so teachers in early childhood and elementary education can use these techniques effectively (Golden & Fortuny, 2011). Programs should actively participate in professional development opportunities provided by the Office of Head Start and others, and practitioners should ask for additional help that they need. For example, the Office of Head Start could provide additional technical assistance to help Head Start–child care partnerships offer full-day care that supports language development (Matthews & Ewen, 2010). In addition, recruiting and developing bilingual teaching staff may be a key next step.

3. **Think through your program's role as a safe place for children.** In communities with many mixed-status families, children's lives could be disrupted if enforcement activities lead to detention or deportation of parents or cause families to move because they fear these outcomes. Researchers studying the damaging effects on children, and the mitigating effects of stability in children's school lives, have recommended that "Schools and early childhood providers should develop plans to protect children immediately following raids or other arrests to provide safe havens and responsive learning environments" (Chaudry et al., 2010, xii). Schools in the sites studied addressed both the immediate aftermath of a workplace raid—ensuring that children could stay at school until a caregiver was available to pick them up—and the longer-term effects. They worked hard to keep children in school and to provide them with a sense of continuity (Chaudry et al., 2010). Head Start, with its comprehensive

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services mission, might be able to do even more, such as providing services to address children's trauma.

4. **Tell your community's story.** Finally, the data that you collect as part of your needs assessment, along with the stories of children and parents who have overcome barriers, can help longer-term members of the community understand the changes happening around them. Even in the states where the number of young children of immigrants is greatest, participants in the Urban Institute's roundtable thought data were important because the pace

and scale of change had outrun the knowledge of state legislators and other policy leaders (Golden & Fortuny, 2011). And in communities where older people are largely white but children are largely minority, a "cultural generation gap" may lead older residents to be anxious or even fearful about today's young children and families (Frey, 2011). The information you have to offer could tell the story of an emerging community in a way everyone can understand, through the lens of young children's healthy development.

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