

# HEAD START'S POSITIVE IMPACT ON HOMELESS FAMILIES

SEPTEMBER 2011

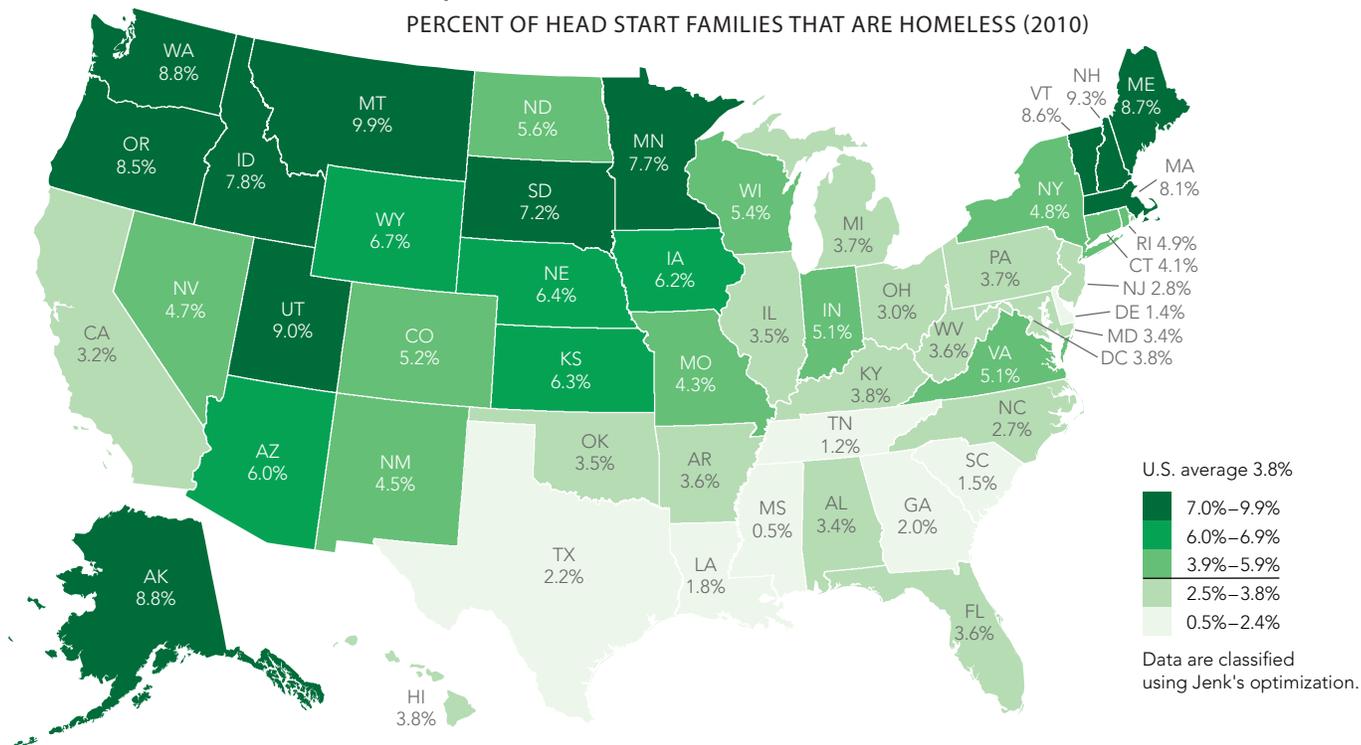
a National Survey policy brief from ICPH

Established in 1965, Head Start is a federally funded, early childhood development program administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) that serves low-income children from birth to age five and their families. Income-eligible families are connected to education, health care, nutrition, parenting, and other supportive social services. Head Start is primarily comprised of two components: Early Head Start (EHS), for children zero to three years of age and pregnant women, and Head Start (HS), for children ages three to five.<sup>1</sup> Head Start policies recognize that homeless children are more at risk for developmental delays; chronic and acute health problems; and behavioral, emotional, and mental health issues than their housed peers.<sup>2</sup> With the passage of the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007, all homeless children were made automatically eligible for EHS and HS programs and all states were called to identify

and prioritize homeless children for enrollment. Homelessness also became one of ten federally mandated service and priority areas to be overseen by state Head Start Collaboration Offices—offices that coordinate services between Head Start grantees and other state and local entities.<sup>3</sup>

In program year 2009–10 (2010), there were just under 3,000 Head Start programs (1,008 EHS, 1,804 HS, and 61 Migrant and Seasonal), serving 1,024,969 low-income families with 1,047,184 children.<sup>4</sup> Nearly four percent (3.8% or 38,979) of Head Start families were homeless (map 1).<sup>5</sup> States that served the most homeless families were located in the Northwest and New England, with Montana and New Hampshire enrolling these households at the highest rates (9.9% and 9.3%, respectively). Among most states in the Southeast, less than 2% of all families registered in Head Start were homeless.<sup>6</sup>

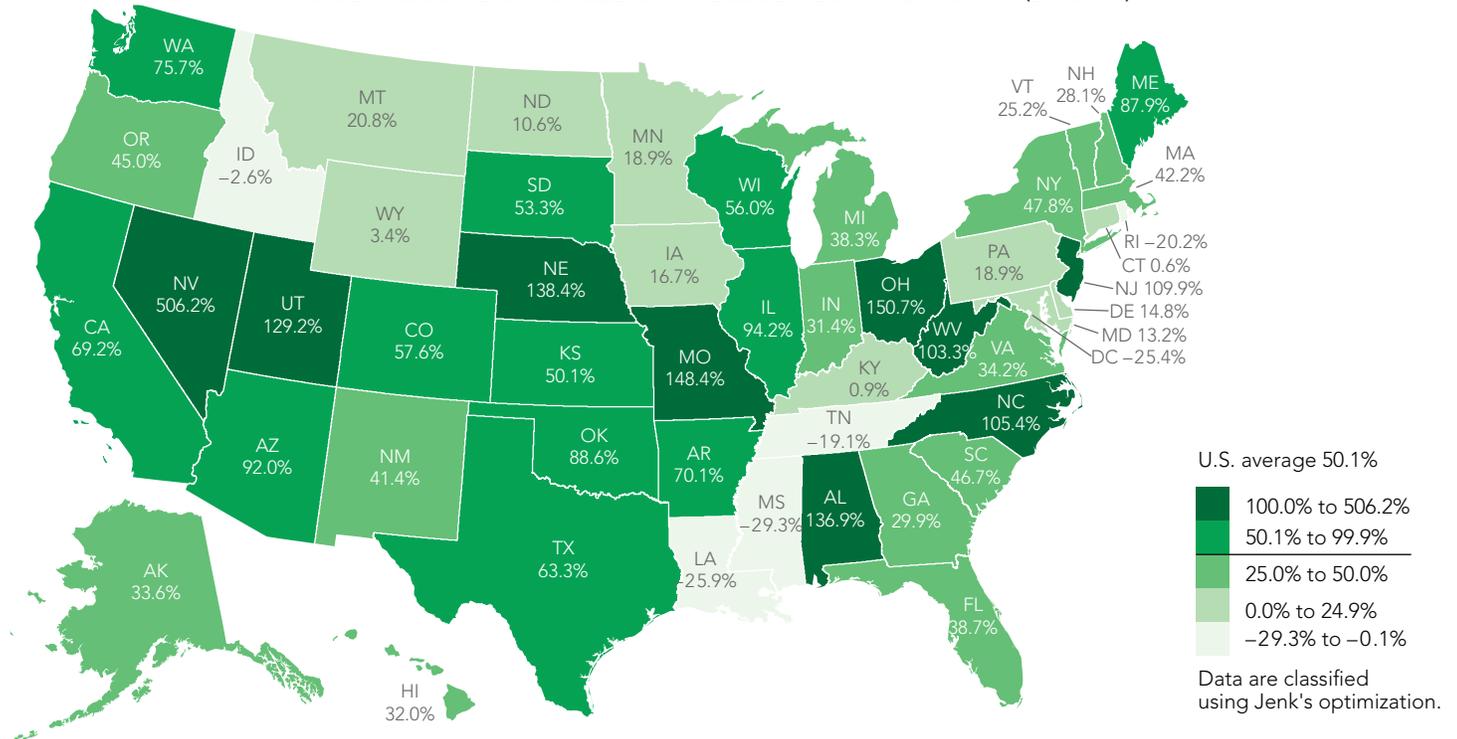
**Map 1**  
 PERCENT OF HEAD START FAMILIES THAT ARE HOMELESS (2010)



Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009–10 Head Start Program Information Report, Family Information Report Multi Year Report—State Level. Alaska is represented at half the scale of the other states.

Map 2

PERCENT CHANGE OF HOMELESS FAMILIES SERVED BY HEAD START (2008–10)



Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009–10 *Head Start Program Information Report, Family Information Report Multi Year Report—State Level*. Alaska is represented at half the scale of the other states.

In 2010, 38,979 homeless families (including 42,939 children) were registered in Head Start programs throughout the country, representing a 50.1% increase from 2008 (map 2).<sup>7</sup> Nevada had the greatest growth in enrollment, serving over six times (506.2%) the number of homeless families from 2008 (32) to 2010 (194), and was one of nine states to more than double its homeless family participation. The District of Columbia and five states—Idaho, Tennessee, Rhode Island, Louisiana, and Mississippi—experienced a decline in the number of homeless families served, with Mississippi and Louisiana witnessing the greatest decreases at 29.3% and 25.9%, respectively.<sup>8</sup>

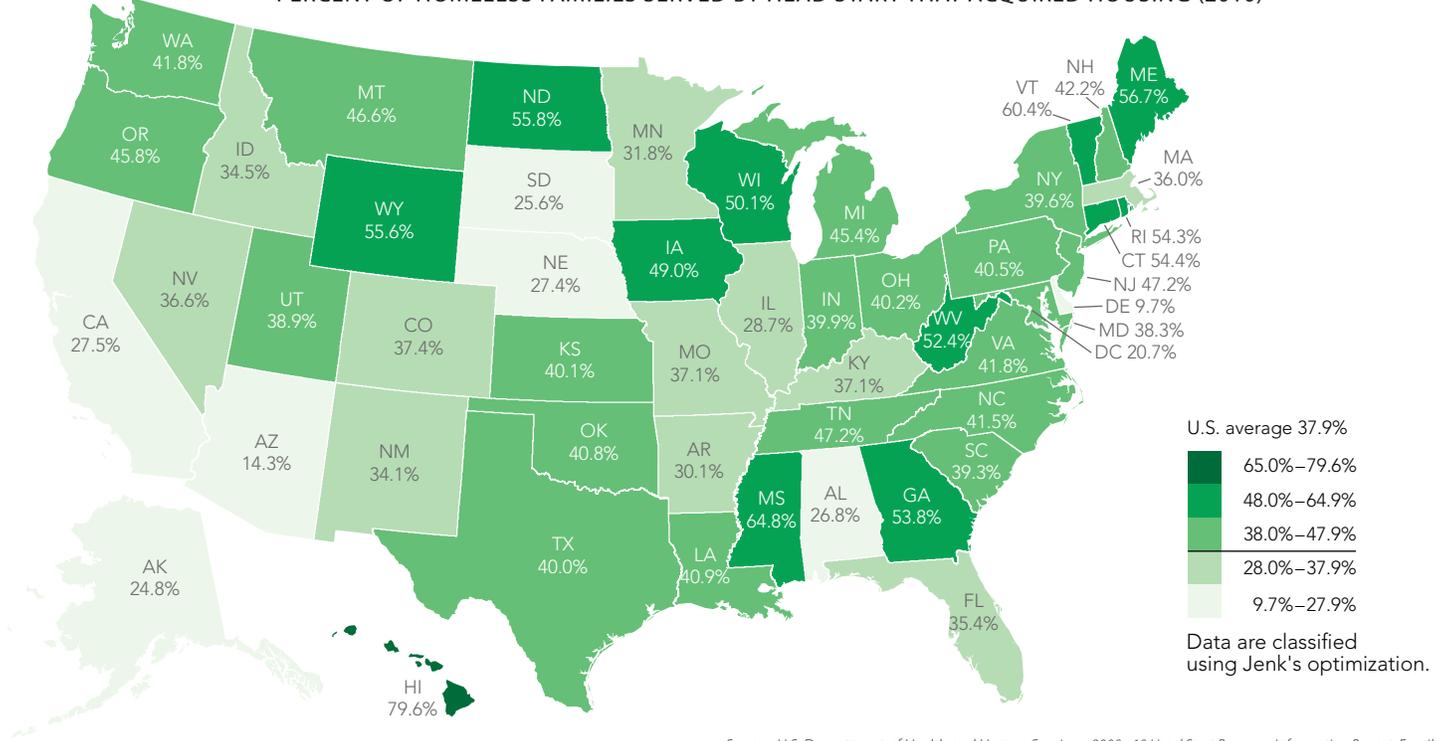
Research has shown that EHS and HS are beneficial for all children. Head Start participants have better cognitive, social, emotional, and educational outcomes compared to their low-income peers. Head Start parents have greater quality of life satisfaction, increased coping skills, and fewer health-related issues. Furthermore, children enrolled in early childhood development programs experience more favorable long-term effects on graduation rates, grade repetition, and achievement test scores.<sup>9</sup>

Families also have access to the housing assistance and emergency intervention services they need to gain shelter and stability through EHS and HS. Head Start grantees partner with community agencies to place families in stable housing that best fits their needs. In 2010, Head Start reported that 37.9% of all enrolled homeless families acquired their own residences (map 3).<sup>10</sup> Fifty percent or more of families secured housing in ten states, including Hawaii (79.6%) and Mississippi (64.8%). In comparison, 9.7% of homeless families were housed in Delaware.<sup>11</sup>

Recent financial constraints at the federal level threatened to cut Head Start funding for over 200,000 low-income children.<sup>12</sup> Roughly \$7.6 million in discretionary monies were allotted to the program for fiscal year 2011, but future allocations remain unknown. The 2011 budget will be able to serve 965,000 children and families. This level of support will also allow programs receiving expansion funding—monies under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009—to operate at their current capacity.<sup>13</sup>

**Map 3**

**PERCENT OF HOMELESS FAMILIES SERVED BY HEAD START THAT ACQUIRED HOUSING (2010)**



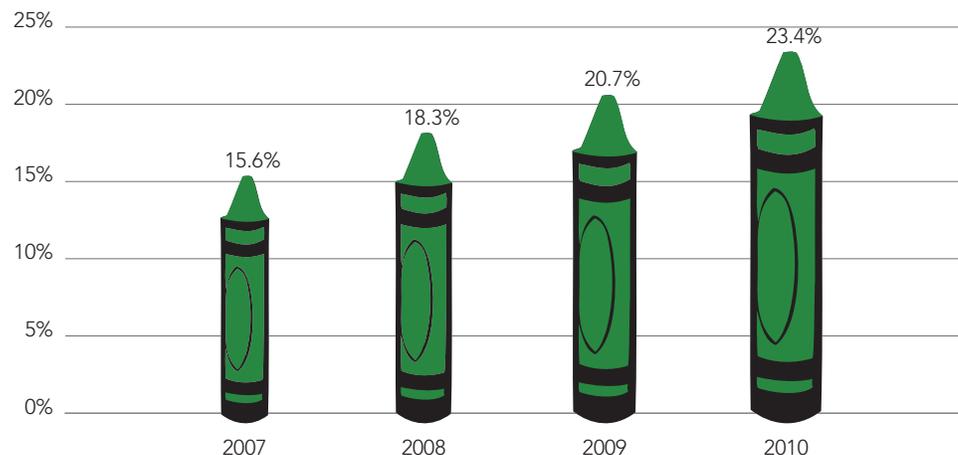
Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009–10 Head Start Program Information Report, Family Information Report Multi Year Report—State Level. Alaska is represented at half the scale of the other states.

In recent years, the proportion of homeless children under the age of six participating in Head Start has increased (from 15.6% in 2007 to 18.3% in 2008 to 20.7% in 2009), and in 2010, nearly one-quarter (23.4%) were registered in EHS or HS.<sup>14</sup> As Head Start enrollment among homeless children steadily grows, the need for EHS and HS is evident.<sup>15</sup> Designed to benefit economically challenged children and parents, the

variety of services offered through Head Start helps families overcome a multitude of barriers and enhances early development among children most in need. Moreover, every dollar spent on a child's participation in Head Start, yields a seven to ten percent economic return each year for the entire life of that child.<sup>16</sup> Head Start is a critical investment for homeless children and families.

**Figure 1**

**PERCENT OF HOMELESS CHILDREN ENROLLED IN HEAD START PROGRAMS (by year)**



Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007–10 Head Start Program Information Report, Survey Summary Report—National Level; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, The 2007–10 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Head Start," <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc>.
- <sup>2</sup> Barbara Duffield, "Serving Homeless Children Through Head Start" (conference presentation, National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 21st Annual Conference, Denver, CO, November 14, 2009); Family Housing Fund, *Homelessness and its Effects of Children*, 1999.
- <sup>3</sup> *Head Start Act*, U.S. Code 9801 (2007); U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Head Start Collaboration Offices Priority Areas*, September 2009.
- <sup>4</sup> Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs provide services to children of low-income farmworkers who relocate during harvest season to engage in agricultural labor; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *2009–10 Head Start Program Information Report, Survey Summary Report—National Level*; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *2009–10 Head Start Program Information Report, Family Information Report—National Level*.
- <sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *2009–10 Head Start Program Information Report, Family Information Report—National Level*.
- <sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *2009–10 Head Start Program Information Report, Family Information Report—State Level*.
- <sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *2009–10 Head Start Program Information Report, Family Information Report Multi Year Report—National Level*.
- <sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *2009–10 Head Start Program Information Report, Family Information Report Multi Year Report—State Level*.
- <sup>9</sup> The recent release of HHS's *Head Start Impact Study* in 2010 has sparked some to question decades of prior research demonstrating the positive benefits of Head Start. However, results of the 2010 study should be interpreted with caution as the methodological design is not representative of the entire Head Start program and allowed for experimental and control groups to closely resemble each other; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Head Start Impact Study: Final Report*, January 2010; National Forum on Early Childhood Policy and Programs, *Evaluation Science Brief: Understanding the Head Start Impact Study*, 2010; National Head Start Association, *Benefits of Head Start and Early Head Start Programs*; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Serving Homeless Families: Descriptions, Effective Practices, and Lessons Learned*, April 1999.
- <sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *2009–10 Head Start Program Information Report, Family Information Report—National Level*.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> National Head Start Association, "An Open Letter From Yasmina Vinci," <http://www.nhsa.org>.
- <sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Fiscal Year 2011 Head Start Funding Guidance*, April 2011.
- <sup>14</sup> Number of homeless children represents children under the age of six residing in emergency shelter or transitional housing. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *2007–10 Head Start Program Information Report, Survey Summary Report—National Level*; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *The 2007–10 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress*.
- <sup>15</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *2009–10 Head Start Program Information Report, Family Information Report Multi Year Report—National Level*; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *The 2009 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress*.
- <sup>16</sup> National Head Start Association, "Yasmina Vinci Comments on House Appropriators' Proposal," <http://www.nhsa.org>.

## Ralph da Costa Nunez, PhD

President, Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness

## Matthew Adams

Principal Policy Analyst

## Sabrina Harris

Policy Analyst

The Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness (ICPH) is an independent nonprofit research organization based in New York City. ICPH studies the impact of poverty on family and child wellbeing

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The *National Survey of Programs and Services for Homeless Families* is an online resource for service providers, advocates, researchers, and public policy makers working in the field of family homelessness. The Web site provides a state-by-state snapshot of the interconnections between governmental and nonprofit work to end family homelessness. [www.icprwb.org](http://www.icprwb.org).



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