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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8rf5t2pw>

Journal

California Journal of Politics and Policy, 3(1)

Authors

Fuller, Bruce
Kim, Anthony

Publication Date

2011-07-08

DOI

10.5070/P2Z314

Peer reviewed

THE CALIFORNIA *Journal of*
Politics & Policy

Volume 3, Issue 1

2011

**Latino Access to Preschool Stalls Declining State
Capacity and Demographic Change**

Bruce Fuller and Anthony Y. Kim
University of California, Berkeley

Abstract

Expanding access to preschool has been one of the most effective policy initiatives by state and federal governments over the past generation. Studies show quality preschools serving children from poor families lift early learning. Families and government spend about \$47 billion yearly on childcare and preschool. Public spending remains focused on youngsters from low-income households. The Great Recession and competing budget priorities such as health care and K-12 education have undercut government's capacity to expand access to and lift the quality of preschools in California and the nation. Unless employment returns to pre-recession levels, state capacity will remain diminished. As state capacity to enrich early learning falters, growth in Latino child populations continues to climb. From 2005 to 2010, the number of Latino children under 18 years of age grew over 3% annually.

Keywords: preschool, Latino, child care, children, California, immigrant, preliteracy, achievement gap, demographic

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Latino Access to Preschool Stalls—Declining State Capacity and Demographic Change

Bruce Fuller and Anthony Y. Kim
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Introduction

Widening access to preschool remains one of the most effective policy initiatives mounted by state and federal governments over the past generation. A variety of studies have detailed how quality preschools serving children from poor families can lift early learning. These effects at times are sustained as children move through schools and into the work force (e.g., Bassok, 2010; Currie, 1999; Fuller, 2007; Karoly and Gonzalez, 2011).

Families and government together now spend about \$47 billion yearly on child care and preschool arrangements. Public spending remains largely focused on lifting youngsters from low-income households. But the Great Recession, along with competing budget priorities, such as health care and K-12 education, have undercut government's capacity to further expand access to, and lift the quality of, preschools in California and across the nation. And unless employment returns to pre-recession levels, state capacity will remain diminished. This may be costly in the future. It's difficult to see how policy efforts to reduce achievement gaps necessary to improve the productivity of a young workforce and presumably civic engagement can succeed if access to preschool levels-off or declines.

Just as state capacity to enrich early learning falters, growth in Latino child populations continues to climb. The count of Latino children, under 18 years of age, grew by over 3% annually between 2005 and 2010, according to preliminary census figures released for reapportionment analyses Current Population Survey (CPS). 2010. Source: www.census.gov).

Latino Growth, Declining Government Capacity

To examine the conflict between demographic pressures and diminished state capacity, we assembled preschool enrollment data reaching back almost three decades, focused on evolving patterns for Latino children. The question motivating

this study pertained to whether Latino population growth has begun to outpace government's capacity to widen access to preschool which has never been observed historically.

We do know that some states, including California, have reduced public support of child care and preschool programs. State child-care spending has declined by about one-fifth since hitting a peak of \$3.2 billion in annual outlays for child care and preschool toward the end of California's dot-com boom in 2002.

We also know that quality preschool can boost children's early literacy and social agility, skills valued highly by K-12 educators and future employers. The returns to preschool appear to be strong for Latino children, especially those from poor and non-English speaking families, compared with other populations.¹

But newly available data reveals that preschool enrollment rates already comparatively low for Latino youngsters have stalled over the past five years, after climbing steadily since the 1980s. Overall, we find that:

- About one-third of Latino 4 year-olds were enrolled in preschool in 1991, rising to 53% in 2005. Yet this share lagged far behind African-American 4-year-olds (69%) and non-Latino whites (70%) in 2005.

- Latino preschool enrollments appear to have declined between 2005 and 2009, while attendance rates remained steady for African-American and white 4-year-olds.

- Preschools serving Latino children range lower on certain quality indicators, yet the share attending academically enriched programs equals the slice of white peers entering such programs.

Given these persisting disparities in preschool access, narrowing early achievement gaps in the public schools will be difficult. These numbers do exhibit good news on one front: tremendous progress in equalizing preschool opportunities for black children since the 1960s. Still, shortfalls in preschool quality may constrain benefits for black and Latino children alike.

Over the next two generations, by 2050, one-third of all Americans will be of Latino heritage. This population will be young and perhaps weakly schooled yet all retirees will depend upon the productivity of Latino workers to finance pensions, staff medical clinics, and serve the elderly. We all hold a stake in lifting the growth of Latino children by, advancing their early education.

Historical Progress

National survey, going back three decade, reveal that Latino children have been less likely to attend preschool limited by fewer neighborhood slots, lower maternal employment rates, and heavier reliance on kin for child care—relative to African-American and white families.

To equalize children's access to preschool every U.S. president since George H. W. Bush has pushed to expand Head Start and other early-education options. State leaders steadily raised their investment as well, until the recession depressed budget revenues. Families and government, together, now spend over \$47 billion on child care and preschool each year.²

So, are young Latino families gaining wider access to quality preschool, thanks to this steady investment?

The answer is, yes, if we take the long view. Figure 1 shows rapid growth in family demand for preschool from 1982 forward, for all ethnic groups as results of nationwide surveys first became available. In 1982, just 15% of 3- to 4-year-olds were attending a preschool center, rising to 43% by 1990. Analysts reported ethnic group differences by 1991 for children 3-5, showing that just 24% of Latino children attended preschool, compared with 37% of whites and 42% of blacks.

Stalled Progress, Faltering State Capacity

More recent data allow us to focus on 4-year-olds. We see that 53% of Latino children attended preschool in 2005, according to one study (estimated at 57% for nonimmigrant children), compared with 70% of whites and 69% of blacks.

The most recent gauge in 2009 shows that Latino preschool enrollments have fallen to 48% of 4-year-olds. The questions asked of parents differ slightly across surveys, yet the 2005 and 2009 enrollment-rate estimates are close to identical for both white and black children³

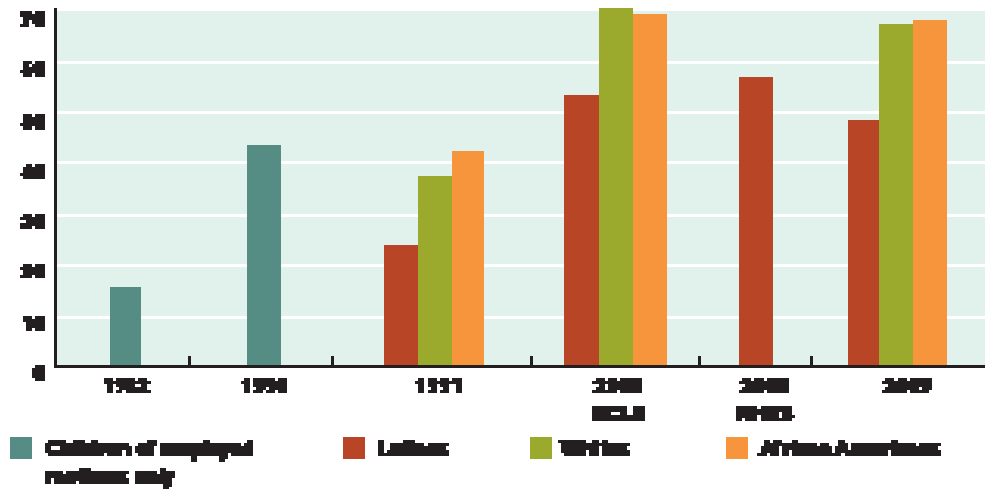
This declining enrollment rate for Latinos likely stems from government's strained capacity to keep pace with child population growth (just over 3% annually for Latino children under 18 during the 2005-09 period, based on early 2010 census number, and job loss among those Latino parents who pay for preschool.

Varying Doses of Preschool

A related question is whether Latino children entering preschool experience differing kinds of quality, relative to other groups. The initial three clusters of bars in Figure 2 show that Latino children were much less likely to attend a part-time program, but just slightly less likely to attend a full-day program in 2005 (the omitted share is children not attending preschool).

To differentiate types of preschools, we sorted those with teachers reporting more time spent on preliteracy activities from those not structured with this emphasis. Similar shares of Latino and White children attended the more academically intensive programs.

Figure 1. Growth in family demand for preschool from 1982 through 2009



Notes: The 1982 and 1994 estimates are for children, age 3-4, with an employed mother [U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1982; Miller et al., 1991]. The 1991 estimate by ethnic group is for children, age 3-5, not yet enrolled in kindergarten [West, Wright, & Henderson, 1995; Feller et al., 1998]. The 2005 and 2009 estimates pertain to 4 year-olds (4.4 and 4.5 years, respectively; Karoly & Goswami, 2011; analysis of Current Population Survey data by A. Kim of the Institute of Human Development, Berkeley). The 2009 NIEES estimate is for children of non-immigrant Latino parents.

Figure 2. Part-time and full-day preschool attendance

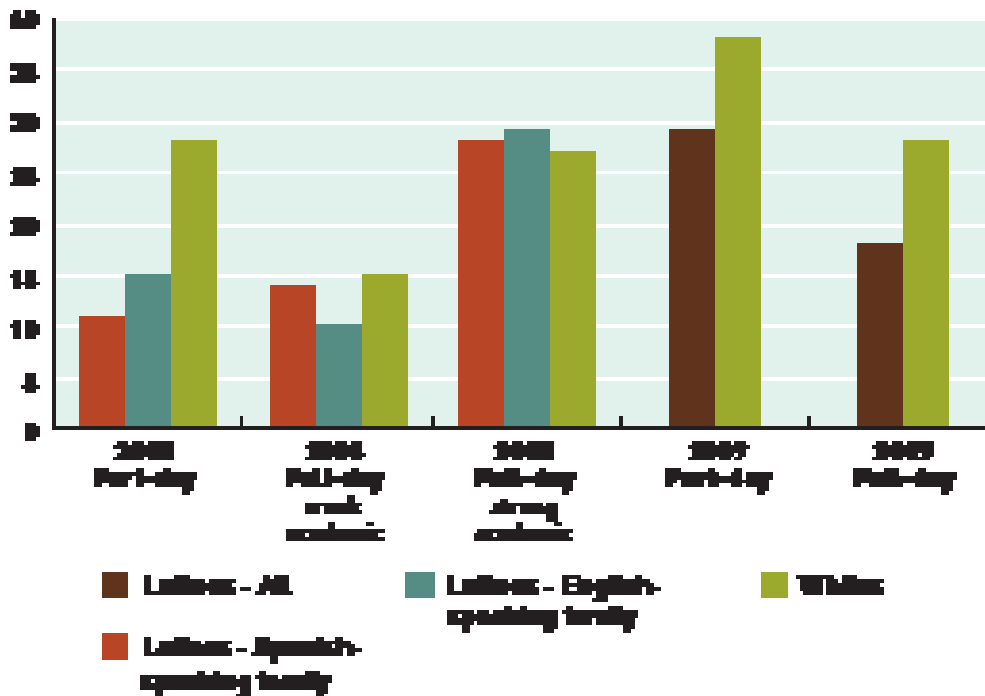
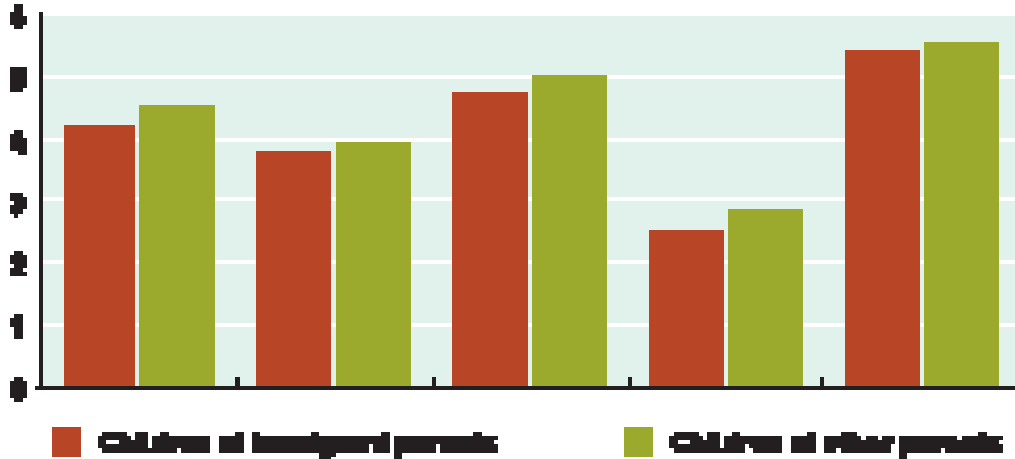


Figure 3. Disparities in quality among 615 California preschools serving children of immigrant and non-immigrant parents



Note: Quality indicators based on classroom observations with scores pegged to a 7-point scale (Morley & Bozeman, 2011).

The 2009 survey data show that Latino children are now less likely to attend preschool part-day or full-day than White peers.

Equal Access to Quality Programs?

We know that preschools vary widely in quality, from the count of kids in classrooms to the responsive and stimulating skills of teachers.⁴ We saw how Latino children enroll in academically focused preschools at about the same rate as whites. But along other indicators Latino children are exposed to lower quality.

Figure 3 reports disparities in quality among 615 California preschools serving children of immigrant and non-immigrant parents. The gap is cast as a fraction of a standard deviation for each indicator. The between-group difference in observed adequacy of classroom space and the quality of materials equals 0.26 SD (first pair of bars), equal to the short-term effect of attending a preschool (of average quality) for the average child from a poor family. The gap for instructional support between children of immigrant versus non-immigrant parents equals 0.29 SD (second pair from the right).

Implications Backstopping State Capacity to Lift Latino Children

As noted earlier, Over the next two generations, by 2050, one-third of all Americans will be of Latino heritage. This population will be young and often weakly

schooled all retirees will depend upon their caring and productive qualities to finance pensions and serve the elderly.⁵

Preschool alone, of course, will not ensure that Latino graduates acquire the literacy skills and social competencies required of a vibrant workforce and invigorating civil society. But we know that quality early education is among the most effective public initiatives to mature over the past half century.

Until Latino children gain equal access to preschools that display robust quality it's difficult to see how early achievement gaps can be narrowed, or how educators can stem the alienating effects of schooling felt by many children and youths.

These findings also pose tough choices for state and federal officials—as they attempt to regain momentum to widen access to, and improve the quality of, early education. The national school reform debate has shifted largely to improving the quality of teachers in the public schools. But we know that disparities in learning—including slower rates of cognitive and language development among poor Latino children—are well in place before these youngsters enter kindergarten. So, policymakers must think carefully and confront strong interest groups as they set budget priorities.

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Notes

¹Studies that detail benefits for Latino children: Bassok, Daphna.(201). “Do Black and Hispanic children benefit more from preschool? Understanding differences in preschool effects across racial groups.” *Child Development*, 81, 1828-1845. Currie, Janet.(199). “Does Head Start help Hispanic children?” *Journal of Public Economics*, 74, 235-262. Gormley Jr., William T., Gayer, Te., Phillips, Debora., an& Dawson, Brittany.(200). “The effects of universal pre-k on cognitive development.” *Developmental Psychology*, 41, 872–884. Loeb, Susann., Bridges, Margare., Bassok, Daphn., Fuller, Bruc., an& Rumberger, Russell.(200). “How much is too much? The influence of preschool centers on children’s social and cognitive development.” *Economics of Education Review*, 26, 52–66.

²For details, see: Fuller, Bruce.(200). *Standardized childhood*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

³The 1982 and 1990 estimates stem from census data and original national survey results [Willer, Barbara et al.(199). *The Demand and supply of child care in 1990, joint findings*. Washington, DC: Office of Policy and Planning, Department of Health and Human Services]. The 1991 and 2005-NHES estimates are from the periodic National Household Education Survey: West, Jerr., Wright, DeeAnn an& Hausken, Elvie G.(199). *Statistics in brief: Child care and early education program participation of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers*. Washington, DC: National Center for Educational Statistics; Fuller, Bruc. et al.(199). “Rich culture, poor markets: Why do Latino parents forgo preschooling?” *Teachers College Record*, 97, 400-418; Karoly, Lynn., an& Gonzalez, Gabriella.(201). “Early care and education for children in immigrant families.” *Future of Children*, 21, 71-101]. The 2005-ECLS and 2009-CPS estimates are by Anthony Kim and Yoonjeon Kim, Institute of Human Development, Berkeley. Estimates of means are true plus or minus 1%, given the large national samples.

⁴Review of the preschool quality literature appears in: Zigler, Edwar., Gilliam, Walter S., an& Barnett, W. Steven,(eds, 201). *The pre-k debates: Current controversies and issues*. Baltimore: Brookes Pub.

⁵Basic demographic figures appear in: Catanzarite, Lis. an& Trimble, Lindsey.(200). *The Latino workforce at mid-decade*. Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center,an. Johnson, Richard W. and Soto, Mauricio. 2009.. *50+ Hispanic workers: A Growing segment of the U.S. workforce*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.