



Measuring How Poverty-Related Risks to Children's Wellbeing Affect Their Progress in School

Naneida Lazarte-Alcalá, Oklahoma State Department of Education

Early life experiences have the greatest and most enduring influences on children's development and behavior. Research on early childhood development agrees that much of what is experienced and learned during a child's "formative years" has an everlasting impact on what can be learned and accomplished in the future. Children exposed to deficiencies in childhood are more likely to experience poor educational, economic, social, and behavioral outcomes – not just when they are young but throughout their lives. If we want to prevent social problems and promote successful lives, identifying specific risks that hinder children's early development is an essential first step. Such investigations also help educators and social service providers grasp where they can best allocate resources.

The risk that children may start school unprepared to learn has been studied in different ways. A notable effort is the framework proposed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization to assess the school readiness of young children in terms of their health, nutrition, pre-school education, poverty, and parental support. Using this framework, my co-authors (Krista Schumacher, Kristin Culver, and Kailee James) and I created the *Oklahoma School Readiness Reach-by-Risk Report* to provide information that would highlight counties whose children are at the greatest risk of starting kindergarten unprepared to learn. We also aim to determine which counties lacked sufficient good-quality early education and child care services. Because indicators used in the report do not change quickly, assessing genuine change over time will require a few more years of data. Nevertheless, a preliminary analysis of changing classifications from the 2014 and 2015 report can reveal patterns and indicate areas for immediate action.

Report Highlights

Comparing county-level indicators of children's risk for poor school readiness with the percentages of eligible children who are reached by social services highlights the counties that need the greatest new infusions of resources for support programs offering child care and early education.

Over two years, four counties – Harmon, Adair, Texas and Pushmataha – remained among the ten counties showing the highest risk levels for factors contributing to school unreadiness. Four counties – Sequoyah, Okfuskee, Blaine and LeFlore – moved from the High-Medium Risk group to the upper end of the High Risk group. Kay and McCurtain counties retained their High Risk classifications and saw an increase in risk level. We also found that an estimated 46% of all children under age six, some 147,527 of them, live in counties classified as high risk or high-medium risk for poor school readiness. The number of young children living in counties classified in higher-risk categories is growing faster than the number living in lower-risk counties.

Severe poverty increases the overall risk that children are unprepared for school. Of the ten counties with the highest poverty rates, seven have risk conditions that exceed national levels in areas such as births to teen mothers, mothers with less than a high school education, and children living with single parents. More than half of Oklahoma's 77 counties exceed national rates on seven of nine factors we identified in the report as being associated with the risk that children are not ready to learn at school. In all of Oklahoma, 27.1% of families with children under the age of six live in poverty – a rate above the national average of 24.5%. But the poverty rate was nearly double the state-wide rate in the state's ten poorest counties.

Uneven Access to Services

Location determines, in large part, which schools, programs, and services are accessible to needy families and children. Schools are present in impoverished neighborhoods, but funding may not exist to provide quality child care or educational programs or other support services to help children succeed once they start school. In Oklahoma, programs such as Start Right, Children First, and Sooner Start are available to assist families on proper nutrition, parenting skills, and child safety, just to name a few, while child care programs like Early Head Start and Head Start programs are designed to meet families' unique needs through a comprehensive system of education and support services. These programs are focused on promoting healthy child development and connecting families to other resources.

Although Oklahoma has a fully funded preschool education system and one of the highest enrollment percentages for four-year-old preschool in the country, high quality child care and other support services are not available in all 77 counties. Low participation rates of eligible children in both early child care and educational programs are partially explained by budget cuts, rising child care costs, and imperfect eligibility guidelines. Child care subsidy benefits can relieve some of the associated costs, but only assist a limited number of eligible families. The cost of quality child care is now more than that of housing, even as poverty rates are either static or increasing and parents and families are left with few ways to get access to care for children, especially those under the age of three.

The Need for Improved Services and Data

Although factors other than those presented here may also contribute to poverty and explain why school readiness programs and related social services are not available to all young children statewide, our report is limited to data available at the county level. That data is not perfect and sometimes involves duplications or gaps due to information collected by different agencies. Having an integrated early childhood data system to accompany a more complete social safety net for children of poor families would go a long ways toward improving Oklahoma's efforts to counteract the many ways in which poverty can leave children unprepared to do their best at school.

This brief was co-authored by Celina Mendoza. Read more in Naneida R. Lazarte Alcalá, Krista S. Schumacher, and Kristin N. Culver, *Oklahoma School Readiness Reach-by-Risk Report 2015*.