

*Research  
Report* on  
America's Cities



Strengthening Families  
in America's Cities:  
Early Childhood  
Development

National League  
of Cities



Institute for Youth,  
Education, and Families



This report is one of a series on conditions affecting children, youth, and families in America's cities. These reports are based on a nationwide Strengthening Families Survey addressed to elected officials, made possible through the support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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*Research  
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Strengthening Families  
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*Cheryl Katz  
Christopher Hoene  
Dylan Nicole de Kervor*

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## Overview

Municipal officials play a vital role in addressing the needs of their community's youngest residents and their families. Civic leaders are highly aware of the numerous benefits associated with quality care during the first years of life, and are challenged to provide programs and services to support positive early childhood development in their communities. Cities are rising to the challenge in a number of innovative ways, with programs such as Seattle's "Safe, Healthy and Ready to Learn" initiative and San Antonio's local Head Start program, yet many of the nation's elected leaders still see early childhood care and education as among the most critical needs in their communities today.

The findings on early childhood development presented in this report are part of the National League of Cities' Strengthening Families in America's Cities Survey, which examined issues affecting children and families in American communities. The mail survey of municipal elected officials in U.S. Cities, conducted from November 2002 to March 2003, included responses from local elected officials representing 501 cities nationwide.

Among the key findings in this study:

- ❖ **Child care and early learning opportunities are seen as critical needs in many American cities.** While the majority of elected officials feel their cities are doing an adequate job meeting the needs of young children, one in four city officials still cite child care as one of the most critical program or service needs for children and families in their community, and one in 10 say early childhood education is among their community's most critical needs.
- ❖ **Despite the fact that early childhood programming has not traditionally been a municipal function, about four in 10 city officials report dedicating funds to early childhood development.** Among larger cities, nearly two-thirds of local officials report allocating city resources to early childhood development. This money goes to pay for a variety of programs and supports for young children and their families. Among all cities, for example, one in six provide some child care services for children under three, and a similar percentage offer some health and prenatal care to young residents.
- ❖ **Cities have a stake in early childhood success.** According to municipal officials, the top three reasons for investing in early childhood development are:



# Research Report

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- Children who enter school healthy and ready to learn tend to receive better grades and have fewer behavioral problems.
- It is the right thing to do. We have a moral responsibility to take care of young children.
- Children who have positive early experiences are less likely to become juvenile delinquents.
- ❖ **City officials express strong support for federal policies benefiting families with young children, including:**
  - Providing affordable, quality child care for all children.
  - Providing a preschool education for all children.
  - Providing child care assistance for low-income working families.
  - Providing early intervention and treatment for children with disabilities.

## Critical Needs

**Child care for young children stands out as a crucial need in America's cities.** When asked to name the most critical program or service needs for children and families in their community, one in four (24%) city elected officials say child care, putting this issue in second place as the most frequently-mentioned concern. In this open-ended question, with up to three mentions allowed, most of those citing child care as a top need in their community specifically name care for children under three (17%), while 7 percent say care for children three and older.



- ❖ Care for children under three is mentioned most in responses from officials in the Northeast and Midwest (21%) and West (19%), while it is mentioned by 11 percent in the South. It is considered equally important by municipal officials from large (population over 100,000, 18%), medium (50,000 to 100,000, 17%) and small (under 50,000, 16%) cities.

**Preschool or early childhood education is also seen as a pressing need.** More than one in 10 (11%) city officials rank this among the most critical needs for children and families in their community in up to three open-ended mentions, putting it among the top 10 program issues named.

- ❖ The need for preschool is most acute in large (24%) and medium-sized (14%) cities. Only 6 percent of officials from cities with populations under 50,000 rank preschool among their community's most pressing needs.
- ❖ Cities officials in the Northeast/Midwest (9%), South (12%) and West (13%) rate preschool or early childhood education as an equally critical need in their communities.

### Most Critical Program Needs in Your Community - Top 10

<i>Open-ended, up to three mentions allowed</i>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Housing affordability	28%	1
Child care	24	2
Before and afterschool programs	22	3
Drug and alcohol abuse prevention and treatment	22	3
Employment opportunities for adults	20	4
Parenting education/promoting parental responsibility	17	5
Raising children to have healthy, constructive values	15	6
Youth employment opportunities and job training	14	7
Youth crime and violence prevention	14	7
Elder care	13	8
Child abuse and neglect prevention and intervention	11	9
Early childhood education/preschool	11	9
Youth mentoring	9	10

**One in five local (25%) leaders rate young children as one of the groups with the most critical needs in their community.** All together, in up to three open-ended mentions, 21 percent of elected officials name children under three as one of the most critical needs groups in their community. Young children are the sixth-most frequently mentioned group, following single-parents, lower-income working families, the elderly, teens, and immigrant families.

- ❖ Elected leaders from large cities are somewhat more likely to mention the needs of young children as among their community’s most critical (27%) than are those from cities with populations under 50,000 (22%) or between 50,000 and 100,000 (20%). There are no significant differences by region.

Group with the Most Critical Needs in Your Community - Top 10		
<i>Open-ended, up to three mentions allowed</i>	Total	Rank
Single-parent families	45%	1
Lower-income working families	42	2
Elderly and aging residents	34	3
Children 13 and older	27	4
Immigrant families	23	5
Children under 3	21	6
Non-parent family members raising children (kinship care)	18	7
Children with disabilities/special needs	17	8
Families receiving public assistance	13	9
Children aged 3-5	11	10

**While many American communities see the needs of their youngest residents as being adequately met, significant gaps exist.** More than six in 10 (66%) elected officials rate their communities as *adequate* or better in meeting the needs of young children and their families. Still, a sizeable number say young children in their communities are being *less-than-adequately* served in the areas of child care (38%), child abuse prevention (33%) and meeting the overall needs of children under three (34%). One in five say the availability of early childhood education in their community is below the minimum acceptable level (20%), and one in four say their community’s health and prenatal care for children is inadequate (26%).

- ❖ The lack of services for young children is especially severe in the nation’s large metropolitan areas: a majority of leaders from cities with a population of 100,000 or over say the child care needs for children under three are being *less-than-adequately* met (51%). Between 30 and 40 percent of officials in large cities report deficiencies in meeting the overall needs of young children, addressing child abuse and neglect, providing preschool or early education programs, and meeting children’s health and prenatal care needs.



- ❖ The gaps between needs and services are also greater in the West and South than the Northeast and Midwest. For instance, nearly half of cities in the West (49%) and 39 percent in the South do not have adequate child care for children under three; this number drops to 30 percent in the Northeast/Midwest.

**How Well Needs of Young Children Are Being Met in Your Community**

	City Population				Region		
	Total	Under 50,000	50,000-99,999	100,000 or more	Northeast /Midwest	South	West
<b>Overall needs of children under 3</b>							
More than adequate	8%	7%	9%	9%	10%	6%	6%
Adequate	58	59	61	53	65	53	58
Less than adequate	34	34	30	38	25	41	36
<b>Early childhood education/preschool</b>							
More than adequate	17%	18%	22%	9%	28%	13%	9%
Adequate	63	64	60	59	61	60	70
Less than adequate	20	18	18	32	11	27	21
<b>Child care for children under 3</b>							
More than adequate	9%	9%	12%	6%	11%	9%	6%
Adequate	53	57	50	43	59	52	45
Less than adequate	38	34	38	51	30	39	49
<b>Children's health and prenatal care</b>							
More than adequate	11%	10%	16%	13%	15%	11%	8%
Adequate	63	66	62	53	68	60	59
Less than adequate	26	24	22	34	17	29	33
<b>Child abuse and neglect prevention and intervention</b>							
More than adequate	8%	7%	14%	6%	12%	7%	5%
Adequate	59	60	60	56	64	53	62
Less than adequate	33	33	26	38	24	40	33

## Funding and Allocation of Resources

More than one in three (38%) cities dedicate at least some resources to early childhood development. One in six local elected officials say their city is allocating either a *great deal* (4%) or a *good amount* (11%) of its municipal budget to programs and services promoting early childhood development, while another 23 percent report spending *some*. Fifty-seven percent of cities have either nothing (48%) or *very little* (9%) in their city budget for early childhood development.

- ❖ Large cities are much more likely to have city funds dedicated to programs and services supporting early childhood development (63% say their budget contains at least some early childhood resources).
- ❖ Cities in the West are more likely than those in the Northeast/Midwest to dedicate municipal funds to services benefiting the learning and development of their youngest residents.

### Municipal Budget Includes Spending on Early Childhood Development

	City Population				Region		
	Total	Under 50,000	50,000-99,999	100,000 or more	Northeast /Midwest	South	West
<i>A great deal or good amount</i>	15%	10%	21%	29%	14%	15%	18%
<i>Some</i>	23	18	32	34	23	17	32
<i>Very little or none</i>	57	67	44	29	56	63	47
<i>Don't know</i>	5	5	3	8	7	5	3

Nearly half of cities have increased overall spending on programs and services for children and families over the past five years. In 2003, 47 percent of city officials report spending either *somewhat* (35%) or *much more* (12%) than five years prior. However, this growth is somewhat slower than in the past. In the 1995 National League of Cities survey, 57 percent of local officials reported increasing their budget for children over the previous five years, with 44 percent spending *somewhat more*, and 13 percent spending *much more*.

- ❖ Spending on services for children and families has grown more in large (54%) and medium-sized (59%) cities than in smaller communities (44%).
- ❖ Municipal budgets for child and family services are much more likely to have grown in the West, where nearly two in three cities have increased their spending at least somewhat over the past five years (63%), compared to 42 percent in the rest of the country.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This increase in spending in Western cities may be a function of a larger number of cities with populations over 100,000, a faster growing population of children in Western cities, and/or increased availability of funds as a result of California's Proposition 10.

**Spending On Services for Children and Families - Today Compared to Five Years Ago**

	2003							
	Total 2003	Total 1995	City Population			Region		
			Under 50,000	50,000- 99,999	100,000 or more	Northeast /Midwest	South	West
<i>Somewhat/much more</i>	47%	57%	44%	59%	54%	42%	42%	63%
<i>Same amount</i>	42	36	45	32	38	46	47	29
<i>Somewhat/much less</i>	11	7	11	9	8	12	11	8

**Elected officials overwhelmingly support allocating resources to early childhood development.** Though cities may not currently have the capacity available to dedicate municipal finances to early childhood development initiatives, strong majorities of elected officials say that the following reasons to do so are *very important* to their municipal government:

- Children who enter school healthy and ready to learn tend to get better grades and have fewer behavioral problems (74%);
- Children who have positive early childhood experiences are less likely to become juvenile delinquents (74%);
- Children who have positive early childhood experiences are more likely to have higher rates of workforce participation and earnings (69%);
- Children who have positive early childhood experiences are less likely to need social services as an adult (66%);
- The availability of high-quality, affordable child care can improve job performance and economic stability for working parents (64%);
- It's the right thing to do. We have a moral responsibility to take care of young children (60%).

Asked in an open-ended question to name the *most* persuasive reason for their community to fiscally support programs and services for early childhood development, officials cited the beneficial effect on school performance as the top reason (30%), followed by one in five saying simply that *it's the right thing to do* (22%), and 13 percent stressing the later reduction in juvenile crime. Interestingly, there are no significant differences by city size or region in views of the most compelling reason to support early childhood education.

*In Seattle, Washington the city's Families and Education Levy generates roughly \$9.5 million per year. Through this property tax levy, the city provides a variety of programs to ensure that Seattle's children are "safe, healthy and ready to learn." Over 10% of this funding has been used to support early childhood programs run through the city's Human Services Department, including child care subsidies for families.*

# Research Report

The City of Aspen, Colorado collects dedicated local tax dollars for early childhood programs. Through the 0.45% Affordable Housing/Day Care Sales Tax, Aspen funds the “Kids First” Childcare Resource Department, which administers a financial aid program to help defray the costs of child care to eligible families enrolled with licensed child care providers. In 2002, over \$190,000 was allocated to the financial aid program, helping more than 70 families meet their child care costs.

## Reasons to Allocate Municipal Resources to Early Childhood Development

	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
<i>Children who enter school healthy and ready to learn tend to get better grades and have fewer behavioral problems</i>	74%	19%	7%
<i>Children who have positive early experiences are less likely to become juvenile delinquents</i>	74	20	6
<i>Children who have positive early experiences are more likely to have higher rates of workforce participation and earnings</i>	69	24	7
<i>Children who have positive early experiences are less likely to need social services as an adult</i>	66	26	8
<i>The availability of high-quality, affordable child care can improve job performance and economic stability for working parents</i>	64	29	7
<i>It's the right thing to do. We have a moral responsibility to take care of young children</i>	60	32	8
<i>Communities that make a commitment to supporting working families attract better workers</i>	56	36	8

## Direct Services for Early Childhood

**More than one in five (22%) cities of all sizes – and more than four in 10 (42%) large cities – are directly involved in providing early childhood education.** Another 12 percent have a department or city staff in place, while 11 percent have a commission or task force working on the issue. Municipal officials advocate or convene events promoting early childhood education in one in six (17%) communities.

- ❖ City size is a factor in direct service provision, with 42 percent of large cities and 34 percent of medium-sized cities providing early childhood education as a direct service. The largest cities are also much more likely to have a city department or staff (25%), a commission or task force (27%), and city officials advocating for early childhood programs (33%). Two in three cities under 50,000 and 43 percent of medium-sized cities have no involvement in this issue, compared to 29 percent of the largest cities.
- ❖ Early childhood education is far more likely to be provided by cities in the West (37%) than the Northeast/Midwest (19%) or the South (15%).

**One in five cities have a direct-service program for child abuse and neglect prevention and intervention.** A similar number (19%) have city staff or a department administering this program, while about one in six have a city commission (14%) or local officials providing leadership (15%) on this issue. Fewer than half, but a still-substantial 42 percent, have no municipal involvement in child abuse and neglect prevention and intervention.

- ❖ In the largest cities, 40 percent have child abuse and neglect prevention as a direct service, compared to 24 percent of medium-sized cities and only 14 percent of smaller ones. All sizes of cities have similar rates of city staff and civic leadership on this issue.
- ❖ Cities in the West are substantially more likely to have a child abuse and neglect prevention program as a direct service (27%), while all regions have similar rates of other types of municipal participation on this issue.

**One in six cities provide child care for children under three (16%) and children's health and prenatal care (15%) as direct services.** About one in 10 have city staff or a commission dealing with either of these needs, and 17 percent say their municipal officials advocate on each of these issues. Six in 10 communities, however, have no city involvement in either of these needs of young children.

- ❖ Again, large cities are much more likely to provide these services. Approximately one-third offer child care for children under three and have health and prenatal care as a direct service. More than a quarter

*The City of Kokomo, Indiana operates a child care center licensed to serve 120 children ages two to 12 years old. The Kokomo Community Day Care Center is funded through the city's general fund budget and with parent fees. It is the only city-owned and operated child care program in the state of Indiana.*

# Research Report

As part of a broader set of early childhood initiatives, the City of San Antonio, Texas runs a local Head Start program that serves preschool age children and their families. Head Start is a federally funded program that provides comprehensive health and early education services for at-risk children from low-income families.

of large cities also have staff or a department providing children’s health and prenatal care (28%), although fewer have a child care staff (17%).

- ❖ Cities in the West are more likely to provide child care for young children as a direct service (26%), to have a city commission and/or department (29%), and to have municipal leadership on this issue (26%). There are no regional differences in municipal involvement in children’s health care, with nearly half of communities in all parts of the nation having some involvement in this issue.

Of those city officials that report spending municipal funds on programs and services promoting early childhood development, the most common investment is in the provision of early childhood education as a direct service (47%). More than a third (35%) of cities earmarking funds to early childhood development provide child care for children under three as a direct service, and more than one in four support programs that promote child health (28%) or address child abuse and neglect (35%).

## Municipal Involvement in Services to Young Children

Percent involved in each (multiple responses allowed)	City Population			Region			
	Total	Under 50,000	50,000- 99,999	100,000 or more	Northeast /Midwest	South	West
<b>Early childhood education</b>							
Direct service	22%	14%	34%	42%	19%	15%	37%
City staff or department	12	7	18	25	15	8	15
Commission or task force	11	7	5	27	11	7	16
Officials lead or advocate	17	11	19	33	15	16	21
No involvement	55	66	43	29	59	65	37
<b>Child care</b>							
Direct service	16%	8%	29%	33%	15%	11%	26%
City staff or department	7	4	11	17	7	5	12
Commission or task force	10	7	13	21	8	8	17
Officials lead or advocate	17	12	19	31	15	12	26
No involvement	60	71	41	36	63	69	42
<b>Health and prenatal care</b>							
Direct service	15%	8%	19%	35%	14%	16%	15%
City staff or department	10	5	11	28	13	8	10
Commission or task force	11	8	11	20	10	8	16
Officials lead or advocate	17	13	16	29	20	14	15
No involvement	60	70	54	31	61	63	54
<b>Child abuse and neglect prevention and intervention</b>							
Direct service	20%	14%	24%	40%	18%	17%	27%
City staff or department	19	17	25	19	22	17	18
Commission or task force	14	13	12	19	10	15	18
Officials lead or advocate	15	14	16	21	18	11	17
No involvement	42	48	37	25	42	47	35

## Federal Policy

**City officials express strong support for federal policies benefiting families with young children.** Asked about four federal policy objectives concerning families with young children in their communities, local leaders support all four:

- Providing early intervention and treatment for children with disabilities (60%);
- Providing child care assistance for low-income working families who do not qualify for other forms of assistance (55%);
- Providing a preschool education for all children (53%);
- Providing affordable, quality child care for all children (52%).

Support for all four policies is solid in all sizes of communities, but is especially strong in the largest cities. Similarly, all regions show high levels of support for all four policies, but favor is especially high in the South.

**Support for Federal Policy Objectives for Young Children**

	City Population				Region		
	Total	Under 50,000	50,000-99,999	100,000 or more	Northeast /Midwest	South	West
<b><i>Providing early intervention and treatment for children with disabilities</i></b>							
Strongly favor	60%	59%	59%	61%	57%	70%	48%
Somewhat favor	33	33	33	36	33	26	44
Oppose	5	6	5	2	7	2	6
Don't know	2	2	3	1	3	2	2
<b><i>Providing child care assistance for low-income working families</i></b>							
Strongly favor	55%	52%	55%	63%	48%	63%	52%
Somewhat favor	34	36	31	30	41	31	31
Oppose	8	9	10	5	8	5	13
Don't know	3	3	4	2	3	1	4
<b><i>Providing a preschool education for all children</i></b>							
Strongly favor	53%	48%	55%	61%	48%	63%	43%
Somewhat favor	33	37	26	27	36	27	38
Oppose	12	13	15	10	13	9	16
Don't know	2	2	4	2	3	1	3
<b><i>Providing affordable, quality child care for all children</i></b>							
Strongly favor	52%	49%	51%	66%	45%	63%	46%
Somewhat favor	32	34	33	26	39	26	33
Oppose	14	15	13	7	14	10	19
Don't know	2	2	3	1	2	1	2

## Economic Impacts

Despite the economic downturn, conditions for children and families have remained largely *status quo* over the past two years, and city leaders are cautiously optimistic about the future. Throughout the nation, 50 percent of local elected officials say that overall conditions for families and children in their communities are about the same today as they were two years ago. One in three (33%) think there has been improvement, while only 16 percent believe conditions have worsened. As for the next two years, optimism edges up slightly, with 38 percent predicting things will get better and 35 percent thinking there will be little change. Still, 18 percent expect conditions for children and families to get worse.

- ❖ The view of the large cities is bleaker: two in 10 (20%) municipal elected officials believe conditions for children and families in their communities have gotten worse over the past two years, and three in 10 (30%) think conditions will deteriorate in the future. Cities in the West also appear to have been harder-hit by recent trends: about one in four say things have gotten worse in the past two years (24%) and expect further decline in the next two years (26%).

Conditions for Children and Families Over Time

	City Population				Region		
	Total	Under 50,000	50,000-99,999	100,000 or more	Northeast /Midwest	South	West
<b>Past two years</b>							
Improved	33%	30%	42%	37%	29%	32%	39%
Worsened	16	14	15	20	14	12	24
Stayed about the same	50	55	40	42	55	54	37
Don't know	1	1	3	1	2	2	--
<b>Next two years</b>							
Improved	38%	37%	42%	40%	37%	39%	40%
Worsened	18	14	18	30	17	13	26
Stayed about the same	35	39	32	23	35	39	28
Don't know	9	10	8	7	11	9	6

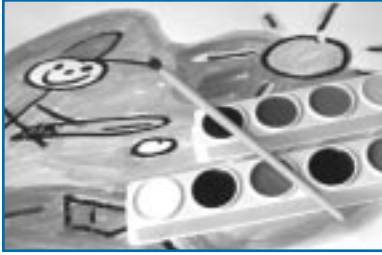
## The Institute for Youth, Education, and Families

The Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, a special entity within the National League of Cities, helps municipal leaders take action on behalf of children, youth, and families within their communities. NLC launched the Institute in January 2000 in recognition of the unique and influential roles that mayors, city council members, and other local leaders can play in strengthening families and improving outcomes for youth and children.

As a national resource to cities and towns across America, the Institute provides guidance and assistance to municipal officials, compiles and disseminates information on promising strategies and best practices, builds networks of local officials working on similar issues and concerns, and conducts research on the key challenges facing municipalities. NLC's council on Youth, Education and Families guides and oversees the Institute's work.

The Institute provides a variety of resources specifically related to municipal leadership to promote early childhood success, including: a national network of city officials and staff interested in early care and education; an action kit for local officials; a community assessment tool to clarify early childhood needs and resources; and periodic workshops and audioconferences. In addition, early childhood success has been the focus of NLC's 2003 President, Mayor John DeStefano of New Haven, Connecticut. As a result, approximately 100 municipal officials have committed to creating early childhood plans for their cities. For more information on NLC's early childhood work, contact: Kirsta Millar at 202-626-3004 or millar@nlc.org.





## About the Survey

The National League of Cities' Strengthening Families in America's Cities Survey, examining issues affecting children and families in American communities, is based on a mail survey of municipal elected officials. The survey, conducted from November 2002 to March 2003, included responses from 501 cities nationwide.

The survey followed the methods used in previous National League of Cities surveys on children and families conducted in 1995 and 1988. For the current survey, questionnaires were mailed to 1,981 elected officials from cities nationwide. Surveys were sent to all cities with populations of 50,000 or more; a total of 640 cities. Surveys were also sent to a random, representative sample of cities with populations of less than 50,000; a total of 1,341 cities. The surveys were addressed to the mayor or highest elected officer of each city, and a cover letter asked that the survey be completed by an elected official.

An initial mailing was sent in November 2002. Mail, fax and telephone follow-ups were made with cities that did not respond to the initial mailing. The survey was closed out in March 2003. The 25% response rate is in line with response rates expected for mail surveys of this type.

This study is part of NLC's Program on Strengthening Families. Supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the program is carrying out multi-faceted efforts to mobilize community leaders and municipal officials in meeting the needs of children and families.

*Cheryl Katz is vice-president of Baldassare Associates, a Kensington, California-based public-opinion research firm specializing in child and family issues.*

*Christopher Hoene is the Research Manager at the National League of Cities in Washington, D.C.*

*Dylan Nicole de Kervor is a staff assistant at the National League of Cities in Washington, D.C.*

The authors would like to thank the IYEF staff, the guidance of John Kyle, who led NLC's previous survey efforts on these topics in 1988-89 and 1995-96, and Julie Bosland and Kirsta Millar in particular for their insight and editorial contributions.



**National League of Cities**  
1301 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20004  
[www.nlc.org](http://www.nlc.org)