



Fulfilling the Promise of Preschool in Silicon Valley

Examining Participation Patterns and Barriers to Access among Low-Income Children and Low-Income Children of Immigrants

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Researchers and policymakers agree: access to high-quality early care and education programs is important to children's readiness for school and success later in life. A growing body of evidence suggests this is particularly true for low-income children and low-income children from immigrant families, who face unique learning challenges related to poverty, geographic and social isolation, insufficient home resources, and instability. Yet these children enroll in high-quality preschool programs significantly less often than other children both nationwide and in Silicon Valley. Understanding the characteristics of these families, the reasons for low enrollment rates, and possible strategies for addressing them, is valuable for efforts to support the strong development and future success of all low-income children in Silicon Valley.

"One of the biggest problems any low-income family has now is simply putting a roof over your head, let alone trying to get preschool."

-Early care and education expert, San Mateo County, CA

This brief synthesizes two research studies on the unique nature of barriers to preschool participation among low-income children in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties, which together make up Silicon Valley in northern California:

- The first study provides a demographic profile of low-income children in Silicon Valley, focusing on preschool enrollment patterns and family and community characteristics (Hanson, Adams, and Koball 2016). One of the most important findings from this profile is that nearly three-quarters of all low-income preschool-age children in Silicon Valley are the children of immigrants; though many of these children have parents from Mexico and Central America, a significant minority has parents from a diverse array of other countries. While Silicon Valley has an unusually large low-income immigrant population, the share of low-income children from immigrant families and the diversity of that population is growing in many communities nationwide. As a result, even though Silicon Valley has relatively higher income and rapid gentrification, insights from Silicon Valley can inform many other communities working to give low-income children a strong start.
- The second study examines the particular barriers to preschool participation facing low-income immigrant families in Silicon Valley (Greenberg, Adams, and Michie 2016). Through interviews and meetings with a broad range of experts and stakeholders from local early childhood and immigrant-serving organizations, as well as a systematic review of existing reports and data, we identify a wide array of barriers facing this population.

Together, these research studies illuminate the current landscape of preschool access in Silicon Valley and suggest opportunities for broadening access for all children from low-income families, including children of immigrants.

BOX 1

What Is Preschool?

“Preschool” is used in different ways across communities of research, policy, and practice. Because our first study relies on data from the American Community Survey (2008–12), that study adopts the definition of preschool used there: “nursery school/preschool, kindergarten, or grade school” programs that enroll 3- and 4-year-old children.

Both studies focus in part on higher-quality preschool, understanding that quality is a topic of wide debate and little consensus across the field. We define higher-quality preschool broadly, to include programs meeting standards higher than state licensing, such as Head Start, California State Preschool, and accredited private programs. We adopt this definition for clarity and inclusiveness, and we acknowledge that many equally valid alternatives exist.

Preschool-Age Children in Silicon Valley

Silicon Valley is home to more than 200,000 children ages 5 and younger. Roughly a quarter (just over 50,000) live in low-income families, defined here as having income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (\$47,700 for a family of four). Approximately 13,000 low-income children live in San Mateo County, and 38,000 live in Santa Clara County. Though poverty rates are lower in Silicon Valley than in the rest of the country (Jiang, Ekono, and Skinner 2015), a significant number of children are nevertheless living in low-income families.

A deeper look at the characteristics of these children and their families, using data from the American Community Survey (2008–12), reveals critical findings about low-income children in Silicon Valley. All the findings in this section are drawn from our demographic study—Hanson, Adams, and Koball (2016)—and are discussed in more detail there. Among the major findings from that report are the following six.

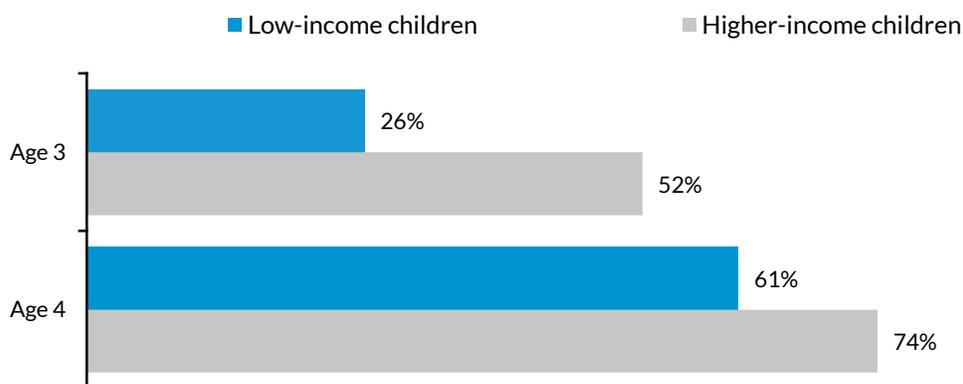
Preschool Enrollment Varies by Income

Our analyses find substantial disparities in preschool participation between low- and higher-income preschool-age children in Silicon Valley. In fact, only 26 percent of low-income 3-year-olds are enrolled in preschool programs compared with 52 percent of higher-income 3-year-olds. Though the gap is smaller among 4-year-olds, only 61 percent of low-income children in this age group are enrolled compared with 74 percent of higher income 4-year-olds (figure 1).

These patterns differ between Santa Clara and San Mateo. For both age groups, while the rate of enrollment for higher-income children is the same across the two counties, enrollment rates for low-income children are lower in Santa Clara than in San Mateo; for 3-year-olds, 23 percent compared with 34 percent; and for 4-year-olds, 59 percent compared with 68 percent.

FIGURE 1

Share of 3- and 4-Year-Olds Enrolled in Preschool in Silicon Valley by Income Level



Source: Analyses of US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2008–12, by Hanson, Adams, and Koball (2016).

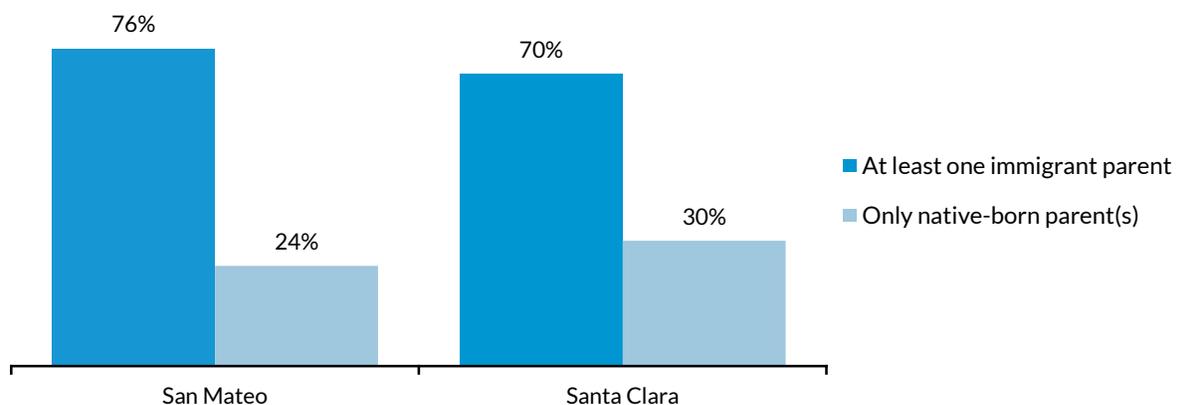
These patterns underscore the importance of exploring factors shaping preschool enrollment among children from low-income families in Silicon Valley.

Many Children from Low-Income Families Have Immigrant Parents

Nearly three-quarters of all low-income children ages 5 and younger in Silicon Valley live with at least one immigrant parent—meaning that at least one parent was born outside the United States and its territories. (In this study, immigrants include naturalized citizens, legal residents, and undocumented residents.) The proportion is slightly higher in San Mateo than in Santa Clara (figure 2). However, nearly all (97%) low-income children in Silicon Valley are citizens. As a result, children in low-income households face the double burden of the difficulties associated with low income and the extra challenges facing immigrant households such as language barriers, a lack of familiarity with US systems, and—among those in undocumented and mixed-status families—fear of government institutions.

FIGURE 2

Share of Children Ages 5 and Younger in Low-Income Families by County and Parents' Immigrant Status



Source: Analyses of US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2008–12, by Hanson, Adams, and Koball (2016).

Low-Income Children Tend to Have Parents from Mexico and Central America, Though a Significant Minority Have Parents from Other Countries

Though the most common region of origin is Mexico and Central America, 16 percent of low-income children in San Mateo County and 21 percent of low-income children in Santa Clara County have parents that come from a range of other countries (table 1).

TABLE 1

Country or Region of Origin for Parents of Low-Income Children Ages 5 and Younger in Silicon Valley by County (percent)

	San Mateo	Santa Clara
United States	25.9	31.5
Latin America		
Mexico	48.5	43.5
Central America	9.2	4.5
South America	1.3	1.0
Southeast Asia		
Vietnam	0.2	7.9
Philippines	4.1	2.2
Other Southeast Asia	1.0	0.7
East Asia and Pacific	3.6	3.3
Middle East and South Asia	3.8	2.9
Africa and West Indies	0.2	1.1
Europe, Canada, and Australia	2.3	1.5

Source: Analyses of US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2008–12, by Hanson, Adams, and Koball (2016).

Many Low-Income Children Have Parents Who Don't Speak English Well; for a Significant Minority of These Children, Parents Speak Languages Other Than Spanish

Low-income children in Silicon Valley have families that come from across the world. Three out of five of these children have limited English proficient (LEP) parents—those who report that they speak a language other than English at home and speak English less than very well. Spanish is by far the most common language among LEP parents, yet many families speak other languages at home (table 2).

TABLE 2

Primary Language Spoken by Limited English Proficient Parents of Low-Income Children Ages 5 and Younger in Silicon Valley by County (percent)

	San Mateo	Santa Clara
Spanish	83.1	73.5
Vietnamese	0.0	11.1
Chinese	2.1	2.3
Hindi and related	1.5	1.2
Filipino, Tagalog	1.3	1.1
Other	5.1	5.8
Missing	6.7	4.9

Source: Analyses of US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2008–12, by Hanson, Adams, and Koball (2016).

The Concentration of Families with Language Barriers Varies

LEP families live throughout Silicon Valley, not just in areas with concentrated or homogeneous immigrant populations. Some communities have high concentrations of LEP families, while others have much lower concentrations. Further, many communities are home to speakers of different languages, although many also have predominantly Spanish speakers. In addition, language barriers are not unique to immigrant families; there are also native-born parents who are LEP. Roughly 1 in 10 low-income children younger than 5 living with only *native-born* parents have at least one parent who is LEP. These parents may face language barriers and related challenges similar to those faced by immigrants.

Most Low-Income Children Live in Two-Parent Households

Seventy percent of low-income children ages 5 and younger in Silicon Valley live in two-parent households, and 53 percent have one parent who does not work outside the home. This suggests that low-income children in Silicon Valley may be more likely to have a parent at home who could care for them—potentially reducing the need to rely on preschool and early education for child care to support work.

Many Low-Income Children in Silicon Valley Have Parents with Low Education

More than half of low-income children in Silicon Valley have parents with low levels of formal education (58 percent with a high school degree or less), suggesting that literacy may be an issue.

Preschool Programs, Including Higher-Quality Programs, May Be in Shorter Supply in Communities with Low Preschool Enrollment and Higher Shares of LEP Families

Within Silicon Valley, some neighborhoods with low preschool enrollment have high proportions of LEP individuals. Maps of these communities suggest that a number of these same neighborhoods may have fewer early care and education programs than communities with higher enrollment patterns, suggesting that the supply of care may contribute to participation patterns.

Though the patterns presented here demonstrate that Silicon Valley is, in some ways, unusual in the size and composition of its low-income immigrant population, the challenges that the areas faces provide important insights for other parts of the country experiencing demographic changes. Even within Silicon Valley, as elsewhere, community characteristics and needs vary substantially (see Adams and McDaniel 2012; Gelatt, Adams, and Huerta 2014). Accordingly, efforts to address preschool participation among low-income children, and low-income children of immigrants, in Silicon Valley will need to be mindful of these realities in designing outreach and service delivery.

Understanding Barriers to Preschool Participation

Low-income immigrant families face a wide array of barriers to enrolling their 3- and 4-year-old children in preschool. We gathered information about these barriers through interviews and meetings with a broad range of experts and stakeholders from early childhood and immigrant-serving organizations in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties, as well as a systematic review of existing reports and data. This section highlights the major findings from our second study, Greenberg, Adams, and Michie (2016).

Respondents highlighted a broad range of barriers that low-income immigrant families in Silicon Valley face around preschool participation. These barriers are set against a complex backdrop that includes (1) the previously mentioned diversity of the immigrant population in Silicon Valley, with its implications for outreach and service delivery; and (2) the unusually high cost of living in Silicon Valley, which makes it even harder for families to afford care, seems to be leading to a migration of some low-income families out of the area, and contributes to high operating costs for providers.

Several barriers facing low-income immigrant families are common among low-income families more broadly, though they may have a disproportionate impact on immigrant families. Other barriers are more specific to immigrant populations. The key barriers that emerged as common among low-income families more broadly include the following:

- **Parents' knowledge of early care and education options in their community**, which may be limited by insufficient outreach and information provision, as well as the complex way preschool programs are funded, organized, and delivered in the United States. Respondents suggested that Head Start programs were better known to low-income immigrant families in Silicon Valley than some other early childhood programs, and that subsidies for child care assistance may be much less well known to this community.
- **Cost and affordability** issues that make even some publicly funded programs unattainable for struggling families. Definitions of *low income* that set eligibility for public programs diverge from the true costs of living in Silicon Valley, and fees are required for certain types of early care and education.
- **Supply and capacity** constraints that leave many programs with long waiting lists and others searching to fill slots in the wake of gentrification and increasing operational and service provision costs. Respondents reported a number of challenges, including a very limited availability of affordable facilities, a small pool of qualified teachers, and a mismatch between where low-income families live and the neighborhoods where early care and education is most available. The mismatch is exacerbated by low-income families leaving communities because of the cost of living.
- **Eligibility and enrollment processes** marked by burdensome paperwork and eligibility criteria for proof of income, home addresses, and, in some cases, parental employment status or enrollment in education and training programs. Respondents noted that these requirements

are difficult for many low-income parents to meet and focus on adult needs rather than child development goals. Language barriers further compound the problem for immigrant parents.

- **Location and transportation** challenges stemming from the size of Silicon Valley and its underdeveloped public transportation infrastructure.
- **Hours and schedules** that are not flexible enough to meet many low-income families' needs. This issue compounds the supply problems mentioned above.

“There are so many requirements that they can get overwhelmed and give up. It’s just too much.”

-Early care and education expert, Santa Clara County, CA

Beyond those issues common to low-income families, respondents identified several additional barriers that pose unique challenges to low-income *immigrant* families:

- **Distrust of government institutions** among undocumented and mixed-status immigrant families, which can deter enrollment in publicly funded preschool programs or use of public subsidies.
- **Parental preferences for early care and education**, which may be shaped by both unfamiliarity with US approaches to preschool and limited trust in existing programs.
- **Cultural and linguistic sensitivities** that make programs more welcoming for families from common linguistic and cultural groups but less responsive to the needs of families from rarer immigrant groups.

Although barriers are listed separately above, they often operate simultaneously in the lives of immigrant families and can interact to shape the low participation patterns found in our first study. In turn, interactions between and among barriers can compound the difficulties facing low-income immigrant families and provide important context for stakeholders interested in implementing strategies to support preschool enrollment and attendance among preschool-age children.

“I think we’re doing better and better with our Spanish-speaking teachers. We’re not really meeting the needs when it comes to other languages and cultures...[I]t’s not realistic to expect that all languages and cultural groups will be represented in the classroom, but there are numerous strategies we can institute and support teachers with. They’ll stay engaged with the children and families even when there are barriers. It’s really about the intention and commitment to building those relationships even when there is a language barrier.”

-Early care and education expert, San Mateo County, CA

Overcoming Barriers to Preschool Participation

Both respondent interviews and demographic analyses yield wide-ranging strategies for overcoming barriers to preschool participation. Respondents note that some of these strategies are already in place and could be broadened to other communities, while other strategies are new and may be adopted by service providers and advocates:

- **A new push for affordability** that expands low-cost or free services, and that accounts for the unusually high cost of living in Silicon Valley through higher program eligibility thresholds, increased reimbursement rates, and decreased family fees.
- **Improved outreach**, including leveraging networks of enrolled parents, adding more informational workshops and public messaging campaigns, enhancing multilingual translation efforts, and using technology to reach families directly.
- **Simplified early care and education enrollment requirements and additional support for eligibility determination and enrollment** tailored to the linguistic and literacy needs of diverse low-income immigrant families.
- **Targeted investments in supply** that serve stable communities of low-income immigrant families. Funding could cover facilities costs for qualified providers, partnerships with local organizations to provide rent-free space, or scholarships to increase the supply of well-trained instructional staff. These investments may be complemented by investments in public school buses or other transportation.
- **Enhanced professional development** about cultural and linguistic sensitivity, reflecting the diversity of immigrant families.

Stakeholders suggest various potential partners well positioned to help improve preschool participation among low-income immigrant families. For example, they suggested that outreach efforts

might be expanded through linking with trusted health providers, WIC offices, churches, legal services organizations, higher education institutions, and workforce development programs. Eligibility determination and enrollment processes could be supported through partnering with trusted neighborhood and community organizations that work with low-income and immigrant families, as well as with early care and education organizations and providers. Enhanced professional development may be offered by early care and education organizations that already serve many families with young children through additional investments of resources. Together, these organizations and their staff members may help expand access to and participation in higher-quality early learning opportunities, so all children from low-income immigrant families have the opportunity for a strong start in life. (For more information on possible outreach strategies from this project and others, see appendix B in Greenberg, Adams, and Michie 2016.)

“We have to remember, why are we doing this? It’s about children; it’s not about the rules.”

–Early care and education expert, San Mateo County, CA

Though low-income immigrant families in Silicon Valley face a number of significant barriers to enrolling their children in preschool, steps could be taken to support their participation. These barriers and possible strategies, and the suggested partnerships with early care and education organizations, other child- and family-serving organizations, and immigrant-serving organizations, do more than provide important insights for Silicon Valley. They may also help inform the efforts of communities across the country that are wrestling with how to ensure a strong start for all their children in the context of demographic change.

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