



Aligning and Investing in Infant and Toddler Programs

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Introduction and summary

The fact that the United States is undergoing major racial and ethnic change is well documented.¹ By 2043, demographers estimate that there will be no majority race or ethnicity for the first time in U.S. history.² The leading edge of this transformation is America's youngest citizens. Already, children of color comprise a majority of children under age 2.³ This is also the first school year in which the majority of children attending public schools are children of color.⁴

Over the past few decades, immigration from Asian and Latin American countries, high birth rates among women of color, and an aging, predominantly non-Hispanic white population have led to a seismic demographic shift in the nation. Non-Hispanic white Americans made up 80 percent of the population in 1980.⁵ Today, they comprise about 65 percent of the population.⁶

This demographic upheaval is mirrored in the U.S. economy. As the nation is experiencing greater diversity, the gulf between the wealthy and the rest of society is growing wider.⁷ While rising inequality and racial and ethnic diversity have played prominently in national policy discussions, the population most affected by these changes has been largely absent from those conversations: children under the age of 3, collectively referred to as infants and toddlers. This age group is the most likely to be poor, experiencing poverty at the highest rate of any age group.⁸ And, for the first time in U.S. history, it is comprised mostly of children of color.⁹

At the same time, a significant number of these youngest Americans are being raised in households experiencing severe financial pressure, thanks in large measure to the 2008 global financial crisis, which exacerbated the long-term trend of rising economic inequality. U.S. unemployment doubled from 2007 to 2009, pushing many American families into poverty.¹⁰ Today, too many families are still living paycheck to paycheck. Moreover, one-third of women live in poverty or on the brink of it—just one illness or broken down car away from financial disaster.¹¹ Even middle-class families are experiencing the financial crunch, feeling the squeeze of the rising costs of everyday necessities, including health care and child care, while their wages have remained largely stagnant.¹²

Because families are still working to recover from the recession, today's infants and toddlers are especially at risk. In terms of human development, infants and toddlers are at a critical stage requiring significant investments of time and resources to produce positive outcomes. Unfortunately, the cost of high-quality care and education that produce such results is still out of reach for most families.

This report explores how shifting economic and social trends are affecting infants and toddlers. It also makes a case for why policymakers should respond to these trends by increasing investments in this age group. The current approach to service delivery for young children is fragmented and under-resourced. Growing poverty and diversity demands another look at how infants and toddlers and their families are served. It also demands a greater effort to align and expand the current patchwork of social support programs to serve young children in a cohesive way that best sets them up for success now and in the future. To provide this more robust and seamless approach to service delivery, considering growing diversity and poverty among our youngest children, this report offers the following policy recommendations:

- Increase funding for infants and toddlers consistent with the cost of providing quality care and education.
- Create single entry points for early childhood programs serving infants and toddlers.
- Allow states to apply for federal infant and toddler funds through a single application with the goal of aligning services.
- Invest in developing more evidence-based programs for diverse populations.
- Enhance outreach efforts to all communities.

Today's infants and toddlers provide a glimpse of what is on the horizon. In order to move toward closing the racial income and achievement gaps, policymakers must first close the school-readiness gap. This requires investing in the nation's most valuable resource: America's youngest citizens—our infants and toddlers.

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