

Children Enrolled in Early Head Start

DEFINITION

Children enrolled in Early Head Start is the number and percentage of low-income infants and toddlers enrolled in a Rhode Island Early Head Start program.

SIGNIFICANCE

Early Head Start is a federally funded, intensive, comprehensive early childhood program serving low-income children birth to age three, pregnant women, and their families. Early Head Start programs serve families with the greatest needs, including families living at or near the federal poverty level, children in foster care, families experiencing homelessness, and families receiving public benefits, including Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. The program provides high-quality early education, nutrition and mental health services, health and developmental screenings and referrals, and fosters the development of healthy family relationships.¹⁻³

Early Head Start programs can be home based or center based. Home-based programs use weekly home visits and group activities to build parents' skills to support healthy child development. Center-based programs take place in a child care classroom and offer at least 1,380 hours of high-quality early care and education with small

group sizes, low child-to-adult ratios, and qualified teachers.¹

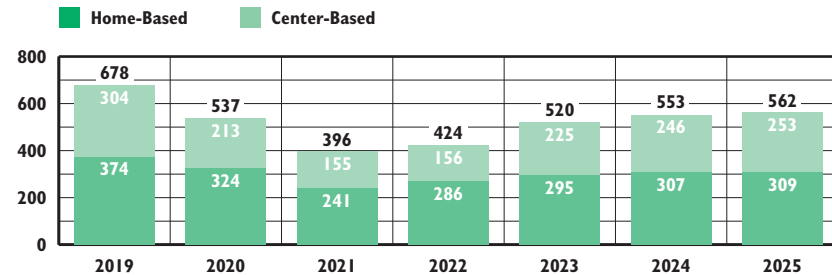
The Federal Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership grant builds the capacity of child care programs to meet Early Head Start quality standards, providing high-quality, full-day, full-year child care with comprehensive services to low-income infants, toddlers, and their families.⁴

In Rhode Island in 2025, 91% of children enrolled in Early Head Start or an Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership were in a program that had achieved a high-quality BrightStars rating of four or five stars while only 27% of infants and toddlers enrolled in the Child Care Assistance Program were in a high-quality program.^{5,6}

Early Head Start has been shown to produce significant cognitive, language, and social-emotional gains in participating children and more positive interactions with their parents. Early Head Start parents provide more emotional support and more opportunities for language development, read more to their children, and are less likely to use physical discipline. Early Head Start parents are also less likely to experience depression and earn higher incomes after participating in the program. Children who enroll in high-quality preschool after Early Head Start have better outcomes at kindergarten entry.^{3,7}



Early Head Start Enrollment, 2019 – 2025, Rhode Island



Source: Rhode Island Early Head Start program reports to Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, October 2019 – October 2025.

- ◆ As of October 2025 in Rhode Island, there were 562 individuals (542 infants and toddlers and 20 pregnant women) enrolled in Early Head Start, up 2% from 2024 but down 17% from 2019. An estimated 4% of the infants and toddlers in low-income families in Rhode Island were enrolled. Statewide there were 196 children on a waiting list for Early Head Start.^{5,8}
- ◆ Four percent of Early Head Start clients were pregnant women, 19% were infants under age one, 30% were age one, 43% were age two, and 6% were age three.⁵
- ◆ In 2025, Rhode Island Early Head Start programs served 127 infants and toddlers with developmental delays or disabilities (23% of all children enrolled), 21 children who were in foster care, and 24 children who were experiencing homelessness.⁵



Early Head Start Staffing Challenges Lead to Reduced Enrollment

- ◆ Since 2019 in Rhode Island, the number of infants and toddlers enrolled in the Early Head Start program has dropped by 17%.⁵
- ◆ Nationally, Early Head Start programs are facing significant staffing challenges, including high turnover, persistent vacancies, and low compensation for educators. When staff vacancies persist and there is not enough funding to raise wages, Early Head Start programs are able to apply to the federal Office of Head Start for a “change in scope” and permanently reduce enrollment so they can boost staff salaries.^{9,10}

Children Enrolled in Early Head Start

Table 30.

Children Ages Birth to Three and Pregnant Women Enrolled in Early Head Start, Rhode Island, 2025

SCHOOL DISTRICT	# OF CHILDREN <AGE 3	% LOW-INCOME CHILDREN IN DISTRICT	ESTIMATED # LOW-INCOME CHILDREN <AGE 3	# ENROLLED IN HOME-BASED EARLY HEAD START	# ENROLLED IN CENTER-BASED EARLY HEAD START	# ENROLLED IN EARLY HEAD START	ESTIMATED % OF LOW-INCOME INFANTS AND TODDLERS ENROLLED IN EARLY HEAD START
Barrington	412	12%	50	0	3	3	6%
Bristol	375	40%	151	0	3	3	2%
Burrillville	388	42%	162	2	7	9	6%
Central Falls	937	93%	874	32	11	43	5%
Charlestown	157	31%	49	0	1	1	2%
Coventry	893	38%	342	4	9	13	4%
Cranston	2,271	55%	1,256	1	22	23	2%
Cumberland	1,097	27%	293	1	5	6	2%
East Greenwich	353	12%	42	0	0	0	0%
East Providence	1,237	54%	663	7	19	26	4%
Exeter	158	22%	36	0	0	0	0%
Foster	113	25%	29	0	0	0	0%
Glocester	250	25%	62	1	1	2	3%
Hopkinton	196	31%	61	0	0	0	0%
Jamestown	90	10%	9	0	0	0	0%
Johnston	703	56%	393	5	11	16	4%
Lincoln	531	34%	183	2	0	2	1%
Little Compton	73	18%	13	0	0	0	0%
Middletown	520	36%	187	1	6	7	4%
Narragansett	175	27%	47	0	1	1	2%
New Shoreham	14	40%	6	0	0	0	0%
Newport	606	74%	448	5	20	25	6%
North Kingstown	729	26%	192	0	3	3	2%
North Providence	914	53%	485	4	4	8	2%
North Smithfield	286	25%	73	0	0	0	0%
Pawtucket	2,652	76%	2,023	48	20	68	3%
Portsmouth	441	20%	89	2	1	3	3%
Providence	6,323	83%	5,259	142	35	177	3%
Richmond	234	31%	72	0	0	0	0%
Scituate	244	24%	57	0	1	1	2%
Smithfield	445	20%	89	0	2	2	2%
South Kingstown	501	28%	142	0	2	2	1%
Tiverton	351	34%	121	2	0	2	2%
Warren	243	40%	98	9	1	10	10%
Warwick	2,146	48%	1,023	24	29	53	5%
West Greenwich	159	22%	36	0	2	2	6%
West Warwick	900	60%	542	17	15	32	6%
Westerly	496	44%	217	0	1	1	0%
Woonsocket	1,469	68%	995	0	18	18	2%
Five Core Cities	11,381	80%	9,076	227	86	313	3%
Remainder of State	18,701	38%	7,075	82	167	249	4%
Rhode Island	30,082	50%	15,043	309	253	562	4%

Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Rhode Island Early Head Start Programs, children enrolled as of October 2025. Children enrolled are listed by residence of child, not location of the Head Start program.

The estimated number of low-income children under age three is based on the number of children under age 3 according to Census 2020, Table PCT12 multiplied by the percentage of students who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch (at or below 185% of the federal poverty level) in each city or town's school district. Free and reduced-price lunch data are from Rhode Island Department of Education, 2025-2026 school year.

Five core cities are Central Falls, Newport, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket.

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