



HEAD START

MSU Extension Head Start-Early Head Start Programs

COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

HARRISON COUNTY

2025



Introduction and Purpose

This community assessment fulfills the requirements of Head Start Performance Standards (45 CFR 1302.11), which requires an assessment of the needs of the communities served every five years. The objective is to provide a snapshot of our service area and to identify characteristics that may have a significant impact on agency planning and program development. The Head Start Program Performance Standards and Other Regulations (45 CFR 1302.11 (b)) specify the information that must be included in the community assessment and submitted with the grant application. To summarize, the grantee agency is required to collect and analyze information in the community assessment about:

1. The number of eligible children 0-5 and expectant mothers, including their geographic location, race, ethnicity, and languages spoken, including:
 - a. Children experiencing homelessness;
 - b. Children in foster care; and
 - c. Children with disabilities, including types and relevant services/resources provided by community agencies.
2. The education, health, nutrition, and social service needs of eligible children and their families, including prevalent social or economic factors that impact their well-being.
3. Typical work, school, and training schedules of parents with eligible children.
4. Other child development, childcare centers, and or family childcare programs that serve eligible children, including home visiting, publicly funded state and local preschools, and the approximate number of children served.
5. Resources that are available in the community to address the needs of eligible children and their families.
6. Strengths of the community.

The community assessment provides the most recent data available regarding demographics, early learning programs, disabilities, health and nutrition, and social services for children and families in the region. The assessment provides a portrait of our programs and activities and identifies community resources available. This assessment also identifies where there are gaps between available services and needs.

The Head Start Program Performance Standards and Other Regulations (45 CFR 1302.102) state that the information gathered in the community assessment (CA) must guide decisions based on the status of eligible families and the community setting(s) within the service area. Specifically, they state that the information in the community assessment will be used to:

1. Help determine the grantee's philosophy and its long-range and short-range program objectives.
2. Determine the type of component services that are most needed and the program option or options that will be implemented.

3. Determine the recruitment area that will be served by the grantee, if limitations in the amount of resources make it impossible to serve the entire service area.
4. If there are delegate agencies, determine the recruitment area that will be served by the grantee and the recruitment area that will be served by each delegate agency.
5. Determine appropriate locations for centers and the areas to be served by home-based Programs.
6. Set criteria that define the types of children and families who will be given priority for recruitment and selection.

Ultimately, the community assessment is used to make decisions for outreach, enrollment, selection, and the most appropriate delivery of Head Start services. It is a valuable resource for staff, parents, and community partners to collectively think about the impacts of population shifts and equitable distribution of services.

Methodology

This assessment was developed from data and statistics collected from several national, state, and local resources, including the most recent research from The Anne E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Center, the U.S. Census Bureau, and local program statistics. The results of this assessment will allow us to identify services where changes are needed and adapt our program to meet the needs of the area's most in-need children and families while also considering programmatic changes to address staffing challenges.

Executive Summary

In overall child well-being, Mississippi ranks 49th, just above New Mexico. The table below shows Mississippi is ranked last in Economic Well-Being, Health, and Family and Community metrics and 30th in Education (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.). A child's chances of thriving depend not only on individual, family, and community characteristics but also on the state in which she or he is born and raised. States vary in their wealth and other resources. Policy choices and investments also influence children's chances for success.

Indicator	Year	Number	Percent/Rate	Rank
Economic Well-Being: 50th				
Children in poverty	2023	154,000	23%	48
Children whose parents lack secure	2023	209,000	31%	48
Children living in households with a high housing cost burden	2023	166,000	25%	17
Teens not in school and not working	2023	15,000	8%	38
Education: 30th				
Young children (ages 3 and 4) not in school	2019-	37,000	50%	8
Fourth-graders not proficient in reading	2024	N/A	68%	14
Eighth-graders not proficient in math	2024	N/A	78%	40
High school students not graduating on time	2021-	N/A	11%	9
Health: 50th				
Babies with low birth rate	2023	4,290	12.5%	50
Children without health insurance	2023	43,000	6%	32
Child and teen deaths per 100,000	2023	384	53	50
Children and teens (10-17) who are overweight or obese	2022-2023	N/A	43%	50
Family & Community: 50th				
Children in single-parent families	2023	277,000	44%	48
Children in families where the head of the household lacks a high school diploma	2023	64,000	10%	32
Children living in high-poverty areas	2019-	138,000	20%	49
Teen births per 1,000	2023	2,596	25	50

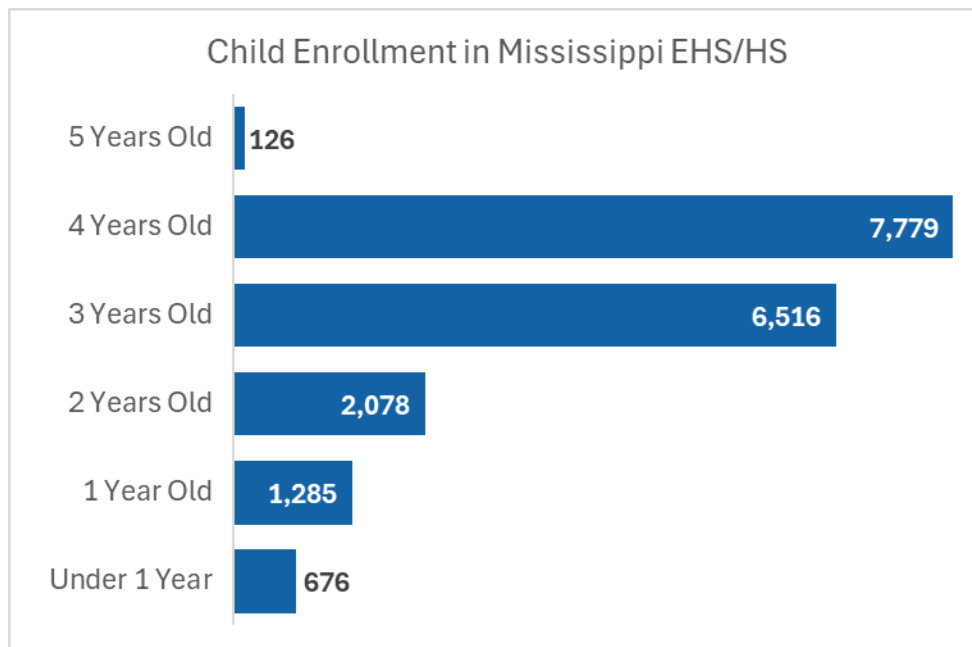
Note. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.

This report includes demographic, economic, and health data for Harrison County and, in most cases, a comparison with statewide statistics. Mississippi State University (MSU) Extension Head Start became a grantee in 2019 after reports that more than 70% of children served by Head Start were in programs that were identified as low-performing and subsequently forced to compete for their grants via the Designation Renewal System. In addition, Head Start children in the area consistently scored the lowest among all child care options in Kindergarten Entrance Assessments, with some Harrison County school districts reporting that Head Start children score lower than Head Start-eligible children who had not been served. MSU Extension is committed to providing opportunities for children and families to experience positive outcomes to ensure future school success.

Early childhood education (ECE) is vital in the first five years of a child's life. Children who receive a quality ECE are more likely than their peers to earn higher wages, live healthier lives, avoid incarceration, raise strong families, and contribute to society. Early learning is foundational in preparing children for school readiness by building essential social, emotional, and cognitive skills. (First Five Years Fund, n.d.). According to the National Head Start Association (NHSA), children attending a Head Start program benefit from a multiplicity of areas, including language, math, literacy skills, social skills, decreased problem behaviors, and regular health and dental checkups. Head Start programs also often benefit certain subgroups of children, including Hispanic and Black children, dual language learners, children in foster care, homeless children, and children living in low-income households (n.d.).

Nationally, Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS) served 791,728 children and 730,163 families in school year (SY) 2023-2024 (Administration for Children and Families Office of Head Start [ACF OHS], 2024d). In Mississippi, those numbers were 18,460 and over 17,199, respectively (ACF OHS, 2024e). Of the 18,460 children served by Mississippi HS and EHS, 77% (14,295) are 3 and 4-year-olds. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 37,161 Mississippi 3 and 4-year-olds are enrolled in school (2023n). So, Head Start potentially serves 38% of children in this age category.

Over 65,000 teachers and nearly 37,000 assistant teachers are employed by HS and EHS nationwide (ACF OHS, 2023d). In Mississippi, those numbers are over 1,700 and almost 1,000, respectively (ACF OHS, 2023e). Staff qualifications for a classroom teacher set forth by Section 648A.(2)(A)



Note. Administration of Children and Families Office of Head Start, 2024e.

of the Head Start Act require that at least 50% of Head Start teachers have a bachelor's degree or higher in early childhood education or a related field. Similarly, Section 648A.(2)(B) requires that Head Start teaching assistants have at least a child development associate credential (CDA), be enrolled in a program leading to an associate or bachelor's degree, or be enrolled in a CDA program to be complete within two years. Section 645A.(h) requires that all teachers have a minimum of a CDA or training in early childhood development (HeadStart.gov, n.d.).

National and state-level educational attainment are detailed in the chart on the right. Mississippi is very close to national levels for Head Start teachers and assistant teachers and above national levels for Early Head Start Teachers.

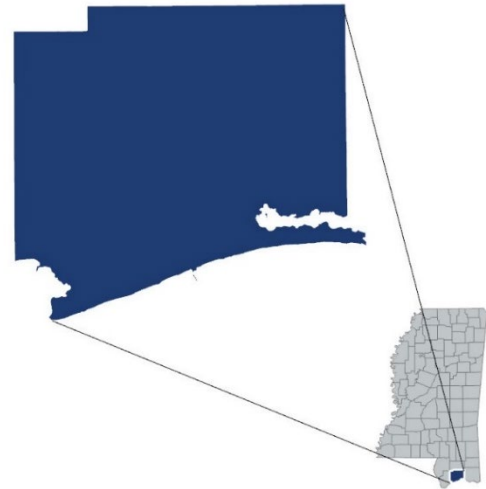
	Nation	State
Head Start		
Teachers	67%	64%
Assistant Teachers	87%	74%
Early Head Start		
Teachers	83%	86%

Note. HeadStart.gov, (n.d.)

About Our Geographic Area:

Harrison County is the largest county in Mississippi's coastal region, spanning more than 900 square miles and is home to 209,443 residents, with 23.8% of this population including children under 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023a). The county, which is centrally located on the Gulf of Mexico, encompasses five distinct cities, including Biloxi, D'Iberville, Gulfport, Long Beach, and Pass Christian. In a state where one in five residents lives below the poverty line, it is among the state's wealthiest areas.

Our organization has been a singular beacon for quality early childhood education in the state. Over the last decade, MSU Extension has been tasked with operating the Mississippi Child Care Resource and Referral Network, administering the state's QRIS, and providing a network of quality improvement supports for early childhood providers, culminating in the \$15M/year Early Years Network grant. There is no meaningful early childhood education (ECE) initiative in the state where MSU Extension has not played a leadership role. We expanded our capacity into Head Start/Early Head Start on August 1, 2019, for Harrison County, Mississippi.

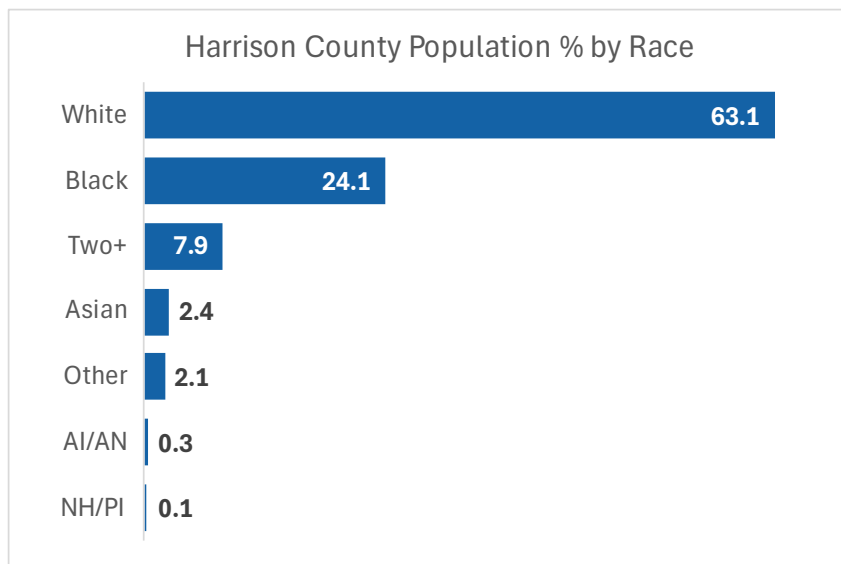


Over a quarter (26.4%) of Mississippi's children live in households experiencing poverty, compared to 16.3% nationally. This does not tell the full story, given the stark racial disparities in poverty (29.9% black compared to 11.7% white; U.S. Census Bureau, 2023l). Overall, 22.5% of Mississippi's children live in households with food insecurity (Feeding America, 2023). Few counties have a higher median and per capita income, and with a poverty rate of 16.8%, only 20 other counties fare better (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.). However, there is a stark contrast for the children of Harrison County, with 29.4% below five living in poverty, ranking 41 out of 82 counties (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023l). Bolstered by the tourism industry that creates opportunities for working families in casinos alongside the restaurants and retail environments surrounding them, residents of this community benefit from a diversified economy, demonstrated by one of the lowest unemployment rates in the state. Even though economic indicators are trending upward, the fact remains that 31% of children in Mississippi live in households where parents lack secure employment (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.). Many parents who want full-time work are forced to piece together part-time or temporary jobs that do not provide sufficient or stable income. In addition, some lack the education and skills needed to secure a good job.

Population Statistics:

	Harrison County		Mississippi	
	Actual	%	Actual	%
Population	209,443	7.1%	2,951,438	100%
Male	102,375	48.9%	1,431,521	48.5%
Female	107,068	51.1%	1,519,917	51.5%
Children under 5	12,996	6.2%	177,145	6.0%

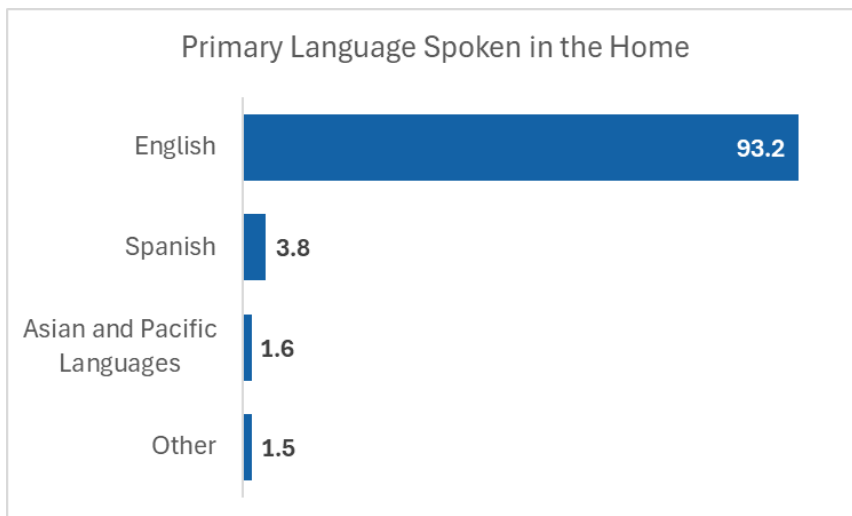
Note. U.S. Census Bureau, 2023a.



Note. U.S. Census Bureau, 2023m.

6.7% of
Harrison
County's
population is
Hispanic or
Latino

Note. U.S. Census
Bureau, 2023f.



Note. U.S. Census Bureau, 2023i.

Over 93% of
Harrison
County
residents speak
only English,
while less than
7% speak other
languages.

Note. U.S. Census
Bureau, 2023i.

Economic Indicators:

	Harrison County	Mississippi
Household Median Income*	\$57,233	\$54,915
Unemployment Rates^	2.9%	3.2%
Children Under 6 with no Parent in the Workforce*	11.8%	12.4%
People Living in Poverty*	35,642	543,697
% in Poverty*	17.4%	19.1%
Children in Poverty*	11,622	179,522
% Child Poverty*	23.8%	26.4%
Children in Single Parent Families*	35.7%	37.0%
Owner Occupied Housing*	60.6%	69.5%
Renter Occupied Housing*	39.4%	30.5%
Children in Care of Grandparents*	4,137	51,341

Note. *U.S. Census Bureau, 2023j, 2023b, 2023l, 2023h, 2023g, 2023e; ^The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.

Approximately 37% of all children in Mississippi live in a single-parent household (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023g), and low-income families are a disproportionate amount.

- The Household Pulse Survey (U.S. Census, n.d.) estimates that 33.5% of Mississippi households are not current on rent or mortgage, and eviction or foreclosure in the next two months is either very likely or somewhat likely. In 2023, 49% of low-income households with children spend 30% or more of their monthly income on rent, mortgage payments, taxes, insurance, and/or related expenses (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.).
- The Kids Count Data Center estimates that 75,000 (11%) children live in extreme poverty. Extreme poverty is defined as those who make less than 50% of the federal poverty level (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.). For a family of 4, that would equate to \$13,870 per year. The Children's Defense Fund estimates that 72% of children in poverty are children of color (2022).
- According to the Mississippi Department of Child Protective Services (MDCPS), 4,120 children were in the foster care system as of April 2025, approximately 150 children higher than the same time a year ago (2025). Of those, a third are under the age of 5, and the number of children under 5 remains significantly higher than any other age range. Gender distribution of children in care is virtually equal. Nearly half of the children were placed with non-relatives, while a little over a third were placed in foster homes with a relative (The Annie E.

Casey Foundation, n.d.). Geographically, children in care are distributed widely, with the highest concentrations in Jackson, Harrison, Hinds, Lee, Lowndes, and Forrest Counties. As of April 2025, a total of 230 children were in foster care in Harrison County (MDCPS, 2025).

- Mississippi has one of the lowest average costs for child care in the nation, with the average annual cost of center-based infant care at \$7,104 (\$592 per month) and \$6,336 (\$528 per month) for a preschooler. Families of children with special needs have limited options and are expected to pay a higher rate (Mississippi Department of Human Services [MDHS], 2024b).
- According to the Mississippi Department of Employment Security (2025), the Consumer Price Index for the Southern Census Region increased for all items by 1.9% over the past year, including the following categories:
 - Household Energy: 3.9%,
 - Rent: 3.1%,
 - Food and Beverages: 2.5%, and
 - Housing: 3.5%
- Harrison County has a labor force participation of 60.9%, which means that the workforce aged 16 or older is currently employed or actively looking for a job. Harrison County has the 7th highest labor force participation rate in Mississippi (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023d).
- The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that in 2024, Mississippi added an average of 11,850 jobs monthly, an increase of 1.0% over the previous year. The majority of those jobs were in Health Care and Social Assistance, with 6,100 additional jobs over the past 12 months. Professional and Business Services added 4,500 jobs in the same timeframe, followed by Government with 3,000 jobs. The largest decrease in employment in all sectors was in Manufacturing, where 1,600 jobs were lost (Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning, 2025).

Child Health and Social Service Metrics:

	Harrison County		Mississippi	
Child Health Indicators	Actual	%	Actual	%
Low Birthweight Babies (2022)~	286	11.7%	4,409	12.7%
Premature Births~	342	14.0%	5,127	14.8%
Teen Pregnancy (rate per 1,000)~	157	23.9%	3,032	29.9%
Infant Mortality Rate (per 1,000)^	6.5		8.8	
Child Abuse and Neglect Reports*	2,632		35,176	

	Harrison County		Mississippi	
Child Abuse Substantiated*	636		8,539	
Children in Foster Care ⁺	230		4,120	
Mothers without a High School Diploma**	296	10.9%	5,080	12.8%
Food Insecurity ^{^^}	42,180	20.1%	571,660	19.4%
Food Insecurity (Children) ^{^^}	11,760	23.6%	155,190	23.0%
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families ²	N/A		\$4,064,616 ²	
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program ^{1,2}	\$76,728,050 ¹		\$857,858,107 ²	

*Note.~Mississippi State Department of Health, 2025; ^The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.; *Fostering Court Improvement, + Mississippi Department of Child Protection Services, 2025; **U.S. Census Bureau, 2023p; ^^Feeding America,2023; ¹Division of Medicaid & Department of Human Services, 2023; ²Mississippi Department of Human Services, 2023a.*

Other Health Factors:

- Mississippi is 7th nationally in substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect, with 13.3 substantiations per 1,000 children (Administration for Children and Families Children's Bureau, 2022), which is higher than the national rate of 8 substantiations per 1,000 children (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.). In FY 23, Harrison County had 636 substantiated maltreatment victims (10.8 per 10K; Fostering Court Improvement, 2023).
- Mississippi Department of Child Protective Services (MDCPS, 2024) reports that only 62.71% of investigations were initiated within a timely manner.
- Of the total number of victims on file with MDCPS, infants up to one year old are at the greatest risk, with 14.0% of the total cases. The next highest percentage for an age group is 6% (ages 1, 13, and 14). For children age-eligible for Head Start/Early Head Start, the total percentage of cases is 40.0% (MDCPS, 2024), making birth to 5 the most at risk of child abuse. Of the children who were confirmed by MDCPS as victims of maltreatment, the following is the breakdown of abuse:
 - 18.7% emotional abuse
 - 5.3% medical neglect
 - 74.8% neglect
 - 16.4% physical abuse
 - 14.9% sexual abuse
- Mississippi ranks 40th (19%) in the percentage of households who, at some point during the year, experienced difficulty providing enough food due to lack of money or resources, compared to the nation at 17% (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.).
- Mississippi's teen birth rate is the highest in the nation. For every 1,000 Mississippi

teenagers ages 15 to 19, 25 had a baby (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.). The nation's average was 13. Teen pregnancies are estimated to cost the state's taxpayers \$137 million (Haselhorst, 2022).

- The state has the highest rate of premature death in the United States (National Institutes of Health). In addition, Mississippi is also highest ranked in infant mortality with a large racial disparity – 6 deaths per 1,000 live births among white babies vs. 12 per 1,000 live births for black babies (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.).
- Harrison County had the highest number of suspected overdose deaths in 2023, with 76, and was ranked number 3 in the state in the reported number of drug-related arrests, with 1,377 (The Mississippi Opioid and Heroin Data Collaborative, 2023).
- 22.2% of adults in Harrison County reported having depression in 2021 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).
- In 2023, 19.2% of adults in Harrison County reported being current smokers, and 18.8% reported excessive alcohol use (Data USA, 2023).
- As of July 2023, Harrison County has had 720 deaths from COVID-19, with 66,683 total cases since its inception (USAFacts, 2023).
- Harrison County (29.65) ranks above the national average (22.04) in self-harm and interpersonal violence mortality and just below the state average (30.56) (Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, 2019).

Early Intervention, Screening, and Disability Information:

In 2023, only 3.1% of children in Mississippi between the ages of 0-35 months received Early Intervention Services, compared to 6.8% nationally (Zero to Three, 2023). In 2020-2021,

34.1% of Mississippi's infants and toddlers received a developmental screening, just less than the national average of 34.8%. However, Mississippi's Early Intervention participation rate remains lower than other southern states. For children receiving Part B Early Intervention Services, a significant trend reflects a national trend that males are the overwhelming majority (61% vs. 39% of females). As children age, the prevalence of Early Intervention increases, with the highest concentrations at 4 and 5 years old. Children are more likely to be referred to services as they grow older, with a distinct spike at age 5 when most children enter kindergarten. More than four times as many children could be supported at the age of two through Early Intervention if delays are caught early. Research shows that younger children are more responsive to intervention, with the impact of services tapering off as the child ages (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024).

	Age	Number
Part C*	Birth to 1	234
	1	614
	2	1,075
Part B^	3	1,157
	4	2,338
	5	815

Note. *Office of Special Education, 2023a;
^Office of Special Education, 2023b.

Early Head Start served two children with an IFSP (Individual Family Service Plan) during SY

2023-2024 (Administration for Children and Families Office of Head Start, 2024b). About 3.8% of Mississippi infants and toddlers (approximately 4,100 children) receive Part C Services (early intervention), compared to the national average of 6.8%. Although Part C enrollment is low, it is reasonable to expect the need in the state to be more significant than in other states due to persistent poverty and other social determinants of health (Mendez et al., 2022). According to the Census, there are 1,304 children under five in Mississippi with a diagnosed disability (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023c).

Head Start Eligible Children and Families

Less than 50% of age-eligible children are enrolled in preschool or nursery school in Harrison County (41.1%), which is below the state average of 49.9%. The number enrolled in Harrison County declined by 2.1% in the past year, while the number enrolled in the state increased by 0.3% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023n). Of the number not in school, the estimate is that 55% of the children not in care in Mississippi are below 200% of the poverty level (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.). Using Census data, we applied the child poverty rate in Harrison County to the age-eligible population of children to estimate there are 1,945 income-eligible EHS infants and toddlers and 1,318 income-eligible preschool-aged Head Start children in our service area. Using birth data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023o) and the poverty rate (17.4%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2023l), we estimate that there are at least 474 income-eligible pregnant women who live in Harrison County.

Eligibility by zip code/age:

	< 1 yr	1 yr	2 yrs	3 yrs	4 yrs
39501 (Gulfport)	71	73	74	73	75
39503 (Gulfport)	174	178	181	178	184
39507 (Gulfport)	56	57	58	57	59
39530 (Biloxi)	26	27	27	27	28
39531 (Biloxi)	62	64	65	64	66
39532 (Biloxi)	110	113	115	112	116
39540 (D'Iberville)	43	44	45	44	45
39571 (Cuevas)	48	49	50	49	50
39574 (Airey)	45	46	47	46	47
Total (By Age)	634	649	661	647	671
Total (By Program)	EHS	1,945		HS	1,318

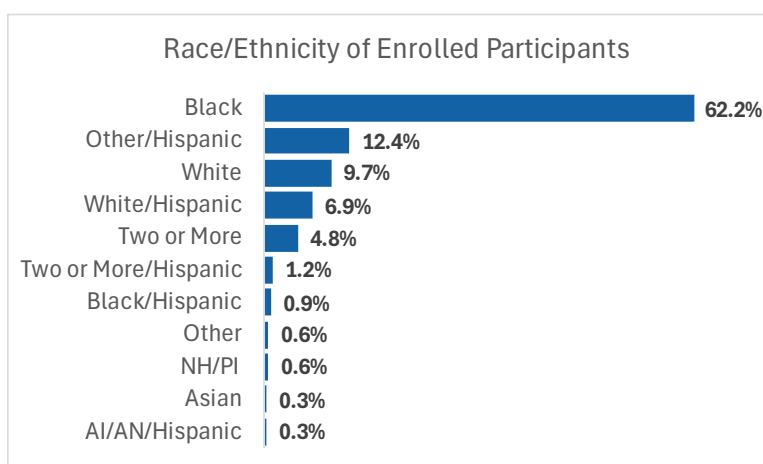
Head Start/Early Head Start Services Snapshot 2023-2024

MSU-Extension has oversight of three Head Start Centers: East Biloxi Head Start, Gilbert Mason Head Start, and Gaston Point Head Start. In addition, we have a partnership with one of the local school districts, Gulfport School District, where we have four pre-K classrooms—one classroom each that is housed at four different elementary schools. East Biloxi Head Start is currently housed at Nichols Elementary in Biloxi, MS, with the region serving families in the Biloxi Public School District. Gilbert Mason is in D'Iberville within the Harrison County School District. Gaston Point Head Start is in Gulfport and, along with the partnership program, serves families in the Gulfport School District. All of the following data regarding Early Head Start and Head Start is from Program Information Reports (PIR) for the 2023-2024 school year for grantee Mississippi State University (Administration for Children and Families Office of Head Start [ACF OHS], 2024a, 2024b, 2024c).

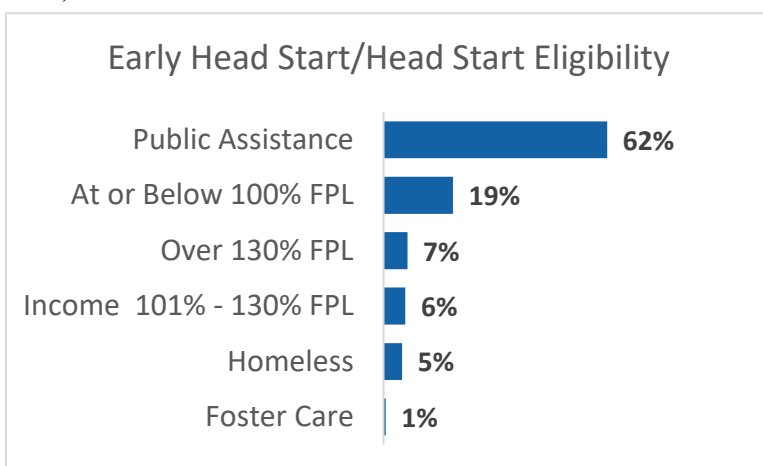
Over the course of the 2023-2024 school year, our program served a total of 288 children in Head Start as well as 39 children in Early Head Start. This represents an increase of 30.9% and 25.8%, respectively. We are seeing increasing numbers of Hispanic/Latinx families. Of the total enrolled participants (331), including pregnant mothers, 259 were non-Hispanic, and 72 were Hispanic. Sixty-six (66) of our children are Dual Language Learners, with the majority being proficient in Spanish. The language breakdown of participants is as follows: 269 spoke English, 61 spoke Spanish, and 1 spoke an East Asian Language.

There were 64 children served by our program who were income-eligible. The number of families the program serves over income >130% is 22, and 20 children are over income of 101%-130%. Two hundred and six (206) children benefit from public assistance.

There were 2 foster children and 17 homeless children (16 in Head Start and 1 in Early Head Start) who have been served by our program this past school year. Six of the homeless families acquired housing during the program year.



Note. Administration for Children and Families Office of Head Start, 2024b.



Note. Administration for Children and Families Office of Head Start, 2024b.

Thirty-two (32) children had an active IEP:

- 13 who are diagnosed with a speech or language disturbance,
- 10 who have a non-categorical/developmental delay,
- 7 who have autism,
- 1 who has an intellectual disability,
- 1 who has a hearing impairment, including deafness.

Currently, all children with IEPs are serviced through our active partnership with our Local Education Agency (LEA). In Early Head Start, two children were determined eligible to receive early intervention services under IDEA, which resulted in the creation of an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP).

The following chart shows the breakdown of how many children and families were served by each center, as well as the number and percentage of children who had physical and dental exams.

Location	Children Served	Families Served	Physical Exams	%	Dental Exams	%
East Biloxi Elementary	39	37	29	74%	31	79%
Gaston Point	57	49	27	47%	36	63%
Dr. Gilbert Mason	106	100	90	85%	89	84%
Gulfport Partnership	87	85	57	66%	63	72%
Total Head Start	289	271	203	70%	219	76%
Linda Lyons (EHS)	39	29	39	100%	32	82%

Note. Shine Insight Data Management System, 2025.

Child Care Availability and Workforce

For Harrison County, the available slots for children ages five and under vs. number of children is only at 52% (Mississippi State University Social Science Research Center, 2024). Parents in Harrison County have limited access to affordable childcare and no simple system that organizes the accountability of caregivers. Between Head Start/Early Head Start, Child Care Payment Program (CCPP), and public pre-k, public assistance programs in the state meet some low-income parents' needs. The CCPP, which is funded through the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), serves children in households earning up to 85% of the state median income, and, of course, Head Start income eligibility relies on poverty status. In Harrison County, just over 40% of children were enrolled in preschool or nursery programs, which is under the state average of almost 50% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023n). Including Head Start, 41.1% of all three- and four-year-olds in Harrison County were enrolled in school in

2023 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023n). Unsurprisingly, some areas with the lowest enrollment overlap areas with the highest economic need.

In 2023, Mississippi had an estimated 212,047 children under the age of 5 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023k). Of these children, 88% had at least one parent in the workforce (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023b). Options for child care range from licensed center-based care; early learning collaboratives; family, friend, and neighbor care; unregistered home-based care; licensed home-based care; and Head Start programs. For families that can find available child care, the cost is oppressive, with an average of \$7,894 per year for toddlers in center-based care (Child Care Aware of America, 2024). It is estimated that this cost burden is upwards of 30.6% of the median income of single mothers and 11.2% of the median family income (U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau, 2022). Further complicating matters is the high percentage of families with insecure employment – 31% of Mississippi's children have parents who lack secure employment, compared to 25% of children nationally (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.). According to the Bipartisan Policy Center in 2021, 32% of working parents with young children lacked access nationally, and the gap was even wider in rural areas (35%). Families with lower incomes spend a higher percentage of their household income on child care, and black families pay a higher percentage (8.9%) compared to white families (6.6%; McCown et al., 2023). In May 2023, the Mississippi Department of Human Services removed the requirement that single parents seeking CCDF vouchers first seek child support from the child's other parent. This policy change is anticipated to greatly expand access to affordable care in a time where extreme inflation felt by families in 2023 has likely had a negative impact on the affordability of child care.

In correlation with the insufficient number of child care slots and the rising costs of the slots available, we are also seeing a serious decline in the child care workforce. According to the Mississippi Department of Employment Security (n.d.), Mississippi had 8,460 child care workers in May 2022. By 2032, Mississippi is estimated to need 530 additional workers in this sector. Problematically, the child care workforce is not well-paid in Mississippi. Workers are paid an average hourly rate of \$10.72, amounting to \$22,298 per year (McCown et al., 2023). These rates are often less than those of a retail or fast food job, an occupation that is much easier to attain and requires no education (Mississippi Child Care Teachers' Wages Survey, 2023). However, the rate of pay is substantially lower than that of Kindergarten teachers and has remained largely stagnant over the past 5 years. Additionally, the average compensation for a child care teacher in Mississippi is less than half the annual income of a school-based preschool teacher, despite the striking similarities in their work and qualifications (Mississippi Child Care Teachers' Wages Survey, 2023). The wage disparity contributes significantly to high turnover rates within the child care field, causing disruptions in the upstream workforce that, in turn, reverberate downstream, affecting both parents and businesses. Over one-third (36%) of respondents stated they had looked for a new job within the last three months. Of the respondents actively searching for a new job, 78% searched for non-child-care-related jobs, and 22% searched within the child care field. A cumulative 57% of respondents answered that they would consider leaving their

current job for a non-child-care-related job for an additional \$5.00/hr (McCown et al., 2023).

In addition, child care educators are less likely to have health insurance, have higher student debt than the national average, and experience high levels of food insecurity (McCown et al., 2023).

Teachers, including those working for Head Start and public schools, were asked which benefits were offered at their child care facility. Respondents selected:

- Paid time off – 40%
- Health Insurance – 28%
- Paid sick leave – 26%
- Professional growth opportunities – 25%
- No benefits – 12%.

The survey also revealed that nearly 11% of child care providers had a second job, 21% of providers worked more than 40 hours per week at their child care center, and 36% of providers received public assistance (McCown et al., 2023). In order to recruit and retain quality early care and education providers, the state needs to examine ways to address salary differentials.

Head Start Staff

Our program is facing the same challenges as other Head Start programs throughout the nation in finding and retaining qualified staff to work in classrooms. Early childhood, with traditionally low pay, is a field that is struggling to attract candidates to the field and even when we hire staff, the burnout rate is incredibly high. Our profession is seeing record numbers of staff across the nation voluntarily leaving their jobs; we are no different. In the past year, we were unable to open several classrooms due to the inability to recruit, hire, and retain staff to safely operate classrooms. As such, we were at approximately sixty percent (60%) of our funded enrollment (ACF OHS, 2024b). In addition to the difficulty in finding qualified staff, we have challenges in keeping staff as well. In the 2023-2024 year, we had six Early Head Start staff leave, all of whom were teachers, and 21 Head Start staff out of 46 total staff (46%). Out of those 21 staff, 15 (71%) were education staff. Of the 27 staff who left, 20 were replaced during the school year, leading to a negative impact on continuity of care for our children served in those classrooms (ACF OHS, 2024a, 2024c). In exit surveys of staff leaving the organization, we are finding a myriad of reasons for the vacancies. Almost half of those staff left for work in similar fields, such as local school systems at a higher rate of pay. Because this is a nationwide crisis, competitors have sprung up in unexpected places, such as Target or Starbucks who are not only offering higher starting salaries but are also offering new employees signing and retention bonuses.

In 2023-2024, 45% of Head Start classroom teachers held a bachelor's degree or higher in their field, and 55% had an associate degree in Early Childhood or a related field (ACF OHS, 2024c). In Early Head Start, 33% of the staff have an associate degree, 33% of the staff have a Child Development Associate in infant/toddler development, and 33% of the staff do not have a credential but are enrolled in classes to obtain a degree (ACF OHS, 2024a). With the stringent

staffing standards required by Head Start, entry-level staff are difficult to find and can be even harder to keep. Working in early care and education is difficult, and wages are notoriously low. During the pandemic, the Head Start Bureau gave special allocations to allow for staffing increases, but they were temporary measures that expired in the 2023 school year. To compensate for the challenges in finding and retaining staff, many programs are “right-sizing” by decreasing the number of classrooms/centers and staff and using the savings to make significant market adjustments to existing staff. As an organization, we will explore all possibilities to find new ways to recruit, train, and retain highly qualified staff.

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