

Unequal Access: Barriers to Early Childhood Education for Boys of Color



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"I want every young man who sees me to know that I'm not that different from them. I wasn't born into wealth. I wasn't born into fame. I made a lot of mistakes—but I kept at it." – President Barack Obama, Excerpt from "RISE: The Promise of My Brother's Keeper" (2015)

Poignant words voiced by the first African American President of the United States, Barack Obama, in a documentary about his initiative, My Brother's Keeper (MBK). Launched in February 2014, the MBK initiative shined a light on the lack of opportunities for boys of color (African American, Native American, Hispanic, and Asian boys) and their potential for success if those conditions were reversed. MBK made the case for a moral and economic imperative in the United States to collectively pursue better outcomes for all citizens. The MBK initiative includes a broad coalition of leaders in philanthropy, business, government, faith communities, and media working together to break down barriers, clear pathways for opportunity, and reverse negative trends for boys of color (Jarrett & Johnson, 2014).

Children and Boys of Color are Disproportionately at Risk

For decades, opportunities for long term success have often eluded boys and young men of color. Starting at birth, these children of all classes face negative perceptions, structural disadvantage, and biased treatment.

Even though many boys of color have led successful lives, the odds are against their success. Research on disparities and long-term outcomes for children of color exposes the bleak truth: children of color face a myriad of structural obstacles which stacks the odds against their success (Barbarin, Graham, Murry & Tolan, 2016). Boys of color are disproportionately shut out of meaningful educational opportunities. Many attend high poverty, low performing schools with inexperienced teachers and fewer opportunities to enroll in advanced courses. This opportunity gap caused by a lack of adequate education can be directly correlated to the high dropout rates in school amongst African-American and Hispanic across the country (Horowitz & Perazzo, 2012).

Table 1 below identifies some key indicators of the opportunity gap for children of any race and boys of color. While federal statistics often do not break data down by both race/ethnicity and gender, the effects are similar for boys of color.

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*Table 1: Key indicators of opportunity gaps for children and boys of color.***Poverty**

While 20% of all children under age 18 live in poverty, 38% of African American children, 36% of Native American children, and 30% of Hispanic children live in poverty, compared to 11% of non-Hispanic white children (U. S. Census

School Readiness Gap

Data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study found cognitive gaps among African American children as early as 9 months of age, and those gaps widen by 24 months (Halle, et al., 2009). By age 4, low-income children have heard 30 million fewer words than their more affluent peers (Hart, & Risley, 2011). By fourth grade, gaps in early reading proficiency for children of color are very evident with the reading proficiency of African American and Hispanic boys significantly below that of white boys by the fourth grade (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2016).

Segregated Low-Income Neighborhoods

Economically distressed neighborhoods magnify disparities for children of color. Whether severely distressed inner-city neighborhoods, chronically poor rural areas, or resource-poor Native American reservations, 9 out of 10 poor children in high poverty neighborhoods are children of color (Jordan, 2014). Conditions in distressed neighborhoods significantly impact the direction of the lives of very young children (Acevedo-Garcia, Osypuk, McArdle, & Williams, 2008). Research shows that as these children age, they are more likely to exhibit aggressive behavior, earn low grades, and drop out of school.

Implicit Bias

There is a growing body of research that suggests that boys of color grow up adversely impacted by a society that consistently sends negative, biased messages about their behavior, identity, and future. For example, African American boys as young as 10 are generally viewed as older than they actually are and less innocent than white boys. Similarly, teens are viewed as adults (Goff et al., 2014). Even the very young are subjected to bias—African American children represent 18% of preschool enrollment but 48% of preschool children receiving more than one out-of-school suspension and they are expelled at a much higher rate than their peers (National Institute of Early Education, 2015; Gilliam, 2005). Studies of immigrant children and English Language Learners also show that they are perceived to have low levels of school readiness based on assessments that are often biased and neglect to account for the social, cultural, and linguistic skills they bring into the classroom (Espinosa, & García, 2012).

Inequalities with the Justice System

In recent years, youth confinement rates have dramatically dropped. However, Hispanic and African American boys are still overrepresented in the incarceration population. They account for as much as 60% of total prisoners—far greater than their share of the total U.S. population (Executive Office of the President of the United States, 2015). African American youth are nearly five times more likely to be confined than their white peers. Hispanic and Native American youth are between two and three times more likely to be confined (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013).

The Extent of the Early Childhood Education Disparity

The nation's census data reveals the pressing need for a remedy to the unequal access to early childhood education for boys of color. According to census data released in 2010, there are approximately 22 million boys of color living the United States. By the year 2050, it is predicted that boys and people of color will be the largest percentage of all U.S. citizens. Furthermore, it is projected that by 2060, Hispanics will represent 39% of the U.S. population under the age of five with whites, African Americans, and Asians at 31%, 13%, and 7% respectively (Santiago, Galdeano, & Taylor, M. (2015).

The settings where children receive early childhood education can be identified along racial and income lines. Among children ages birth through four whose mother is employed, African American children are the most likely to be enrolled in center-based care (31%); Hispanic children are the least likely to be in enrolled in center-based care (14%). Both African American and Hispanic children are more likely to be in cared for by a relative in the home, while white and Asian children are more likely to be cared for in a home by a non-relative. Regardless of race, poor children are less likely to be in center-based care and more likely to be cared for by a relative at home (Child Trends Databank, 2013).

One way to understand the disparity of access for boys of color is to extrapolate from the data on participation rates in the major publicly-funded early care and education systems for children of color. These systems are designed to assist poor and low-income families in accessing high-quality learning environments for their children.

- Head Start is the oldest and largest early education program funded by the federal government providing child care, education, and wraparound services to children in poor families (those at or below the federal poverty level, or FPL). It currently serves 941,000 children with a budget of \$10.1 billion. There are four programs under the Head Start umbrella: Head Start (ages 3 and 4), Early Head Start (ages 0 -2), the AIAN Head Start (serving American Indian and Alaska Native populations), and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (migrant farm worker families). Even as the largest early education program, Head Start reaches less than half of eligible preschool-age children, and Early Head Start reaches less than 5 percent of eligible infants and toddlers (National Women's Law Center [NWLC], 2015a).
- The federal government funded the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) \$2.48 billion in FY 2016 disbursed to states to underwrite child care programs through subsidies to child care



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providers (including child care centers), home-based providers, and family-care providers. States are required to contribute matching funds. CCDBG targets low-income families that need a suitable placement for their child so that a parent can work or enroll in education or training. Each state determines income eligibility limits. In 2014, the median income was 175% of FPL. Recent studies show that only 1 in 6 eligible families receive subsidies (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2015).

- There is no currently available participation rate data broken down by race/ethnicity for state-funded and administered preschool or pre-kindergarten programs. Forty states and the District of Columbia funded pre-kindergarten programs in the 2013–2014 school year; however, these programs reached only 29% of 4-year-olds and 4% of 3-year-olds (National Institute of Early Education [NIEER], 2015).

Table 2: Participation rates of poor and low-income children by race/ethnicity, in federally funded early childhood education programs.

	All Americans	Black	Hispanic	AI/AN	Asian
Percent of Population	100	14	26	1	4
Percent living in poverty	24	43	34	40	12
Percent of eligible children of color served by Head Start programs					
• Head Start (CLASP, 2013)	43	54	38	n/a	36
• Early Head Start (CLASP, 2013)	5	6	5	n/a	4
Percent of eligible children served in CCDBG (CLASP, 2013)	13	21	8	6	11



Access to Quality Early Childhood Education Narrows the Opportunity Gap

Unfortunately, all early care and education programs are not equal. Studies show that some children of color, particularly African American preschoolers, are the least likely to gain access to high-quality early care and education. Barnett and colleagues (2013) reported on the findings from the National Center for Education Statistics study of observational ratings of preschool settings and revealed that although 40% of Hispanic and 36% white children were enrolled in center-based classrooms rated as “high,” only 25% of African American children were in classrooms with the same rating. Furthermore, 15% of African American children attended child care centers ranked as “low”—almost two times the percentage of Hispanic and white children. Hispanic and African American children in home-based settings were even worse off with over 50% in settings rated as “low” compared to only 30% for white children.

Head Start, meant to serve the children of very poor families, is focused on delivering quality programming with high program standards and frequent federal monitoring. Quality, however, is inconsistent from program to program, leaving African American children at a real disadvantage. In fact, only 26% of the Head Start programs that serve African American children are considered high-quality—far below the numbers for both Hispanic and white children (43% and 48%, respectively) (Barnett et al., 2013).

While the data above is sobering, it is important to note that the most vulnerable youngsters—low-income children of color—reap significant benefits from participation in high-quality early education settings (Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2004). Ensuring children and boys of color have access to high-quality, affordable early childhood programs is critical to narrowing the educational and societal opportunity gaps for boys of color. The earliest research on the benefits of quality early childhood education - the Abecedarian Preschool Project (Campbell et al., 2012), the Perry Preschool Project (Schweinhart et al., 2005), and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers (Reynolds et al., 2007) - focused on low-income African Americans. Positive impacts of their high-quality experiences have stood the test of time. Long-term benefits included higher test scores, increased high school graduation rates, a greater likelihood of gainful employment, and a decreased likelihood of being incarcerated or using illegal drugs. More recent evaluations of state preschools in Tulsa, Oklahoma, show significantly stronger gains in early literacy skills and problem-solving skills for children who are African American, Hispanic, and English Language Learners (Gormley, Gayer, Phillips, & Dawson, 2004; Gormley, 2008).

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Research has shown that high-quality early childhood programs contribute to stronger families, greater economic development, and more livable communities. Investments made when children are very young generate returns that accrue over their lifetimes (Heckman, 2008). For children of disadvantaged families, economists have estimated the rate of return for high-quality early intervention to be in the range of 6-10% per annum (Grunewald, 2003) with long-term returns on investment as high as 16% (Christeson et al., 2013).

“The benefits (of child care) have a tremendous bottom-line economic impact. An independent analysis of over 20 preschool programs demonstrated that quality preschool returned an average “profit” (economic benefits minus costs) to society of \$15,000 for every child served, by cutting crime and the cost of incarceration, and reducing other costs such as special education and welfare.”

—Ohio Sheriffs (Christeson et al., 2013)

Finally, the Obama administration argues that closing opportunity gaps and lowering barriers to achievement for boys of color would result in substantial economic gains. By White House estimates, if the gap in educational attainment between working-age men of color and non-Hispanic white men of the same age were closed, (1) the share of working-age men of color with a bachelor’s degree or above would double, (2) men of color would earn as much as \$170 billion more annually, (3) average weekly earnings among U.S. workers overall would increase by 3.6%, and (4) the total U.S. GDP would increase by 1.8% (Executive Office of the President of the United States, 2015).

Barriers to Access

Certainly, barriers to accessing high-quality early childhood educational programs can take on many forms, from personal concerns to structural and bureaucratic issues. The most common reasons families of color are less likely to access quality early childhood education are financial, cultural, and geographical in nature.

Lack of affordable early childhood education

Early care and education is one of the most significant expenses in the family budget (Child Care Aware® of America [CCAoA] 2015); Cook, 2015). Low-income families of color are especially burdened by the high cost of care. In 2014, the average annual cost of child care (in 23 states and the District of Columbia) for a 4-year-old child exceeded 10% of the median household income for a married couple. The average annual cost of full-time care for a 4-year-old child in a center-based setting ranged from \$3,997 in Mississippi to more than \$17,842 in the District of Columbia. In 18 states plus the District of Columbia, the annual average cost of care for a 4-year-old is higher than a year’s tuition and fees at a 4-year public college (CCAoA, 2015)

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To alleviate the financial strain, federal and local governments have established programs offering financial assistance. In addition to the previously noted Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), other funding sources for child care assistance include state funds, federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG). States may transfer up to 30% of their TANF block grant funds to CCDBG or draw directly from TANF funds for child care without first transferring the money. In fiscal year 2013, the total federal spending on child care assistance—including combined CCDBG and TANF funds—was \$11.3 billion; 1.46 million children received care subsidized by CCDBG.

These investments have not been enough. CCDBG funding, has not kept pace with inflation or the current demand for care across the country. A recent analysis of the CCDBG funding by the Center for Law and Social Policy suggests that patterns of investments have not kept up with demographic shifts. For example, funding has remained relatively flat in the South and Southwest where child populations have experienced rapid growth, particularly among Hispanic and African American children (CLASP, 2013).

In addition, publicly funded programs that offer free early childhood education don't reach nearly enough families in need. In 2014, the number of children served by CCDBG funds reached a 15-year low (Matthews & Schmit, 2013). Head Start serves less than half of eligible preschool-age children, Early Head Start reaches less than 5% of eligible infants and toddlers, and state funded pre-k programs reach only 29% of 4-year-olds and 4% of 3-year-olds. Even though there are some public funding options available for early childhood education, the incomplete patchwork of support often does not provide enough assistance for low-income families to access high-quality child care. Only 17% of eligible families access these subsidies due to a complex maze of program rules at the state level regarding waitlists, family co-pays, and provider reimbursement rates. For example, families may not receive the subsidies they are eligible for due to long waiting lists or freezes on intakes (turning away families without adding them to a waitlist) (NWLC, 2015b). Depending on population distribution and the racial distribution of children served in a state, children of color may be disproportionately impacted by these policies. As the gap between those eligible and those served widens, many of these families turn to placing their child in an informal, unlicensed, or low-quality setting.

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Desire for early childhood education that is responsive to family needs, culture, and language

Center-based early childhood education programs have difficulty meeting the need for child care during nontraditional hours. Research shows that low-income working parents are more likely to operate on irregular, unpredictable schedules that often require last-minute adjustments to childcare arrangements, including organizing care from multiple providers

(Enchautegui, Johnson, & Gelatt, 2015). To complicate matters, many states require that children are enrolled in a minimum or consistent number of hours per week for their families to be eligible for essential child care subsidies. This requirement leaves many low-income families working sporadic and/or nontraditional hours without access to quality, affordable care when they need it.

In addition to the need for flexible hours, cultural and linguistic responsiveness in early childhood education settings is important to many families of color. According to The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), recognizing children's and families' unique cultural backgrounds and experiences is a key factor in quality early childhood education programs (NAEYC, 2012). Like most parents, minority parents want to effectively communicate and convey information to early childhood educators about their child's experiences and home life. Recent focus groups by CCAoA have found that parents searching for quality child care feel more comfortable when staff endeavor to understand their culture and communicate in their language.

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Unreliable data collection and research on boys of color and access to early education

While not a direct barrier to access, unreliable data and research specifically targeting boys of color makes it difficult to understand the full extent of the problem and to develop strategies to address the issue. A plethora of research exists that demonstrates the disparate access to a variety of high-quality early childhood education settings experienced by children of color; however, the current research doesn't break down the data by gender. There is a dearth of information specifically related to boys of color, and stakeholders must extrapolate from data examining boys and girls of color in general. Moreover, federal data sets do not uniformly collect information on race and ethnicity which makes statistical comparisons pertaining to access across early childhood education programs difficult (CLASP, 2013).

Finally, in order to close all of the opportunity gaps and make sure that boys of color gain access to high-quality early childhood education, communities need reliable data on educational needs as well as supply and demand of services. At the local and state level, early childhood education leaders can conduct needs assessments, map supply and demand for target populations, and develop strategies to increase accessibility.



Tackling Barriers to Access: Lessons Learned From the Field

States and communities across the country are experimenting with ideas to narrow the educational disparities for young boys of color. Most successful interventions and policies developed to close opportunity gaps include multiple stakeholders from the private funding world, federal agencies, and leaders at the state and community level. For example, the U.S. Department of Education's Promise Neighborhoods program coordinated high-quality educational, health, and community supports for children and families. Though not focused solely on boys of color, this comprehensive cradle-to-career pipeline has helped many succeed in education and employment. Though there has been no new funding for the program since 2012, Promise Neighborhoods Institute (a collaboration between PolicyLink, the Harlem Children's Zone, and the Center for the Study of Social Policy) continue to support this work across the country.

Specific examples of programs and initiatives working to address unequal access to early childhood education are described below. While these initiatives do not specifically target boys of color, boys of color are often included in these at-risk groups and have benefited from these initiatives.



- **Augmented state financing to expand Pre-K for All.** The mayor of New York, New York, Bill de Blasio, made universal pre-k a critical focus of his 2013 campaign. In 2015, the city pioneered the Pre-K for All program which offers free, full-day, high-quality education for 4-year-olds. Pre-K for All expands early education from just over 20,000 students to more than 53,000 children—the majority of them low-income children of color. The initiative is supported by \$300 million in state funding for the expanded pre-kindergarten program and instruction follows New York's preschool learning standards aligned to K-12 expectations. The city is working to serve all eligible 4-year-olds in the next school year (Invest In US, n.d.; Colangelo, 2015).
- **Expanded subsidy pool with matching grants.** In 2006, only 39% of children under the age of five attended early childhood education in Orlando, Florida's Parramore neighborhood. In a predominantly African American neighborhood, high-quality programs were too costly for most, and families eligible for subsidies either had trouble navigating bureaucratic application processes for those subsidies and/or were relegated to lengthy waitlists. That same year, the Parramore Kidz Zone (PKZ) provided the local community child care council with a matching grant to create a special subsidy pool which expanded access to high-quality early care and education

opportunities. PKZ helped families understand and complete eligibility documents to qualify for subsidies which removed more Parramore children from waitlists and into early learning programs. PKZ also helped families ineligible for subsidies by covering the full cost of their child's attendance in early learning programs. These strategies increased the total number of Parramore children enrolled in licensed child care by 30% over five years. The reading proficiency gap also narrowed as the percentage of children in the program reading at or above grade level moved from 45% to 60% in five years (Promise Neighborhoods Institute, 2014).

- **Increased access through public-private partnerships.** Oklahoma offers nationally-recognized, high-quality infant and toddler programs and a longstanding statewide universal preschool program available to all children birth through preschool age. All preschool teachers possess a bachelor's degree at minimum, must be fully-certified in early childhood education, and are compensated at the same level as public school teachers. Of particular note for boys of color, evaluations of the preschool program in **Tulsa, Oklahoma**, found that boys and low-income children who attended Tulsa preschools made important gains in early literacy and math skills that extended to third grade math outcomes. In addition to the high-quality preschool program offered to 4-year-olds, the Oklahoma Early Childhood Program, which was launched in 2006, now serves more than 2,000 infants and toddlers across the state. This program benefits from a unique public-partnership with the George Kaiser Family Foundation (GKFF) that matches state investments annually to serve additional children and families. GKFF also supports Tulsa Educare, a public-private partnership that serves over 500 children under 3-years-old in three high-quality early childhood programs in at-risk communities (Invest In US, n.d.).
- **Structured supply of—and access to—quality early childhood education to meet needs of minority parents.** Research has shown that low-income parents, parents of infants and toddlers, and Hispanic families prefer family and home-based child care. However, the quality of such care varies. All Our Kin, a nonprofit organization in New Haven, Connecticut provides technical assistance and training to providers in low-income neighborhoods of color to increase access to high-quality family child care providers. They work with more than 250 educators each year (35% are African American, 60% are Hispanic), serving the poorest children in the community. Their research has demonstrated higher quality and benefits to the local economy from a 74% increase in the number of licensed family child care programs in communities of color.

Research has shown that low-income parents, parents of infants and toddlers, and Hispanic families prefer family and home-based child care. However the quality of such care varies.

- **Used of data to identify needs and craft solutions to access.** The State of Ohio has conducted research on child care supply and demand in their state to address access issues by cross-referencing census data with the addresses of existing high-quality early childhood education providers and the addresses of low-income parents who qualify for child care vouchers. This information was then plotted on a map, making it easier to identify areas with unmet child care needs. These areas are then targeted for extensive community outreach. This level of micro-targeting appears to be more effective, since needs in a state can differ greatly from county to county and neighborhood to neighborhood.

Recommendations

As outlined in this issue brief, access to quality early education programs is critical for at-risk populations, especially boys of color. Resulting from a review of the current problems, practices, and recommendations in early education access and quality, the following recommendations complement existing efforts to reduce disparities in access to early childhood education for boys of color.

Recommendation 1

Increase federal investments to assist states in building the supply of affordable, accessible, high-quality early childhood education opportunities for all young children, including boys of color by:

- Increasing significant federal investments in child care assistance for all eligible children and eliminating state waitlists.
- Increasing requirements for states' use of federal funds toward quality improvement efforts that will build the supply of early childhood education.
- Providing resources for planning and developing child care capacity to increase the availability of, and access to, high-quality child care options for working families in response to community demand.
- Reducing barriers in the subsidy administration process.
- Providing sufficient funds to serve more eligible children in Head Start and Early Head Start, as well as Head Start/Early Head Start—child care partnerships.
- Expanding the number of full-day, full week programs.

- Offering high-quality preschool to children living below 200% of the federal poverty level.

Recommendation 2

Leaders in early childhood education play an important role in supporting the cultural and linguistic preferences of parents to meet the needs of boys of color. States and communities can support families of color in their desire for culturally and linguistically appropriate settings by:

- Encouraging public and private funding and promotions of outreach models that reach boys of color and adapt to geographical, cultural, and linguistic experiences.
- Promoting locally-designed options as the foundation for a new research base on the efficacy of models designed specifically for boys and families of color.
- Including the perspectives of families of color in initiatives to address access gaps. Recent evaluations of programs that include two generations, and encourage family engagement in children’s learning and development, show promise for closing opportunity gaps for the entire family (Aspen Institute, 2016).

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Recommendation 3

Ohio’s aforementioned mapping of supply and demand illustrates why states need support in collecting reliable and useful data. Developing a way to document the demand for quality of programs informs our understanding of how diverse groups of children experience differential access to CCDBG, pre-k, and Head Start. Further analysis at the Child Care Resource and Referral level may also identify emerging lessons on supply and demand models, quality indicators, and successful strategies to reach populations of children of color. With the CCDBG reauthorization, there is a perfect opportunity to leverage funds used for child care slots for child care services in particular communities to increase access for underserved populations.

In order to address unanswered questions regarding racial and ethnic disparities in access to early education programs, quality research with reliable data collection procedures should be initiated to determine the effects of access disparities for boys and children of color. Federal data collection should ensure that cross-tabulation of ethnic makeup and gender is accounted for in order to differentiate between access

to CCDBG, pre-k and Head Start. Data collection efforts should also be consistent with the government's overall standards for reporting on race and ethnicity. New research should:

- Describe disparities in access.
- Identify major gaps in access.
- Examine current practices and policies.
- Recommend improvements for reducing and eliminating disparities.

Summary

The research is clear—access to quality early childhood education is a matter of social and economic importance. It is imperative that vulnerable populations, particularly low-income boys of color, have this important educational foundation to help them overcome the significant challenges they face throughout their lives. The solutions require multifaceted approaches and will take time to implement and achieve meaningful positive outcomes for boys of color and the men they will become.

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