

Rural Illinois & Early Childhood Challenges

Strengthen early care and education to bolster children's well-being and public safety



Acknowledgements

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Fight Crime: Invest in Kids

Thousands of police chiefs, sheriffs, prosecutors and violence survivors protecting public safety by promoting solutions that steer kids away from crime

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20%
of children in
rural Illinois
live in poverty

The farms and surrounding communities of rural Illinois can be idyllic places to raise families, and, yet, child poverty in the state’s rural areas is often as or more severe than in more populous areas of the state. Overall, one-fifth of Illinois’ rural children live in poverty. At the same time, children in Illinois’ rural communities often lack resources and supports—including quality early childhood care and education—that research shows can significantly improve the trajectory of children’s lives. By making robust investments in proven early childhood programs, Illinois policymakers can help support the success of all the state’s children. As law enforcement leaders know, this includes bolstering the safety of children and communities alike.

“ Strong investments in young children’s learning and development can improve upon countless other aspects of a community’s well-being, too—including public safety.”



Jerel Jones
Macomb Police Chief



Children and families in rural Illinois face many challenges

High poverty

Illinois' rural children have a poverty rate of 19.7 percent, compared with 17.5 percent of urban children.¹ Of the 27 Illinois counties with child poverty rates above 20 percent, 19 are rural.² Although the child poverty rate has dropped for the state overall in recent years, children in rural areas have not shared in this improvement.³

Population decline

Over the past decade, 87 of 102 Illinois counties have lost population, with the northeastern-most counties as the exception to this trend.⁴ All of Illinois' rural areas have suffered population declines, due in part to technological changes in agriculture.⁵ From 2010 to 2020, the rural population in Illinois dropped nearly 6 percent.⁶

Population loss, in turn, brings other problems, including a decrease in services such as health care.⁷ For example, Illinois' rural counties have 47 percent fewer physicians per resident than urban areas.⁸ 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,⁹ as well as opioid overdoses.¹⁰

Educational disparities

Children throughout Illinois are often at risk of entering kindergarten inadequately prepared in key areas that can affect future success in school and throughout their lives, and these problems are often particularly pronounced in rural regions. Annually, the state's kindergarten teachers assess their incoming students' readiness in

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. About 11 percent of Illinois' population resides in nonmetropolitan 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?StateFIPS=17&StateName=Illinois&ID=17854>

three areas: math, language and literacy, and social-emotional skills. Of the 13 counties deemed at “high risk” for lack of kindergarten readiness by the Erikson Institute’s “Risk and Reach” report, eight are rural. Analysis shows that similar challenges exist in rural counties for children assessed in the third grade. Nine of the 12 counties at high risk for lack of language arts proficiency are rural, as are 14 of the 18 counties whose third-graders were at high risk for lack of math proficiency.¹¹

Further ripple effects from early childhood challenges

Why are kindergarten readiness and early learning so important? Research shows that the experiences children have in their earliest years, during a period of critical brain growth, set the foundation for future development.¹² Children who arrive at school already behind their peers may never catch up—underperforming in third grade reading and math, more likely to be held back in school, and less likely to graduate from high school on time. The fact that six out of 10 prisoners nationwide lack a high school diploma helps illustrate the link between educational deficits and crime.¹³

In addition, law enforcement agencies in rural areas typically recruit locally, making out-migration of young people from rural areas problematic and exacerbating a troubling, national trend: Law enforcement recruitment overall has become more challenging in recent years. A 2018 survey found that 63 percent of police and sheriff agencies had seen a reduction in the number of applicants.¹⁴ For these and many other reasons, we must invest further in Illinois rural communities, particularly in children and youth.

“ We cannot simply arrest our way out of crime and violence; the job also demands wise prevention strategies, such as early care and education.”



John Simonton
Lee County Sheriff

Quality early care and education can help address challenges in Illinois’ rural communities

Early care and education (ECE) can bolster children’s well-being and contribute to our state’s long-term public safety. Early childhood is a time when children acquire the foundation of many skills needed for 21st-century jobs, including both cognitive and character skills.¹⁵ Quality ECE can help build these skills and contribute to educational success, setting children on the path to legitimate employment and away from lives of crime.

For example, a longitudinal study of more than 1,300 children found that children in higher-quality child care were better-

“ Rural Illinois’ pressing challenges include a shortage of the quality, accessible child care options that our kids and families need in order to thrive.”



Brandon Zanotti
Williamson County
State's Attorney

prepared for school at age 4 than kids in lower-quality care. At age 15, they were still performing slightly above their peers.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

Research has also shown that preschool can improve rates of on-time high school graduation among participants.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

However, the considerations around high-quality ECE transcend even these

impressive educational outcomes. 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—not only so they will be ready for college and careers, but less likely to later engage in criminal activity.²⁰ The aforementioned longitudinal study of more than 1,300 children found that those in higher-quality child care had significantly lower levels of behavior problems at age 15 compared with children in lower-quality care.²¹ 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 help.²² Further, the differences between the two groups were larger in middle school and high school, when the rates of infractions increase.

A smaller, but significant, number of long-term studies directly examine the link between preschool participation and crime prevention. Most recently, an MIT study of the Boston preschool program found that enrollees were less likely to have been incarcerated in a juvenile facility during high school, compared with non-enrollees.²³ Children not served by the Chicago Child-Parent Centers (CPC) early education program were 70 percent more likely than participants to be arrested for a violent crime by age 18.²⁴ By age 24, the people served by the CPC were 20 percent less likely to have served time in jail or prison.²⁵ Taken together, this research suggests that, by providing access to high-quality early education for kids today, we can see less crime and incarceration in the future.

Quality early learning has a high return on investment

An independent cost-benefit analysis of preschool programs for children from families with low incomes showed that they can return, on average, a “profit” (economic benefits minus costs) to society of more than \$22,000 for every child served. The benefits accrue due to increased test scores, which are associated with higher earnings in adulthood, as well as decreases in costs to society, such as children being held back in school or needing special education—as well as reduced expenditures due to crime reduction.²⁶

Yet children who live in Illinois’ rural areas have less access to quality child care

Despite the proven impact of high-quality ECE on various child outcomes, children in rural Illinois are less likely to have access to child care programs than children in non-rural areas. While 58 percent of Illinoisans live in a child care “desert,” where there are more than three children under age 5 for each licensed child care slot, in rural communities the figure is 69 percent.²⁷ 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. Although data show that Illinois’ efforts to stabilize the child care sector during the pandemic were largely successful, providers in rural areas of the state were less likely to receive resources than those in urban areas.²⁸

Across the nation and in Illinois, 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.²⁹ This is particularly true for families who access child care using subsidies.³⁰ The choice to use home-based care is largely driven by the lack of child care centers in rural areas,³¹ particularly for infants and toddlers.³² However, even before the coronavirus pandemic, the number of family child care providers had dropped 25.5 percent from 2010 to 2016 in Illinois, contributing to the shortage of child care in rural areas.³³

With regard to preschool, Illinois’ rural areas are generally better-served than they are for child care. Still, overall, there is a gap of more than 11,000 pre-K slots throughout the state.³⁴ And even when slots are available in rural areas, transportation has been identified as a significant barrier to accessing them.³⁵

Illinois policymakers face a unique opportunity to enhance early care and education programs for children—including those in rural areas

Illinois is making strides to improve access to child care in rural communities. In March of 2021, the Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development (GOECD) announced a pilot program to enhance the quality of rural child care services, providing 35 centers in rural areas with \$3.8 million in funding to bolster staffing and increase worker compensation.³⁶ Strengthening chronically low compensation and other aspects of staff training and quality are a focus of the new, \$300 million Strengthen & Grow grant initiative announced in late 2021—and this followed on the heels of \$725 million in Child Care Restoration Grant help that already had helped providers in nearly every corner of the state to weather the pressures of the COVID pandemic.³⁷

Much more needs to be done, however. Illinois policymakers now face a significant opportunity to make substantial investments

in early childhood care and education that will greatly benefit children in rural areas and throughout the state. After a year of study, the bipartisan Illinois Early Childhood Funding Commission published recommendations³⁸ in 2021 that represent a road map to a fully-funded, more efficient, and more equitable system of delivering early childhood programs to the families that need them.

Improving the system’s equity is, appropriately, a major goal—a concern to ensure we do a better job of identifying and meeting the needs of Black and Brown children, those living in low-income areas, and those in other underserved populations such as rural Illinois. The GOECD has established an Early Childhood Transition Team that has begun the work of acting on these recommendations. In early 2022, a Birth to Five Illinois initiative launched to focus on better-identifying regional needs in early childhood services, and their answers. Policymakers must act now to build further on these moves and continue working towards achieving the Commission’s vision, over time.

Conclusion

High-quality early childhood care and education programs can help ameliorate the challenges faced by Illinois children, including those living in often-underserved rural communities. These services strengthen our state and contribute to public safety in the long run. Illinois policymakers should take advantage of this opportunity to meet the needs of children, both in rural areas and throughout the state.

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