



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"... are we finding them, those that need us most? I think we're trying hard to do that, but still, we're not exactly where we want to be."

Head Start Recruitment Staff

Overview

The Feasibility Study of Head Start Recruitment and Enrollment was designed to provide information about Head Start's recruitment and enrollment activities. The central purpose of the study was to determine the feasibility and utility of obtaining information from secondary analyses of existing data and from primary data collection efforts regarding 1) the procedures that Head Start programs employed in the recruitment and enrollment of families and children, 2) the characteristics of eligible families, and 3) the reasons why some families with Head Start-eligible children chose not to enroll their children in the program.

Rationale for the Study

Although Head Start's goal to serve one million children by the year 2002 is quite ambitious, the program would still reach significantly fewer than the estimated population of 1.6 million 3- and 4-year-old children living in poverty. While the number of children served by Head Start has increased, the program's ability to reach this goal in an age of changing social demands may be compromised without up-to-date information on eligible families. Recent Head Start research efforts inform us about the families Head Start is serving, but also prompt new questions: How does Head Start typically reach out to recruit and enroll families? Who are the eligible families and children missing from Head Start? How are these families and children different from enrolled families? What can be done so all eligible children needing services can benefit from the program?

Along with gaining knowledge about recruitment and enrollment activities, an important step in helping local programs meet their enrollment objectives is identifying the characteristics of the following four types of Head Start-eligible, but non-enrolled families:

- Families who are unaware of Head Start and/or are never actively recruited,
- Families who are aware of Head Start and have possibly been recruited, but never enroll,
- Families who enroll in Head Start but never attend, and
- Families who enroll and begin at Head Start, but then drop out early (during the first month) in the program year.

Description of the Project

Existing Data. This project involved several independent study activities. Existing data from Head Start -- the Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) and the Program Information Report (PIR) -- were examined. The FACES databases contained several sources of relevant information for this study. These included:

- Exit interviews conducted with parents of children who dropped out of Head Start during the program year,

- Interviews with Social Service Coordinators and Center Directors about recruitment and enrollment efforts,
- Interviews with parents of currently enrolled Head Start children, and
- Interviews with community agency staff, focusing on collaboration with Head Start and service provision to low-income families.

Three large-scale extant national databases were also examined to determine what information might be available regarding numbers and characteristics of children eligible for Head Start and, to the extent possible, to compare characteristics of the families of enrolled and non-enrolled eligible children. These datasets were the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79), the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), and the Panel Survey of Income Dynamics (PSID).

Primary Data. A primary data collection in the fall of 1999 consisted of focus groups at nine Head Start sites across the country with staff from 11 of the Head Start FACES programs, and reviews of recruitment records and waiting lists from 9 of the 11 Head Start programs. In addition, focus groups with parents of children who were Head Start-eligible but not enrolled were completed in three communities. Based on what was learned from the fall data collection, individual interviews were completed in the spring of 2000 with a total of nine parents of eligible, non-enrolled children in two communities. These parent focus groups and interviews, while not a representative sample, provide an indication of questions and issues of interest.

The selection of individual Head Start programs was based on overall program size and representation of the original FACES sampling strata: region, urbanicity, and minority membership. At each of nine locations, two focus groups with staff were completed. The first involved administrative staff who were knowledgeable about their program's recruitment, enrollment and retention policies, and the second included field staff involved in recruitment and enrollment activities.¹⁰

The focus groups with staff covered program recruitment practices (timing and nature of community outreach approaches, description of recruitment staff, overlap of service areas, safety policies, cultural considerations, and referral agency contacts), program enrollment activities (timing of family contact, prioritization of risk factors, use of waiting lists, and enrollment notification), and retention policies and practices. The record reviews provided data on timing of initial contacts, demographics, and risk factors identified for children in the targeted groups. Finally, the parent focus groups provided information on non-enrolled parents' knowledge of the Head Start program, the reasons for not enrolling their children, and their general views on preschool programs in the area, including Head Start.

In two of the communities where Head Start parent focus groups were scheduled, a total of nine individual interviews was completed in the spring of 2000 with parents of Head Start-eligible children who were not enrolled in the program and who had never been contacted by Head Start in anyway. The purpose of these interviews was to test the feasibility of procedures for identifying and contacting such families independent of the Head Start program and to assess a preliminary version of a parent interview protocol. This interview was designed to gather information about the characteristics of eligible, non-enrolled families, their personal and environmental risk factors, their current use of child care, and their knowledge and perception of Head Start as well as reasons why they chose not to enroll their children in the program.

Discussion of Findings

Presented below is a summary discussion of key findings across the multiple data sources. In the Final Report, a comprehensive presentation of the study findings are found in Chapters 2 and 3, followed by a more detailed discussion in Chapter 4.

Head Start Recruitment Activities. The recruitment strategies identified by programs were generally uniform across the focus group sites. Head Start staff reported that recruitment was an on-going, year-round process, with the most intense recruitment periods being spring and summer, a notion supported by the enrollment dates found in the record reviews. Although families applied throughout the calendar year, most did so during the few months prior to the beginning of the Head Start year. Many staff noted the use of formal recruitment activities, but recruitment was reported to occur anytime an appropriate opportunity arose. Under this philosophy, all staff persons were responsible for recruitment, even though the great majority of the recruitment efforts were actually handled by the field staff.

Head Start staff, particularly the field staff, reported that while they tried to target the "neediest of the needy," these recruitment efforts were not always successful. Sometimes they recruited eligible, less needy families to ensure that the program met its targeted enrollment by specified dates. During recruitment, the field staff often met with families to assist in the completion of applications, to observe the areas of family need, and to review

appropriate documentation for the verification of income. However, field staff reported that they sometimes encountered families with serious needs whomay not qualify for Head Start under the program's income eligibility guidelines (i.e., they are not below the Federal Poverty Level). In such cases, staff reported they have accepted information from these families without full verification or they have taken an older (and acceptable) piece of documentation to assure that the families appeared income-eligible. Staff admitted that they occasionally "bend the rules" to meet enrollment targets or, more importantly, to help families whom they believed were in need of Head Start services. Although Head Start regulations allow local programs to have up to 10% of their enrollment be over-income, the tone of the staff discussion suggested they felt they were not following standard policy.

"The working poor. The ones that make too much money to get in to qualify for Head Start, but are desperately poor and need the services. They fall between the cracks. They don't qualify for everything. And that is a large, large group that desperately needs to be served, and they're not. If they meet the free lunch guideline, we should be able to put them in Head Start."

–Head Start staff

It was noted that Head Start staff encountered barriers to their recruitment activities, including misconceptions about Head Start (who is eligible, what the program offers), the presence of alternative services (public preschool, subsidized child care), and an inability on the part of the program itself (lack of physical space, transportation, specialized staff, or funding for expanded program hours) to reach or serve some families. Staff also struggled with family mobility within and out of the service area and changes in the cultural or ethnic make-up of the target population. In general, the recruitment activities across the participating programs showed that Head Start staff were trying to make inroads into the communities of families that needed them most, but they were not always able to serve these families. What Head Start staff did bring to the effort to combat these barriers was the passionate belief that the program provides a superior service for children and families, and the willingness to go to considerable lengths to bring needy families into the program.

Head Start Enrollment Activities. There was little consistency across programs in the actual process of selecting families, with the final decision for selecting families for enrollment left to an individual or to a committee, depending on the program. All programs assessed family need by using predetermined eligibility risk factors that reflected the needs or risks of the individual communities. In most cases, these risk factors carried assigned point values that were summed to generate a priority score for each family. The higher the score, the greater the risk for that family and the more likely they were to be enrolled in the program. However, even after objective priority scores were determined, most programs allowed the recruitment staff to advocate for any families they thought would benefit from the program.

"I have a hard time keeping a waiting list because of day care. Because when you need day care, you need it now. You can't be on anybody's waiting list... they can't wait two months until we actually open. They found other things."

– Head Start staff

As available classroom slots were filled, the remaining families were placed on waiting lists. Unfortunately, the use of waiting lists was somewhat frustrating for staff. Data from the PIR points to the need for programs to maintain waiting lists, based on the number of families that typically dropped out of programs during the course of a year. The FACES staff interviews offered evidence of great variation in the size of these waiting lists, both across and within programs. In the focus groups, however, Head Start staff suggested that many families who were put on the waiting list would never actually enter the program. Typically, if these families were even

contacted, many had already placed their children in alternate sources of care because they were not able to wait for an opening in Head Start.

Head Start Retention Activities. Beyond recruitment and enrollment activities, staff also encountered families who enrolled and/or started the program, but then chose to withdraw. A review of the focus group data found that programs responded to these families in similar ways, usually with formal and informal methods of contact after a child had a series of consecutive, unexplained absences. Staff reported that families left Head Start for a variety of reasons, including family moves, problematic family situations that precluded the family from getting the child to the program (domestic problems, substance abuse, mental illness, or lack of motivation, organizational skills, or coping skills), the failure of Head Start to offer certain needed services (full-day care), separation issues for parents with young children, and transportation difficulties. The FACES exit interviews and

the parent focus groups had similar reports, and also provided some evidence of dissatisfaction with the local Head Start programs. Staff indicated that they worked hard to retain families whenever possible, and that by working with these families on problem solving and creating solutions, Head Start often became more attractive and viable.

Perceptions of Head Start. One area having significant impact on recruitment, enrollment, and retention was the local perception of the Head Start program. While community agency staff generally reported cooperative relations with Head Start, there were some reports by agency staff of difficulties in communication and collaboration with Head Start. Less than one half of the agencies contacted indicated that they regularly made referrals to Head Start, while almost two thirds took referrals from Head Start.

Some parents reported concerns about the perceived quality of a Head Start education. In at least one location, parents and staff reported that being a “Head Start kid” was a negative label in their local schools. Some parents had the view that Head Start sacrificed education for socialization, while some Head Start staff felt they were viewed in the community as unqualified educators or glorified babysitters. The presence of other misconceptions about the program was supported through the parents’ responses during their individual interviews. Misconceptions were as simple as thinking that Head Start was a program that served only working families, children with behavioral problems, minorities, or disabled children. Community consciousness-raising about Head Start was discussed by some staff in their focus groups as a method that would improve the image of Head Start in the community and help bring families from the target population into the program.

Identifying Characteristics of Eligible, Unserved Families. The exercise of reviewing national datasets for information on enrolled and non-enrolled Head Start-eligible families did not yield many conclusive findings. While the depth of information on eligible families was slim, one conclusion was clear: All the relevant national data sources confirmed that there have been large numbers of Head Start-eligible families who were not enrolled in the program. This notion was supported by local staff who acknowledged that pockets of eligible, unserved families existed in their service areas, even if their program areas were considered to be ‘fully served.’

Staff also suggested that unserved families in their communities may be those who lacked the necessary knowledge or means to access the local child and social service networks, as well as families who simply chose not to use services of any sort, Head Start or otherwise, preferring to manage on their own. This latter group included families who were just more comfortable having their child stay at home or with a family friend until they started kindergarten. Some families liked the comfort and informality of home and family day care settings and chose to forego the opportunities that Head Start might bring them. Administrators from one focus group noted the challenge for Head Start will be to build better links with the informal child care network in their communities, particularly during a time when Head Start seeks to expand its services.

The differences in the configuration of such variables as income and education across the national datasets were serious enough to preclude their use in generating a consistent picture of eligible, non-Head Start families. These datasets also lacked the necessary information to offer insight into why families did not enroll in Head Start when they were eligible. For some families, the reason is simply the fact that they were unaware of the program, but for others a clear choice was made not to participate, and Head Start programs should attempt to learn why.

One means of doing this is through interviewing eligible, non-Head Start parents. This study noted three potential strategies for identifying eligible, unserved families. These were 1) using listed samples of telephone numbers targeted to include low-income families and families likely to have children under the age of five, 2) asking parents who were contacted about participation to provide referrals to other families who might be eligible for the study, and 3) contacting local service agencies. While individual names were not actually requested, most agencies offered useful suggestions for locating Head Start-eligible families in their service areas, and many offered to actively help contact these families. As for the eligible families on the listed sample who were contacted by telephone, all consented to participate and completed the interview.

“We call the family and if they say ‘well, the weather is bad and my child doesn’t have any boots’ ... it’s up to us to get some so they can continue bringing their child to school.”
--Head Start staff

We, as Head Start, can see our partnering as an undermining of our own stability...partnering with child care centers and also working in families’ homes, doesn’t that undermine what we have? ... if we decide to do that, then we will perish... we’ve said that we believe in the whole community and we want to serve, be part of the community. But, that’s the struggle ... sometimes we so firmly believe in how we have delivered services ... we should keep that pristine ... but that’s not the world we live in.”
– Head Start staff

Lessons Learned

Because understanding the reasons why some families with Head Start-eligible children decide not to enroll their children in the program is an important goal, the findings discussed above provide a foundation for future study aimed at identifying and understanding these families. They also will help target possible changes to recruitment and enrollment procedures in order to make Head Start more successful in attracting these families into the program. The lessons learned from this study that will assist in this goal include the following:

Actual Program Practices Do Not Always Fit with Prescribed Program Procedures. While cognizant of local and national program procedures, staff sometimes took it upon themselves to assist certain families in the enrollment process when they truly believed that enrollment was in the best interests of those families. Sometimes this aid took the form of advocating for the family during the enrollment decision process, and other times it meant “bending the rules,” such as documenting that a family who really needed Head Start services qualified under the income guidelines, when in fact there were circumstances that possibly made them ineligible. Rather than abuses of the system, these efforts reflect sincere efforts to help very needy families who otherwise would have not received any assistance at all.

For Many Families, “Need” Is Not Solely Defined by Economics. Head Start eligibility starts with qualifying according to the income guidelines, which are set at the Federal Poverty Level. However, staff were strong in their beliefs that ‘need’ is not solely defined by economics. Low-income families often demonstrated great need in their battles against other hardships, such as substance abuse, mental illness, domestic violence, and limited education. Therefore staff argued strongly and eloquently for Head Start to offer services to over-income families. Even though they experienced somewhat better economic conditions, these families were still ‘needy’ and required better links to Head Start and/or other community services.

Wide Variations Exist Across Programs in the Management and Use of Waiting Lists. There was a general inconsistency across the local Head Start programs regarding the use of waiting lists for enrollment. Although most programs had what they considered a formal waiting list, this list was often formal in name only. Lists typically were updated (information verified) only when new families applied and families already on the list were called to replace dropouts. When contacted, many of the families on the list had sought and found alternative sources of care or the family was simply no longer able to be contacted.

National Databases Have Restricted Usefulness for Providing Information on Families Who Are Eligible for Head Start. It was hoped that the extant national datasets would provide useful insights into possible differences between enrolled and non-enrolled Head Start-eligible families. Unfortunately, for the most part, this was not the case. Inherent differences in the construction of the datasets resulted in significant concerns about attempts to make judgements across the datasets. In addition, some of the information that would be most useful to Head Start was not available in these datasets, including details of family risk and family needs that may impact the decision to enroll in Head Start.

It Is Feasible to Identify and Engage Unserved Families. Even though the formal collection of actual parent interviews was limited, the success of this experience is encouraging. Multiple methods were assessed for their likelihood of achieving the goal of reaching eligible, non-Head Start families, and all three appeared promising. The parents in these families who were interviewed were very cooperative in the completion of what was at times a sensitive interview. This suggests that Head Start would be successful in future attempts broaden to learn more about its unserved target population.

Summary

It is anticipated that the Head Start program will continue to expand the numbers of children served. Information sources examined in the present project suggest that a significant number of eligible preschool children reside in the communities served by Head Start. This research effort also provided much useful information about the Head Start procedures in place for recruitment, enrollment, and retention of families. However, the observers and overseers of Head Start will need to encourage further investigation to learn more about the best ways of reaching out to the eligible families who remain unserved by Head Start.

¹⁰ Two rural programs in the Midwest and two urban programs in the West were combined, resulting in a total of eleven programs participating in the nine pairs of focus groups. These lasted about 90 minutes each, with approximately 9 participants per group. ([back](#))

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