

Head Start

Headline

Children living in neighborhoods with high concentrations of child poverty are much more likely than children living in more affluent neighborhoods to be participating in a Head Start program. (See [Figure 3](#)) In 2001, 28 percent of children ages three to four who lived in neighborhoods where at least 20 percent of those under age 18 lived in poverty attended Head Start programs, compared with 3 percent of children ages three to four who lived in neighborhoods where less than five percent of the child population lived in poverty.

Importance

Head Start is a federally funded preschool program targeting children in low-income families to help prepare them for school. In addition to educational services, Head Start also provides health and social services, encourages parental involvement, and has programs for the parents of participating children. A recent rigorous national evaluation of the impact of Head Start on three- and four-year-olds, the Head Start Impact Study, found gains for Head Start children in pre-reading, pre-writing, vocabulary and literacy skills.¹ Children assigned to participate in Head Start also had fewer behavior problems, better overall physical health, less hyperactivity, and more access to dental care. More positive effects were found for children who entered the program as three-year olds than as four-year olds.² Another study found that four-year olds participating in Head Start did better in receptive language and phonemic awareness than four-year olds of similar backgrounds who were wait-listed for the Head Start program.³ Other studies find that children who attended Head Start are more likely to stay in school, and have lower rates of grade retention in early elementary school.⁴ Head Start participants were also more likely to have been fully immunized⁵ and to have better access to health care.⁶

Head Start programs may also have benefits for the parents of the children attending. In comparison to a group of families with similar backgrounds, parents of children attending such programs are more likely to report good health and safety practices than are parents of children not attending.⁷ First-year findings from the National Head Start Impact study also found that parents of children attending Head Start were more likely to read to their children frequently, less likely to use physical punishment, and more likely to engage in educational activities with their children. However, in this study, parents were not significantly more likely to use better safety practices.⁸

The rigorous Head Start Impact Study will be reporting findings for the children over time. Studies to date of the long-term effects of Head Start have less rigorous research designs. Some of these studies find that initial increases in IQ and academic performance often fade out over time.⁹ However, valid comparisons may be difficult because the children who attend Head Start are often the most disadvantaged, and their subsequent school experiences may differ. For example, one study found that children who attended

Head Start were in the worst middle schools in eighth grade, which might explain why some of the positive gains fade over time.¹⁰

Early Head Start (EHS) is another federally funded program for children in low-income families, serving infants, toddlers, and pregnant women by offering child development and parenting education services. In 2004, Early Head Start served almost 62,000 children under the age of three.¹¹ A large-scale, random assignment evaluation of 17 EHS programs found that EHS had significant impacts on cognitive and language development between age two and age three (though Head Start children still scored below the national norms). Early Head Start was also found to have significant impacts on several parenting outcomes when the children were age three, such as less negative parenting behaviors, fewer punitive discipline strategies, less detachment, and more support for language and learning.¹²

According to the National Institute of Early Education Research, less than 60 percent of eligible children were served by Head Start programs.¹³ Children are eligible for Head Start if their families' incomes are below the poverty line or if they are eligible for public assistance. Children in foster care, regardless of income, are also eligible. Additionally, at least ten percent of space in Head Start programs are to be reserved for children with diagnosed disabilities. However, despite higher rates of eligibility, certain groups, such as children of immigrants, may be especially unlikely to enroll.¹⁴

Trends

Between 1991 and 2001, the percentage of all children ages three to four participating in a Head Start program remained fairly constant, ranging between 9 percent and 11 percent, and was at 9 percent in 2001. ([See Table 1](#))

Differences by Race/Ethnicity

In 2001, non-Hispanic black children ages three to four were more than five times as likely as non-Hispanic white children and about two times as likely as Hispanic children of the same age to be participating in a Head Start program (24 percent, compared with 4 percent and 13 percent, respectively). ([See Figure 1](#)) However, it is important to note that Head Start programs target those children of low income families, which accounts for some of the difference. In 2004, 37 percent of black children and 31 percent of Hispanic children under age six lived in families with incomes below the poverty line, compared with 17 percent of white children.¹⁵

Differences by Parental Education

Children whose parents had less than a high school degree were much more likely than children whose parents had more education to be enrolled in a Head Start program. In 2001, 20 percent of children ages three to four whose parents had less than a high school degree were attending a Head Start program compared with 13 percent of those whose parents had a high school degree or the equivalent, 10 percent of those whose parents had

some college or a technical degree and only 2 percent of children whose parents had a bachelor's degree or more. ([See Figure 2](#))

Differences by Neighborhood Poverty

In 2001, children living in neighborhoods with high concentrations of child poverty were much more likely to be attending Head Start programs. In 2001, 28 percent of children ages three to four who lived in neighborhoods where at least 20 percent of those under age 18 lived in poverty attended Head Start programs, compared with 3 percent of children ages three to four who lived in neighborhoods where less than five percent of the child population lived in poverty. ([See Figure 3](#))

Differences by Welfare Benefits

Children living in households that received food stamps in the past 12 months were more likely than children whose households had not received food stamps to attend Head Start (26 percent versus 6 percent, respectively, among three- and four-year olds in 2001). Similar patterns can be found by TANF and WIC receipt. ([See Figure 4](#))

Differences by Region

Children living in the South were more likely than children living in the Northeast or the West to be enrolled in Head Start programs (12 percent versus 8 percent and 7 percent, respectively, in 2001). Nine percent of three- and four-year olds living in the Midwest were enrolled in Head Start in 2001. ([See Table 1](#))

State and Local Estimates

While percentages are not available, the number of children enrolled in Head Start programs by state are available at:

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/hsb/research/2005.htm>

International Estimates

None available

National Goals

In April 2002, as part of the Bush administration's preschool education plan, the government implemented the *Grow Smart, Right Start* initiative, including three goals:

- Strengthening Head Start;
- Partnering with States to improve early childhood education; and
- Providing information on child development and early learning to teachers, caregivers, parents, and grandparents and closing the gap between research and practice in early childhood education.

More information is available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/hsb/budget/index.htm>

Definition

Percentage of children in Head Start include children whose parents reported that one of child's care arrangements was an (Early) Head Start Program.

Children who were three or four years old as of December preceding the survey are included in these estimates.

Parental education is the education level of the parent with the highest education.

Data Source

Child Trends' original analyses of data from the National Household Education Survey

Raw Data Source

National Household Education Survey

<http://nces.ed.gov/nhes/>

Next Update

Unknown

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (May 2005). *Head Start Impact Study: First Year Findings*. Washington, DC. Available at:

http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/hs/impact_study/reports/first_yr_execsum/first_yr_execsum.pdf

² Ibid.

³ Martha Abbott-Shim, Richard Lambert, & Frances McCarty. "A Comparison of School Readiness Outcomes for Children Randomly Assigned to a Head Start Program and the Program's Wait List," *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 8(2), 191–214.

⁴ Bulgakov, Dina. (May 2003). *Head Start Attendance as a Predictor of Elementary School Outcomes*. Dissertation. University of Toledo.

⁵ Barnett, W. Steven, & Hustedt, Jason T. "Head Start's Lasting Benefits," *Infants and Young Children*, Jan-Mar, 2005, 18(1): 16-24.

⁶ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (May 2005). *Head Start Impact Study: First Year Findings*. Washington, DC. Available at:

http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/hs/impact_study/reports/first_yr_execsum/first_yr_execsum.pdf

⁷ Barnett, W. Steven, & Hustedt, Jason T. "Head Start's Lasting Benefits," *Infants and Young Children*, Jan-Mar, 2005, 18(1): 16-24.

⁸ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (May 2005). *Head Start Impact Study: First Year Findings*. Washington, DC. Available at:

http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/hs/impact_study/reports/first_yr_execsum/first_yr_execsum.pdf

⁹ Aughinbaugh, Alison. (September, 2001). Does Head Start yield long-term benefits, *Journal of Human Resources*, 36(4).

¹⁰ Lee, Valerie E. & Loeb, Susanna. (1995). Where do Head Start attendees end up? One reason why preschool effects fade out. *Educational Evaluation & Policy Analysis*, 17(1): 62-82.

¹¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Head Start Bureau. (2005). "Head Start Program Fact Sheet: 2005." Accessed September 15, 2005.

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/hsb/research/factsheets.htm>

¹² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Child Outcomes Research and Evaluation and Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Head Start Bureau. (2002). "Making a Difference in the Lives of Infants and Toddlers and Their Families: The Impacts of Early Head Start."

http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/ehs/ehs_resrch/reports/impacts_exesum/impacts_exesum_title.html

¹³ W. Steven Barnett, Jason T. Hustedt, Kenneth B. Robin, and Karen L. Schulman. (2004). *2004 State Preschool Yearbook*. The National Institute for Early Education Research. Available online at:

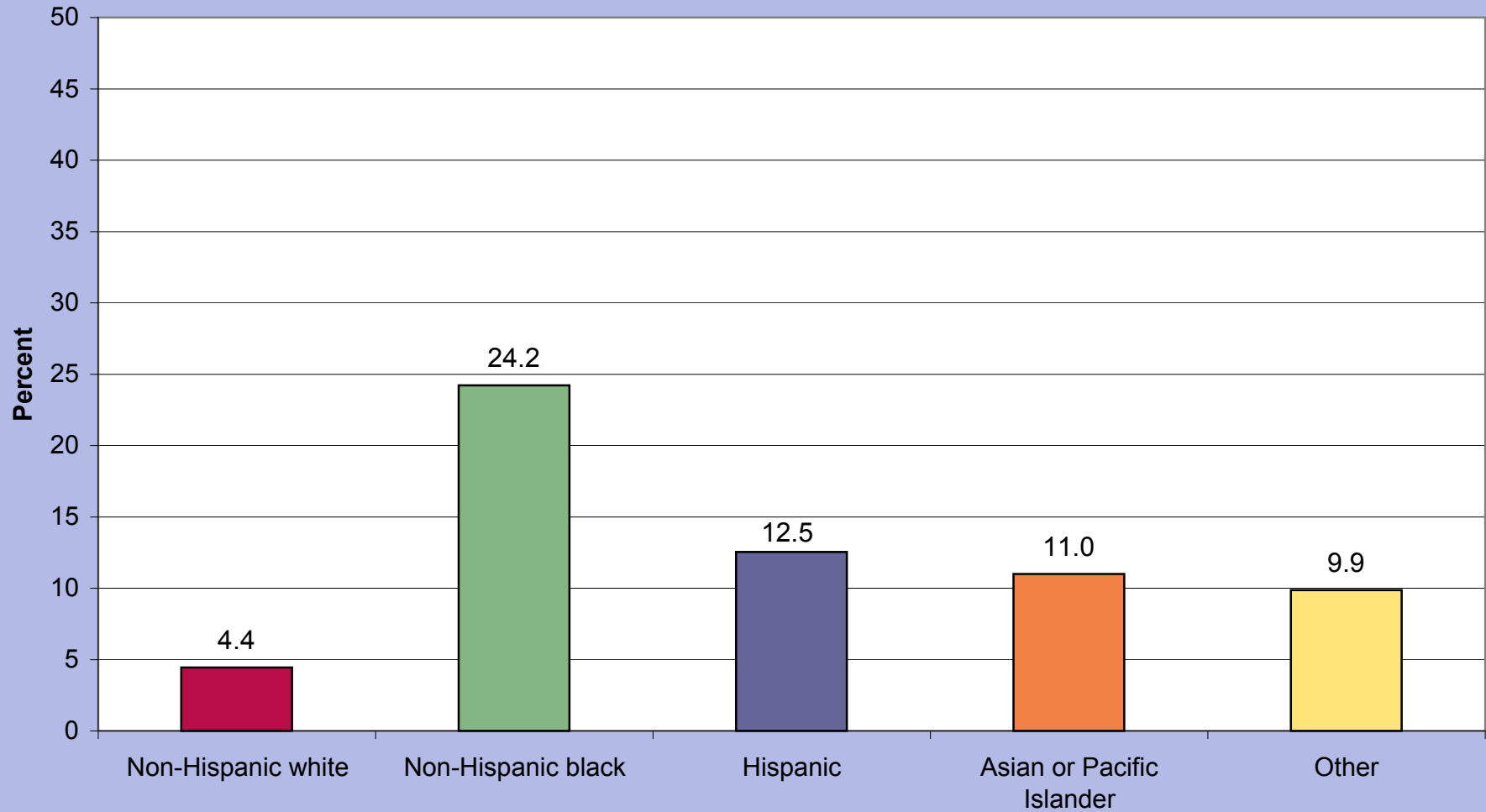
<http://nieer.org/yearbook/pdf/yearbook.pdf>

¹⁴ Takanishi, R. (2004). Leveling the playing field: Supporting immigrant children from birth to eight. *The Future of Children*, 14. Available at http://www.futureofchildren.org/usr_doc/Vol_14_No2_no_photos.pdf

¹⁵ Child Trends. *Child Trends Data Bank: Children in Poverty*. Retrieved October 11, 2005 from <http://www.childtrendsdatbank.org/indicators/4Poverty.cfm>. Original data from the March Current Population Survey, a joint project of the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau.

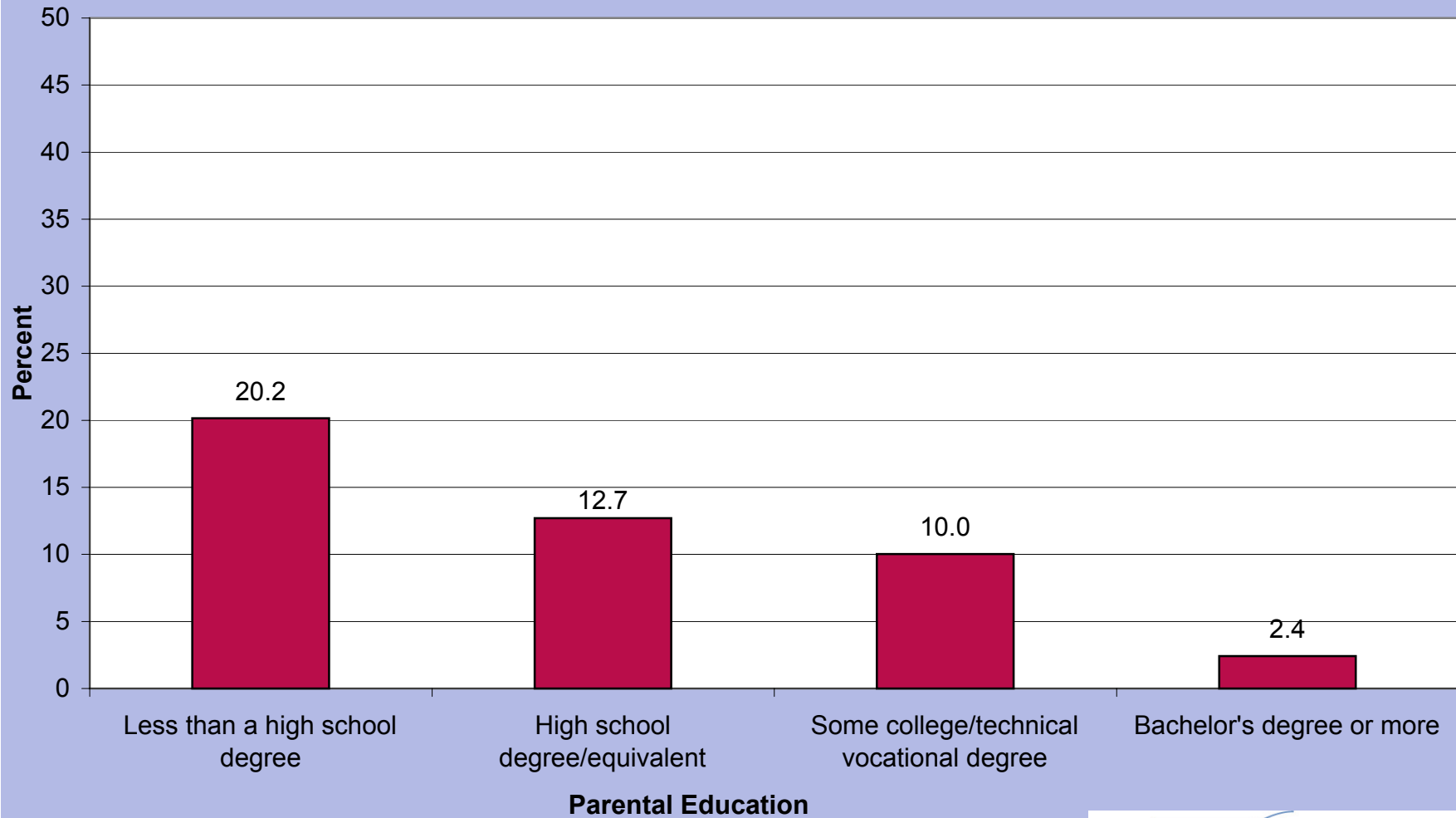
Figure 1

Percentage of Children Ages Three to Four Attending a Head Start Program, by Race and Hispanic Origin, 2001



Source: Child Trends' original analysis of data from the National Household Education Survey

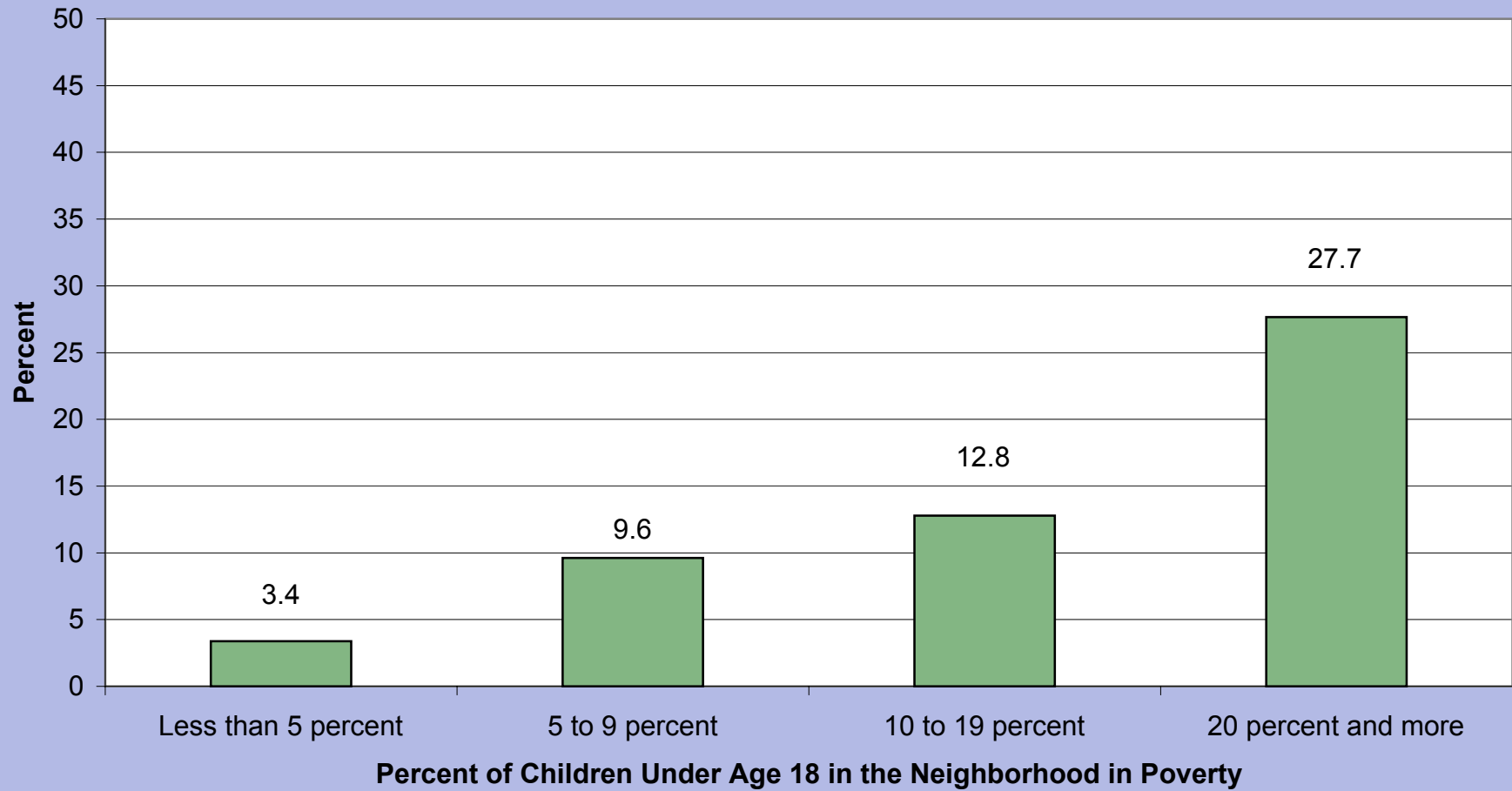
Figure 2 **Percentage of Children Ages Three to Four Attending a Head Start Program, by Parental Education, 2001**



Source: Child Trends' original analysis of data from the National Household Education Survey

Figure 3

Percentage of Children Ages Three to Four Attending a Head Start Program, by Neighborhood Poverty, 2001

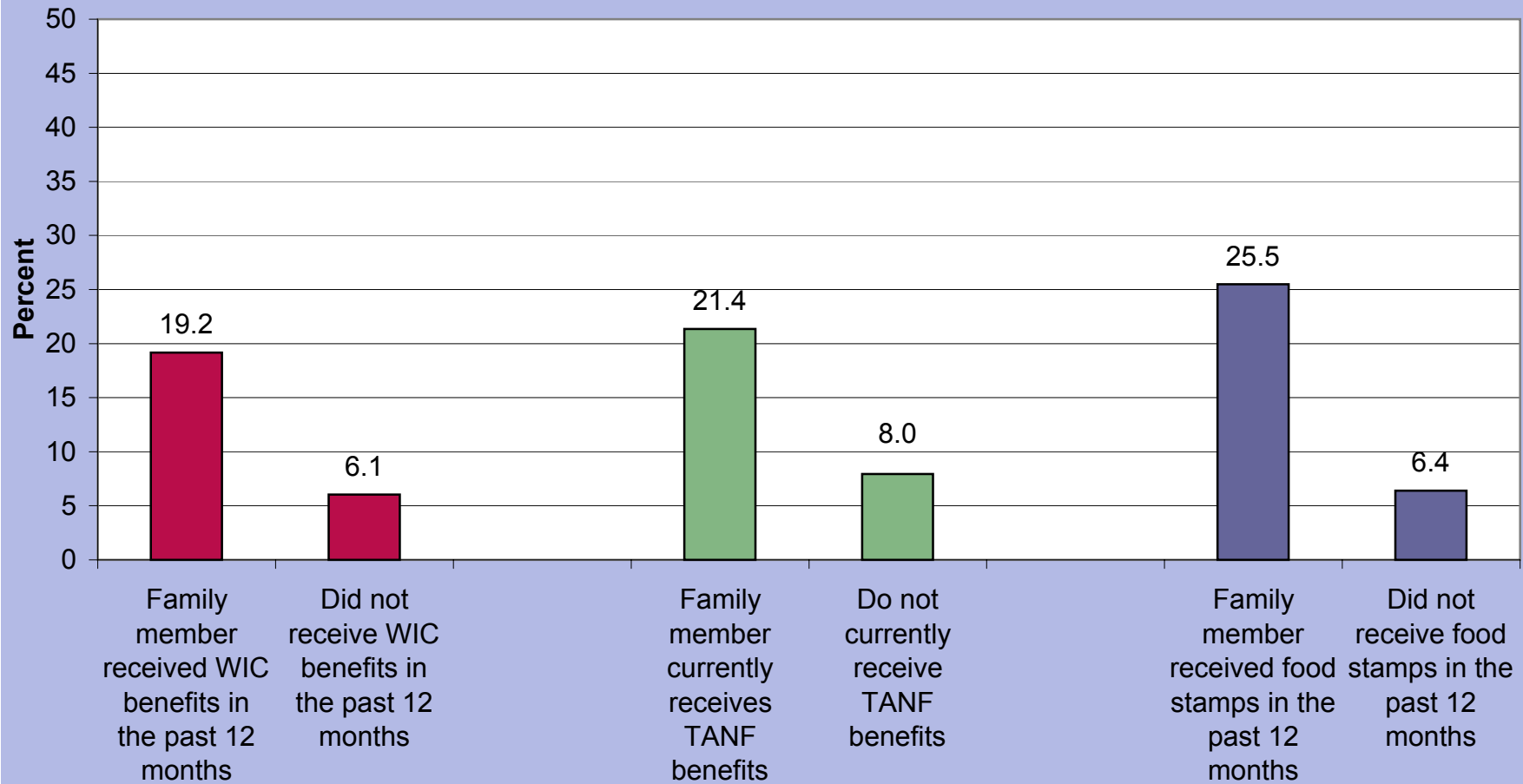


Source: Child Trends' original analysis of data from the National Household Education Survey



Figure 4

Percentage of Children Ages Three to Four Attending a Head Start Program, by Family Welfare Receipt, 2001



Source: Child Trends' original analysis of data from the National Household Education Survey

Table 1

Percentage of Children Ages Three to Four Currently Attending a Head Start Program, 1991-2001

	1991	1993	1995	1996	1999	2001
Total	9.9	10.0	9.3	10.0	11.4	9.2
Gender						
Male	9.8	10.9	9.1	10.8	11.9	8.8
Female	9.9	9.1	9.5	9.1	10.9	9.5
Race/Ethnicity						
Non-Hispanic white	5.4	5.6	5.2	4.6	5.4	4.4
Non-Hispanic black	26.9	24.3	24.9	28.2	29.1	24.2
Hispanic	12.8	15.4	12.4	12.5	18.9	12.5
Asian or Pacific Islander	10.7	17.3	12.5	6.4	11.9	11.0
Other	16.1	13.8	9.4	7.0	11.3	9.9
Parental Education						
Less than a high school degree	13.2	18.7	17.3	17.9	22.8	20.2
High school degree/equivalent	14.9	12.1	13.6	13.3	15.8	12.7
Some college/technical vocational degree	9.5	11.3	10.2	10.5	11.5	10.0
Bachelor's degree or more	3.0	3.0	1.9	3.1	5.2	2.4
Immigrant Status						
Native born with native born parents	-	-	-	-	10.9	8.6
Native born with a foreign born parent	-	-	-	-	13.0	10.8
Foreign born	-	-	-	-	13.4	15.5
Primary Language Spoken in the Home						
Both parents' main language is English	-	9.7	9.2	9.9	10.6	8.6
One parent's main language is not English	-	9.7	9.5	10.4	23.2	15.1
Neither parent's main language is English	-	14.3	10.7	11.1	16.9	12.6
WIC benefits						
Received WIC benefits in the past 12 months	-	-	18.9	19.1	23.3	19.2
Did not receive WIC benefits in the past 12 months	-	-	6.9	7.1	7.5	6.1
TANF/AFDC benefits						
Received TANF/AFDC benefits in the past 12 months	-	-	22.9	24.0	28.1	-
Did not receive TANF/AFDC benefits in the past 12 months	-	-	7.0	7.6	9.6	-
Currently receive TANF benefits	-	-	-	-	-	21.4
Do not currently receive TANF benefits	-	-	-	-	-	8.0
Food Stamp Receipt						
Received food stamps in the past 12 months	-	-	22.6	22.8	26.5	25.5
Did not receive food stamps in the past 12 months	-	-	5.3	6.3	8.6	6.4
Urbanicity						
Urban, inside urbanized area	-	9.8	10.0	-	11.6	8.5
Urban, outside urbanized area	-	9.3	8.7	-	11.8	9.1
Rural	-	11.1	7.8	-	11.0	11.0
Region						
Northeast	9.1	9.8	8.0	8.7	10.4	7.9
Midwest	8.8	11.1	11.3	13.6	12.0	9.0
South	12.5	10.3	10.5	10.2	12.3	11.9
West	7.9	8.9	6.3	6.9	10.6	6.7
Neighborhood Poverty (of those under 18)						
Less than 5 percent	-	5.0	5.1	-	5.3	3.4
5 to 9 percent	-	9.2	10.3	-	11.8	9.6
10 to 19 percent	-	14.1	11.3	-	18.0	12.8
20 percent and more	-	25.6	20.8	-	21.8	27.7

Source: Child Trends' original analyses of National Household Education Survey data.