

Early Childhood Programs' Scarcity Undermines Ohio's Rural Communities

Quality early care and education can bolster public safety, the economy, and national security



Acknowledgements

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19%
of children in rural
Ohio live in poverty.

High rates of child poverty and persistent child poverty are prevalent in rural Ohio. At the same time, children in Ohio's rural communities often lack resources and supports, including quality early childhood care and education, which research shows can strengthen the current and future workforce, contribute to a strong economy and public safety, and enhance national security in the long run. Ohio policymakers must support tailored investments for children in rural communities to help ensure the future strength of our state.

Children and families in rural Ohio face many challenges

Poverty

Although rates of child poverty in Ohio are slightly higher in urban areas (20.9 percent) than in rural areas (19 percent),¹ 10 of the 16 counties with child poverty rates above 25

“ Early childhood care and education programs are vital to ensuring rural communities thrive and prosper by giving every child the opportunity to meet their developmental milestones.”



Keith Everhart

Sheriff, Hardin County and
President, Buckeye State
Sheriff's Association

percent, and both of the counties with rates over 30 percent, are rural.² In addition, all six Ohio counties with persistent child poverty are rural.³ Poverty in Ohio is concentrated in the Appalachian counties and in counties in the Western and Northwestern parts of the state.⁴ More than 30 percent of Ohio's Appalachian children ages birth to five live in poverty.⁵

Declines in population and employment

Over the past decade, 59 of 88 Ohio counties have lost population,⁶ with Central Ohio as the exception to this trend.⁷ Ohio's rural counties, particularly in the Appalachian region, have large estimated losses.⁸ An aging population, fewer births, and outmigration have all contributed to the loss.⁹ Population loss has also been the result of changes in employment, as agriculture and manufacturing have declined.¹⁰

Despite the population loss, however, pre-COVID-19, many rural communities in Ohio that do not rely on agriculture experienced job growth. From 2010 to 2018, these areas had a 7.6 percent increase in jobs, almost 10 times the national average.¹¹

Health Issues

Population loss, in turn, brings other problems, such as a decrease in services such as health care and hospital closings.¹² For example, one-third of rural counties in Ohio have a shortage of primary care providers¹³ and two hospitals in rural Ohio have closed since 2012.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, this has an impact on health, and rural residents are increasingly more likely to die from preventable causes such as cancer, heart disease, and respiratory disease.¹⁵ A study of "excess deaths"—deaths of people ages 25 to 64, leading to a first-ever drop in the average American life expectancy—

What is "rural?"

There are different definitions of what constitutes a rural community. The U.S. Census Bureau defines as rural locations with fewer than 2,500 residents. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has a more nuanced nine-category Rural-Urban Continuum Codes system:

1. Metro-counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
2. Metro-counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population
3. Metro-counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population
4. Nonmetro-urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to metro area
5. Nonmetro-urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to metro area
6. Nonmetro-urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to metro area
7. Nonmetro-urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to metro area
8. Nonmetro-completely rural or urban population less than 2,500, adjacent to metro area
9. Nonmetro-completely rural or urban population less than 2,500, not adjacent to metro area

Approximately 20 percent of Ohio's population resides in nonmetro areas. Although "nonmetro" is not identical to "rural," many data sources and studies use this distinction; this report does as well.

Sources: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-continuum-codes/>; <https://data.ers.usda.gov/reports.aspx?ID=17854>

found that one-third of them occurred in just four states, one of which is Ohio.¹⁶ Deaths were due to substance abuse, particularly the opioid crisis, suicides, as well as poorly managed chronic health problems. Rates of child and adolescent obesity are higher in

Ohio's rural populations¹⁷ and substance abuse is also a problem.¹⁸ Although rural areas were not hit hard early in the COVID-19 pandemic, by October, 62 percent of Ohio's rural counties were in the "red zone," where the spread of the virus was out of control.¹⁹ The infection rate was 25 percent higher in rural areas, compared to metro areas.²⁰

Challenges in rural areas can impact our state's strength

The talents of all of our state's residents, rural and metro, are needed to build a strong workforce that will contribute to a vibrant Ohio economy. Similarly, our national security relies on a large, robust pool of potential recruits, including from rural areas (about nine percent of enlisted service members come from rural areas).²¹ Law enforcement agencies in rural areas typically recruit locally, making out-migration of young people problematic. For these and many other reasons, we must invest in Ohio's rural communities, particularly in children and youth.

Quality early childhood care and education can help address challenges in Ohio's rural communities

Early care and education (ECE) can strengthen the current and future workforce, contribute to a strong economy and public safety, and enhance national security. More than two-thirds (69 percent) of parents of Ohio children under age 6 are in the workforce.²² Of Ohio children under age 6 with working parents with low incomes, nearly one-fifth (19 percent) live in nonmetro areas.²³ Working parents depend on ECE so they can go to work, remain

“ A strong nation begins with quality early childhood programs. Child care, preschool, and home visiting programs help children meet both physical and educational stages of development, preparing them for lives of service either in the military or in their community.”



Paul Sullivan

Major General (Ret.)
United States Air Force

productive, and build successful careers to better support their families. Children, meanwhile, need nurturing, stimulating environments for healthy brain development during the first five years of life, both at home and in ECE while their parents work. Further, early childhood is a time when children acquire the foundation of many skills needed for 21st-century jobs, including both cognitive and character skills.²⁴ Quality ECE can help build these skills and contribute to educational success.

For example, a longitudinal study of more than 1,300 children found that children in

higher-quality child care were better prepared for school at age 4 compared to children in lower-quality child care. At age 15, they were still performing slightly above their peers.²⁵ A large study of children in rural counties found that children who participated in higher-quality child care had better language skills at age 3, which, in turn, resulted in better academic and social skills in kindergarten.²⁶ Research has also shown that preschool can increase rates of on-time high school graduation among participants.²⁷ An economic analysis of Head Start found that the program increases high school graduation, college attendance, and the chances of receiving a postsecondary degree or certificate.²⁸ Quality ECE supports the workforce and helps build a strong economy, both now and into the future.

However, the considerations around high-quality ECE transcend even impressive educational outcomes. Our national security relies on qualified young adults who are ready, willing, and able to serve in the U.S. military. However, educational deficits (lack of a high school diploma or failure on the military's entrance exam), behavior problems (crime and substance use), and health issues (particularly obesity) currently prevent 71 percent of Ohio youth from qualifying for service.²⁹ Early development sets the stage for children's future success, and the foundation of lifelong health is established early in life. In addition to its educational benefits, ECE programs that emphasize healthy eating and physical activity can help reduce children's risk of obesity. For example, a study of the Abecedarian ECE program found that girls who participated were less likely to become obese as adults, and boys had fewer risk factors for heart disease, stroke and diabetes.³⁰ In addition to providing

early education, Head Start offers preventative health care, including immunizations and dental care, and connects families to other services. This comprehensive approach is invaluable, given the health care shortages often found in rural areas. Without access to high-quality ECE, our nation risks having an even smaller recruiting pool in the future.

Further, our state's correctional system is full of people serving time for serious and costly crimes. It doesn't have to be that way. Providing children with high-quality early learning opportunities can set them on the path to success in school, so they will be ready for college and careers, and less likely to later engage in criminal activity.³¹ The aforementioned longitudinal study of more than 1,300 children found that children in higher-quality child care had significantly lower levels of behavior problems at age 15 compared to children in lower-quality child care.³² Students who participated in Alabama's First Class Pre-K program were about half as likely to have a behavioral infraction in school as those who did not receive pre-K.³³ Further, the differences between the two groups were larger in middle school and high school, when the rates of infractions increase.

Children who live in Ohio's rural areas have less access to quality early care and education

Despite the proven impact of high-quality ECE on various child outcomes, children in rural Ohio are less likely to have access to child care programs than children in non-rural areas. While 39 percent of Ohioans live in a child care "desert," where there are more than three children under age 5 for each licensed child care slot, in rural

Champaign Family YMCA-Graham B/A Care

St. Paris, Ohio

St. Paris is a rural community, with a population of just over 2,000 people, located in Champaign County, Ohio. It is home to highly-rated child care services provided by the Champaign Family YMCA-Graham B/A Care. This is a licensed, publicly-funded child care program, with care paid, wholly or in part, with federal or state funds distributed by the Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS). Families may receive assistance with child care costs by contacting their county ODJFS to determine eligibility. The program provides subsidized child care for families who meet federal poverty guidelines.

The Champaign Family YMCA serves children ages six weeks to kindergarten entry and operates as a before and after care program, with hours from 5:30am to 6:00pm. The program is the largest child care provider in Champaign County and has been awarded five stars by the State of Ohio's Step Up to Quality rating system for exceeding state standards for quality early childhood education.

Source: <http://childcaresearch.ohio.gov/>

communities the figure is 60 percent.³⁴ Nearly all (29 of 31) of Ohio's Appalachian counties are child care deserts.³⁵ None of those counties have enough child care slots to meet the need and in some counties the ratio is as low as fewer than 30 slots for every 100 children.³⁶ The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this challenge, with some providers closing temporarily or permanently, and others forced to limit capacity to allow for social distancing. Across the nation and in Ohio, families in rural areas more frequently use home-based child care options (family child care homes or family, friend, and neighbor care), which serve smaller numbers of children than child care centers.³⁷ This is particularly true for families who access child care using subsidies.³⁸ The choice to use home-based care is largely driven by the lack of child care centers in rural areas,³⁹ particularly for infants and toddlers.⁴⁰

However, the number of family child care providers in Ohio has dropped 25.5 percent in recent years, contributing to the shortage of child care in rural areas.⁴¹

Twenty percent of eligible children in Ohio's rural Appalachian area attend preschool, a figure that is better than that for eligible children statewide (14 percent), but still low.⁴² The Head Start program plays a vital role in Ohio's rural communities, with 78 percent of the state's Head Start programs placed in rural areas.⁴³

29

**of Ohio's Appalachian
counties are child
care deserts.**



Barnesville Head Start

Belmont County, Ohio

Barnesville Head Start is a public pre-kindergarten program that includes Early Head Start and is located in Belmont County, in the heart of Appalachia, Ohio. The program has received five stars from the Ohio Step Up to Quality program, a tiered quality rating and improvement system designed to recognize the efforts of licensed early learning and development programs that take steps to improve the quality of services they provide.

The program provides early childhood education and other services to eligible children, birth to age 5, and their families. Eligibility is based on child age, family income, and unique child circumstances. Head Start programs receive federal funding to provide services that support family well-being and promote children's learning and development. Families (90 percent of those enrolled) must meet poverty guidelines. Children from families receiving public assistance such as TANF or SSI are automatically eligible. In addition, 10 percent of the overall enrollment must be children with a diagnosed disability.

Head Start classes meet Monday through Thursday, four hours per day, September through May. Children benefit from the school readiness skills they acquire: early math, science, writing, language, and letter and number recognition are a few of the skills children develop.

Source: <http://childcaresearch.ohio.gov/>

Ohio policymakers must enhance early childhood care and education programs for children in rural areas

Despite the impact of COVID-19 on our state budget, we must continue to invest in our early childhood care and education system. Given the prevalence of child care deserts in Ohio's rural communities, increasing the number of child care options in these areas is imperative. Policymakers must also increase access to quality child care to families with incomes at 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). In addition, current funding levels for Help Me Grow, our state's evidence-based parent support and education program, must be sustained.

Similarly, increasing the supply of preschool programs will help improve Ohio rural children's school readiness and long-term academic outcomes. Legislators should consider innovative delivery models, including home-based or mobile programs.⁴⁴ We must also seek federal and state support for efforts to expand rural broadband access to support these innovations as well as others demanded by the pandemic.

“Quality child care and preschool programs are a critical workforce tool. These programs support working parents as well as educate our children. Part of building the right business environment in our communities includes having a quality current and future workforce that will attract potential employers and that begins with early childhood care and education.”



John Rataiczak

President, Barnesville
Chamber of Commerce

Conclusion

High-quality early childhood care and education programs can help ameliorate the challenges faced by Ohio's children living in rural communities. These programs also strengthen the current and future workforce, contribute to a strong economy and public safety, and enhance national security in the long run. Ohio policymakers must support tailored investments for children in rural communities to help ensure the future strength of our state.

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