

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106077](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2021–2022, Head Start served nearly 790,000 young children, primarily from low-income families. However, HHS estimates that far more children are eligible than can be served due to limited resources, heightening the importance of targeting services effectively.

House Report 117-96 includes a provision for GAO to review the nationwide distribution of Head Start resources and what could help better align funding with need.

This report examines the extent to which (1) Head Start resources align geographically with child poverty; (2) statutory provisions support aligning resources with need; and (3) OHS uses its grantmaking authority to align resources with need.

GAO analyzed Head Start enrollment data from 2022 and Head Start funding and Census child poverty data from 2006 and 2021 (most recent available comparable data), interviewed OHS officials and stakeholder organizations, such as the National Head Start Association; and reviewed relevant federal laws and agency documents.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending two matters for congressional consideration to review and revise, as appropriate, annual Head Start funding and expansion funding provisions. GAO is also making two recommendations to HHS to use its existing authority to consider Head Start resource distribution across communities in its competitive grant awards and use the data it already collects to inform those decisions. HHS agreed with the recommendations.

View [GAO-24-106077](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki at (202) 512-7215 or nowickij@gao.gov.

February 2024

HEAD START

Opportunities Exist to Better Align Resources with Child Poverty

What GAO Found

Administered by the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Office of Head Start (OHS), Head Start aims to promote school readiness for young children in poverty. However, Head Start availability varies widely across states and counties and does not closely align with child poverty. GAO found that the number of Head Start seats for every 100 young children in poverty ranged from nine in Nevada to 53 in Oregon in 2022. This high degree of variability persisted even when accounting for state and county child poverty rates. Further, the Head Start statutory formula, by which annual funding is provided to grant recipients, is not responsive to changes in child poverty. As a result, grant recipients in states with rising child poverty can generally serve a lower proportion of income-eligible children.

Head Start Seats Available for Every 100 Young Children in Poverty, Fall 2022

