

Using Data to Assess and Respond to Community Needs in Head Start Programs

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Head Start programs use federal funding to tailor services to meet the unique strengths, needs, and resources of the local communities where they operate. Head Start programs regularly collect and use data to inform their program model and ensure its responsiveness to community needs. For example, all Head Start programs must collect and use data as they conduct their comprehensive community assessments.¹

This brief describes how Head Start programs use data to assess and respond to the changing needs of the children, families, and communities they serve. It synthesizes select findings from across the [Conversion of Enrollment Slots from Head Start to Early Head Start \(HS2EHS\)](#) project, which includes the following:

- case studies with six Head Start programs that shifted funding from Head Start Preschool services for preschool-age children to Early Head Start services for pregnant women, infants, and toddlers (i.e., converted enrollment slots)
- coding and analysis of Head Start programs' applications to the Office of Head Start to convert enrollment slots
- case studies with four Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs about how they assess the needs of the farmworker families in their communities and adjust services to meet those needs

What Data Sources Are Head Start Programs Using to Assess Community Needs?

Head Start programs reported using a variety of data sources to assess the changing needs of the children, families, and communities they serve. As shown in table 1, these data sources include the following:

- "internal" data sources, which refers to data collected by a Head Start program (about enrolled families or the broader community)
- "external" data sources, which refers to data collected by an outside source

Although we document a wide range of data sources, the list is not necessarily comprehensive—there may be other data sources that are appropriate for examining certain community needs, strengths, and resources.

¹ 45 CFR Chapter XIII of the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) requires a community assessment (see "Head Start Program Performance Standards," US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, August 2024, <https://headstart.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/performance-standards-final.pdf>). It is also in accordance with the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 (see "Head Start Act," HHS, ACF, OHS, accessed May 16, 2025, <https://www.headstart.gov/policy/head-start-act>).

TABLE 1

Examples of Data Sources Used to Assess Community Needs

Type of data source	Examples of data sources used to assess community needs
<i>Internal data</i>	
About enrolled families	- program data on enrollment submitted to the Head Start program information report - program data on slots or capacity - family surveys - staff and center director surveys - conversations with families, including in parent conferences and listening sessions - conversations with staff about any trends in families' needs that they notice - policy council meetings on topics related to families' needs
About the broader community	- information about how many children and families are on a program's waitlist - referral data of children and families seeking Head Start services - program-collected data on number of providers and programs or other availability indicators within a segment of the community (e.g., a zip code or city) - conversations with community partners (e.g., health department, school systems, WIC offices, or political leaders) about potentially eligible children based on family income and age - conversations while canvassing in the community about unmet needs and potentially eligible families - conversations with representatives of school districts - conversations with local employers about topics such as employees' family size and composition, potentially eligible families, and crop seasons[†]
<i>External data</i>	
From federal government sources	- Census Bureau data on the availability or need for early care and education services - Kids Count Data Center from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which draws from data originally collected from the Census Bureau - Other federal government data, from sources such as the US Department of Agriculture,[†] National Agricultural Worker Survey from the US Department of Labor,[†] and WIC
From state or local government sources	- local school or district data about potentially eligible families - state early care and education agency data on the availability of early care and education services - state data from a non-early care and education agency - child care resource and referral agency data - data on homeless population
From other organizations	- media or news articles - local surveys of the need for child care or services - data collected by nonprofit, advocacy, research, or policy organizations - county health rankings - community health center data on the health needs of the community - academic or university research data - surveys of agricultural employers[†] - United Nations Immigration and Migration data[†]

Source: Project team's analysis of Head Start conversion applications, as well as interviews with staff and leaders who participated in the six case studies examining conversation of enrollment slots and the Migrant and Seasonal Head Start case studies.

Notes: WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.

[†] Data source that is specific to Migrant and Seasonal Head Start.

What Are Promising Practices for Collecting Data to Assess Community Strengths and Needs?

During the case studies, we heard about several promising practices for collecting data to assess community strengths and needs. Examples include the following:

- Collect data on an ongoing basis to identify potential changes in the community.
- Use multiple data sources to inform complex decisions, such as the Census Bureau, state and local agencies, and other organizations.
- Designate one person or team to assess community strengths and needs to increase efficiency, streamline data collection efforts across multiple program sites, and ensure clear accountability; at the same time, engage all key leaders in decisions about the priorities based on analysis of data.
- Develop relationships with local employers and service organizations to gain deeper insights into community needs; building trust with these partners takes time but can be critically important for accurately assessing community resources.
- Build trust with families to successfully collect sensitive information that can inform the community assessment.
- Consider innovative strategies, such as using new technology to improve data collection or setting up regular data review meetings to identify needs.
- Work with training and technical assistance providers from the Office of Head Start to address challenges related to the community assessment, particularly for support building capacity to assess needs and in identifying relevant sources of data to address critical questions.

How Do Head Start Programs Use Data to Make Decisions?

The Head Start program staff and leaders who participated in our case studies relied on a wide variety of data sources to assess community needs, strengths, and context. Some sources offered insights about the families enrolled in their programs, whereas others provided information about the broader community.

With this information, programs made a variety of decisions:

- Many programs adjusted the age mix of children served—for example, by applying to convert enrollment slots from Head Start Preschool to Early Head Start to serve infants and toddlers, as well as pregnant women.
- Some programs hired teachers or other staff with specialized expertise, such as experience working with infants and toddlers or fluency in a language that aligns with families enrolled.
- All Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs reported building new community partnerships to support families.
- Some programs opened or closed classrooms or center locations.
- A few programs expanded transportation services.

Programs that converted enrollment slots from Head Start Preschool to Early Head Start used data to inform decisions about converting enrollment slots and plans for providing expanded services. Case study participants reported using data to inform decisions about the following:

- **Program options.** The data led some programs to offer services through child care centers, whereas others planned to offer services through a family child care home or by using a home-based option. Programs

reported using parent surveys and other federal, state, and local data to determine the program option that best met community needs.

- **Location.** Programs reported using a variety of data sources to determine the best location for offering new slots when they offered services at multiple locations.
- **Facility renovations.** Many programs reported making changes to indoor and outdoor spaces to ensure they were appropriately designed for infants and toddlers.

Head Start programs use a variety of data to understand their communities' strengths and needs. The findings in this brief illustrate a sampling of the wide range of these programs' data sources, including internal data the programs collect directly and external data that speak to the broader populations in their communities. Program staff adaptively identify data sources to fill gaps in their understanding of the needs of their community. They also use data to inform what program adaptations might address these needs. The findings also highlight practices that program staff and leaders identified as supporting these activities, like having staff with a nuanced understanding of the context in which they operate.

Related Resources

["What Data Do Head Start Grant Recipients Use in Applications to Convert Enrollment Slots to Center-Based Early Head Start?"](#)

["Assessing the Need to Convert Head Start Enrollment Slots to Early Head Start"](#)

["Identifying and Responding to Community Needs in Migrant and Seasonal Head Start"](#)

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