

# LOW PRESCHOOL ENROLLMENT RATES THREATEN TO WORSEN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

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As children across the country settle into the new school year, a concerning national trend is taking shape: Over 50% of America’s preschool-age kids are not in school, and this statistic is growing, according to researchers.

Early education programs are invaluable in preparing children for elementary school. Such programs are associated with improved academic achievement and emotional and physical health. Preschool also plays a key role in [reducing academic and health disparities](#) by socioeconomic status and race. Yet, high-quality early childhood education is inaccessible to many Americans — especially low-income kids and children of color.

**THE LATEST FINDINGS ON PRESCHOOL ENROLLMENT** More than half (54%) of the nation’s 3- to 4-year-olds were not in preschool, according to data from 2017–2021 presented in the [2023 KIDS COUNT® Data Book](#). The share of young kids who didn’t attend any preschool program — representing 4.4 million kids — has increased by one percentage point since 2012–2016. In addition, preschool enrollment for kids ages 3 to 6 [dropped off substantially](#) from 2019 to 2021, and this dip was statistically significant in 42 states and the District of Columbia.

The [KIDS COUNT Data Center](#) also tracks enrollment in the public Head Start program, which showed a similarly steep decline between 2019 and 2021. The total enrollment of U.S. children ages 3 to 5 in Head Start [fell by nearly 30%](#) during this two-year period.

**LIMITED ACCESS TO PRESCHOOL IS NOT A RECENT PROBLEM** Limited access to preschool is a persistent issue, with data prior to 2020 indicating that more than 50% of the nation’s children were not enrolled in preschool. When parents do seek to utilize child care or preschool, they often [struggle to find high-quality, affordable and available options](#).

Contributing to this challenge is the fact that very few states offer free, public preschool programs starting at age 3. America’s child care system is also chronically underfunded, and this issue is exacerbated by [widespread staffing shortages](#) in the early childhood education field.

## EXPLAINING THE TERMS: PRESCHOOL, EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CHILD CARE

The KIDS COUNT Data Center defines “preschool” as educational experiences offered in a group or class setting prior to kindergarten. Children in private homes that primarily provide custodial care are not included in this snapshot while children enrolled in programs sponsored by federal, state or local agencies — including Head Start programs — are considered in preschool.

The umbrella term “early childhood education” (ECE), describes a variety of developmentally appropriate care and educational programs offered from birth to kindergarten. High-quality ECE is culturally responsive and promotes social and emotional learning, physical health and cognitive development. ECE can be offered in a number of settings, including schools, child care facilities and faith-based institutions.

“Child care” describes a spectrum of care that starts with infant care and includes comprehensive ECE programs. This care may be center-based or family home-based and delivered formally or informally. School-aged programming that is offered before school or after school is also considered child care.

**PERSISTENT BARRIERS TO PRESCHOOL FOR LOW-INCOME KIDS** The KIDS COUNT Data Center tracked preschool enrollment by family income level each year for nearly 15 years — from 2005 to 2019 — and the findings are abundantly clear: Children from low-income families are less likely to access preschool compared to kids from higher-income families. Over the entire period, about 60% of low-income kids did not attend preschool while only 46% of higher-income kids missed out on this opportunity.

These findings echo a large body of research demonstrating that low-income children have less access to high-quality early learning programs and face more barriers to academic achievement in general. Other groups facing similar barriers include children of color, English-language learners and children with disabilities.

## ADDITIONAL PRESCHOOL ENROLLMENT FINDINGS BY RACE AND LOCATION

By race and ethnicity:

- In 2017–2021, participation rates by race and ethnicity showed that, for children ages 3 to 4, Latino, American Indian and multiracial kids were less likely to access preschool compared to their white, Black and Asian and Pacific Islander peers. This range — describing the share of kids not in preschool — runs from a high of 61% for Latino kids to a low of 51% for Asian and Pacific Islander kids, according to the *2023 KIDS COUNT Data Book*.
- Between 2019 and 2021, preschool participation fell for all racial and ethnic groups with available data, but Asian American and Black children experienced the largest drops, according to the latest Census Bureau data.
- On average, Black children attend lower-quality ECE programs than their white peers, according to a recent analysis by the *National Institute for Early Education Research*. Lower-quality programs can make it harder to achieve the benefits of early childhood education.

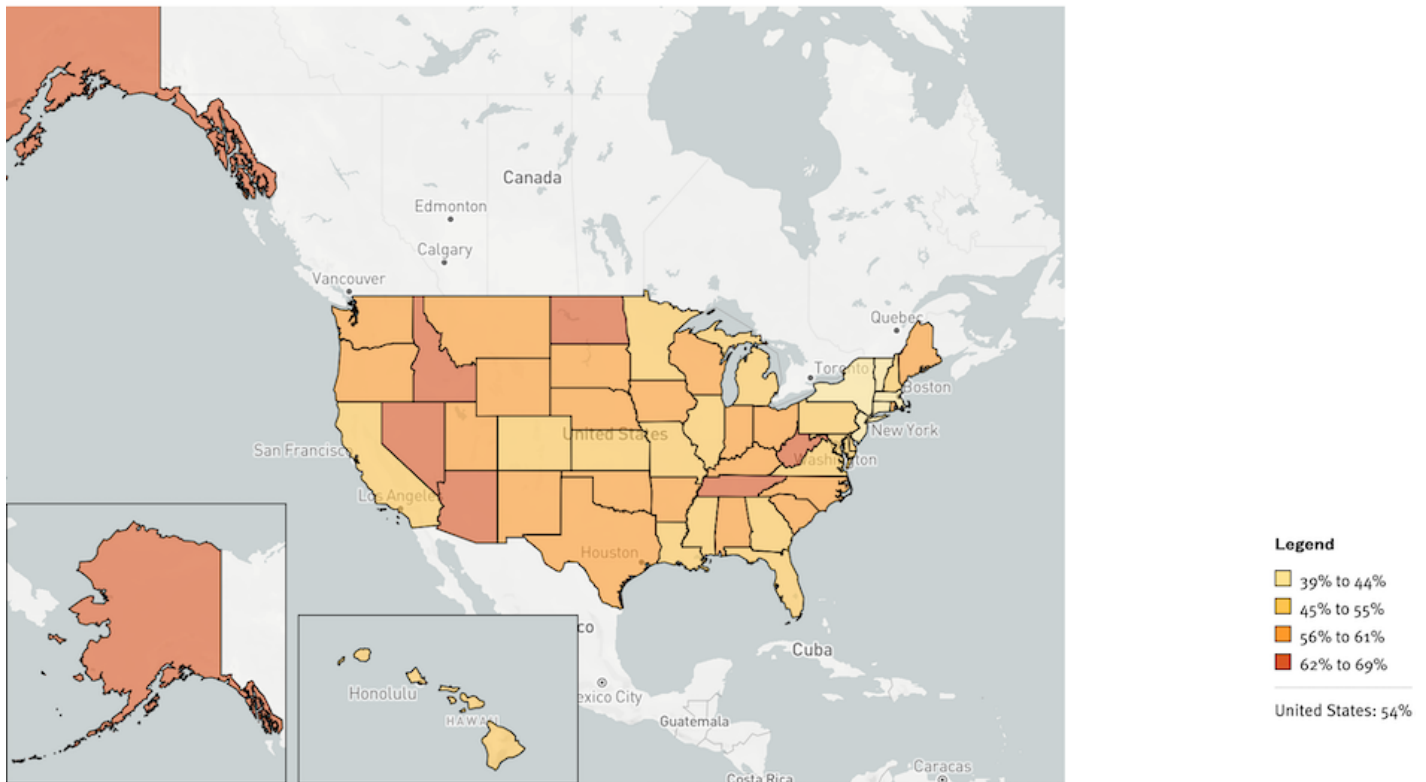
By Region and State:

- In 2017–2021, kids ages 3 to 4 in the nation’s Western, Midwestern and Southern regions were less likely to access preschool relative to their Northeastern peers. This range — describing the share of kids not in preschool — runs from a high of 57% in the West versus a low of 45% in the Northeast.
- Also from 2017–2021 but at the state-level: The share of kids missing out on preschool varied widely, from a low of 39% for kids in the Northeastern states of Connecticut and New Jersey to

a high of 69% of kids in both North Dakota and West Virginia. Across the nation, 10 states — concentrated in the South, Midwest and West — reported that at least 60% of their children, ages 3 to 4, were not in preschool.

- Between 2012–2016 and 2017–2021, 32 states and the District of Columbia saw preschool enrollment rates fall as shown in the map below.

### Young Children Not In School, 2012-2016 And 2017-2021 (Percent) - 2017-2021



The Annie E. Casey Foundation from [datacenter.aecf.org](https://datacenter.aecf.org)

**TAKING ACTION TO IMPROVE PRESCHOOL ACCESS AND QUALITY** Early childhood is a critical period of development, and experiences during this phase lay a foundation for long-term health and well-being. Declining access to preschool is especially alarming given the following:

- early childhood education is strongly linked to later student success and positive health outcomes;
- the nation is already facing an education crisis, with students less likely to reach academic proficiency after the COVID-19 pandemic and with academic disparities by race and income level persisting;
- kids who can benefit the most from early learning programs are already the least likely to access such programs; and
- early childhood education improves school readiness, and students who enter kindergarten behind their peers may struggle for years to catch up.

Many parents rely on preschool and child care programs in order to work. When families have access to affordable, high-quality early childhood education, both kids and their parents benefit. Prioritizing equitable access to such programs is essential.