

RESEARCH BRIEF

African American Preschoolers: Risk Factors and School Readiness

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INTRODUCTION

The preschool years are critical for developing children. During this time, factors ranging from the health and viability of communities where children live to the socioeconomic and structural characteristics of families can influence future outcomes (Karoly et al., 2005; Neuman, 2003; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Children from low-income families are especially at-risk. They often enter school with fewer academic skills than their more affluent peers and these initial gaps tend to persist (Stipek & Ryan, 1997).

The connection between poverty and unfavorable developmental outcomes is one of the most consistently documented relationships in developmental science (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Low-income children are more likely than middle and high-income children to be in fair to poor health, to die during childhood, to experience developmental delays, to repeat a grade in school, to be expelled or suspended, to drop out of school, to experience emotional and behavioral problems, to have out-of-wedlock births, and to experience hunger (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997).

"The period from birth to age 5 is one of opportunity and vulnerability for healthy physical, emotional, social and cognitive development" (Karoly, Kilburn, & Cannon, 2005, p. xv).

In the U.S., young children are more likely to be living in poverty than any other age group. At the same time, the influence of poverty on later achievement is greater in the early years than at any other time in life (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The interaction of these two factors can make this age group particularly vulnerable.

Other risk factors also exist for young children. Even though resilient children have been known to thrive in adverse situations, low maternal educational attainment, living in a low-income household or being welfare dependent, or living in a single-parent household often contribute to developmental problems, and poor academic outcomes (Karoly et al., 2005; Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1989). In some cases, membership in a minority racial or ethnic group is also considered a risk factor (Denton, Germino-Hausken, & West, 2000). Not surprisingly, multiple risk factors tend to increase the likelihood of undesirable outcomes (Karoly et al., 2005).

Given the academic and social challenges experienced by this vulnerable population, the purpose of this report is to provide a brief overview of African American preschoolers and to compare selected demographic characteristics with parents' reports of school readiness.

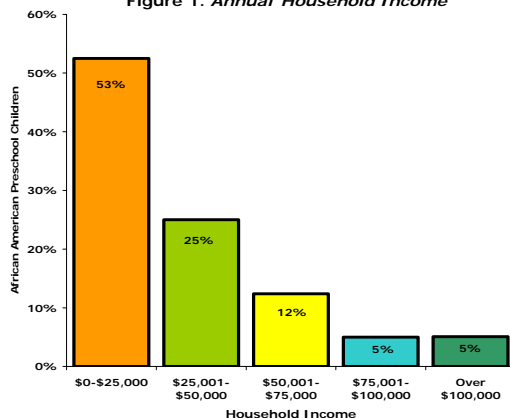
DATA

This report utilizes the Early Childhood Program Participation Survey, a sub-set of the National Household Education Survey (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). This survey is a weighted sample of 7,209 preschool children. It looks at non-parental care and program participation of U.S. children ages birth to 6 years who are not enrolled in kindergarten or any higher grade (Hagedorn, Montaquila, Carver, O'Donnell, & Chapman, 2006).

FINDINGS

There are nearly 3 million African American pre-school children ages 0 to 6 in the U.S., an estimated 14% of the population in this age group. Of these, 47% are male and 53% female. The vast majority of African American preschoolers (91%) live in urban areas. Over half (53%) live in a household where the income is \$25,000 or less annually (See Figure 1); 26% percent of these low income children reside in neighborhoods where at least

Figure 1. Annual Household Income



Children learn better when they are prepared for school. Educational policy, most notably the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, assumes that children will arrive at kindergarten or first grade prepared to learn. Research has shown that this is often not the case, especially with regard to poor children or those whose mothers have little education. Beginning kindergarteners who are from the lowest socioeconomic stratum have consistently poorer school-readiness skills than those from higher SES levels, which negatively impacts their ability to learn alongside their better prepared classmates (Neuman, 2003).

Figure 2: Risk Factors for African American Preschool Children

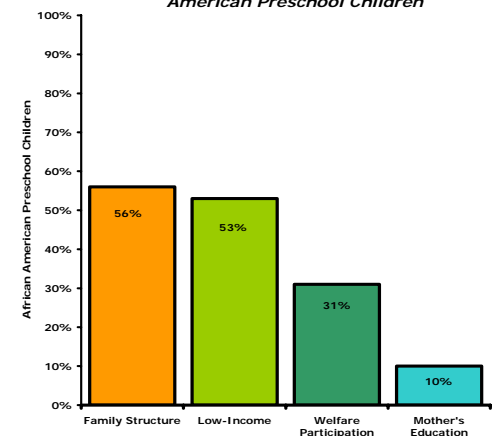
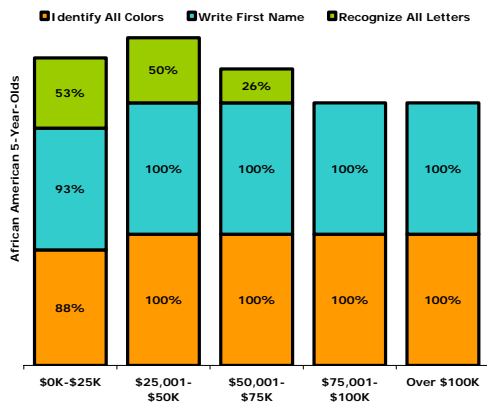


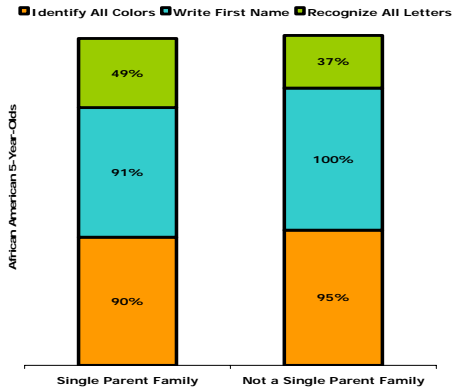
Figure 3. Household Income and School Readiness Indicators for African American 5 Year Olds



one-fifth of the children under age 18 are living below the poverty line.

Sixty-four percent of African American preschoolers have at least one risk factor for poor educational outcomes. The most prevalent risk-factor for these children is family structure, followed by living in a low-income household, living in a household that has received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or state welfare funds within the last three

Figure 4. Family Structure and School Readiness for African American 5-Year-Olds

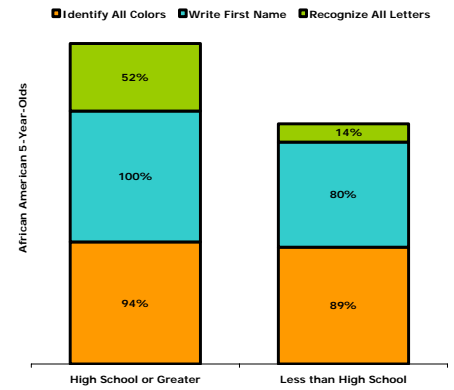


CONCLUSION

The findings show that in some instances, students who are at higher risk actually out-perform those who are more advantaged (as seen in the comparison of school readiness indicators by household income).

This preliminary look at the African American preschool population focuses on some of the differences between students who are more at risk for poor developmental and academic outcomes and those who are at less risk. Some findings from these data reflect

Figure 5. Mother's Educational Attainment and School Readiness for African American 5-Year-Olds



expected outcomes (i.e., the relationship between mother's educational attainment and school readiness indicators); others, such as household income and family structure show unforeseen outcomes with regard to school readiness. Thus, these findings provide a stimulus for additional research especially in areas examining factors which may have influenced unanticipated outcomes.

Figure 6. Welfare Status and School Readiness for African American 5-Year-Olds



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