

Head Start Community Assessment 2025

Tacoma Public Schools

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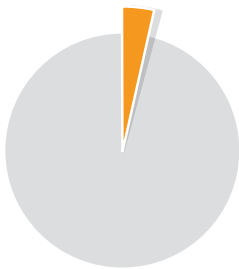
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Executive Summary

The 2024-2025 Head Start Community Needs Assessment for Tacoma Public Schools (TPS) provides a comprehensive overview of early childhood education and family support needs in the Tacoma area. The report reveals significant demographic and socioeconomic trends that underscore the critical importance of Head Start programming.

The Tacoma area has experienced notable demographic shifts, with an increasing number of residents identifying as multiracial. The population of children under five has declined since 2021 in both the City of Tacoma and Pierce County; however, rising poverty levels, especially among families with children, are of particular concern, highlighting the growing need for support services.



The Tacoma Public Schools Head Start program currently serves 400 children. Despite this, the program reaches only a fraction of eligible children.

Only **4%** of income-eligible children in the City of Tacoma are served by TPS Head Start.



The program's current enrollment

reflects the community's complex needs.

Most students qualify based on income, while some qualify based on other categories, including:

240 children from families receiving public assistance,

76 children are unhoused, and

10 children are in foster care.

Sources: ACS Table S1701 - City of Tacoma, 2023



The assessment identified several key challenges facing families and the Head Start program. Housing instability remains a persistent issue, with an increasing number of families experiencing housing challenges. The program also faces resource limitations, including a shortage of community support systems and difficulties aligning program hours with the needs of working families.

Despite these challenges, the Head Start program demonstrates significant strengths. The program boasts high-quality educators and consistent programming, providing comprehensive wraparound services that support both children and their families. Its strong integration with the Tacoma School District and commitment to serving all eligible

children and families stand out as key positive attributes.

The implications of this assessment are clear: there is a substantial unmet need for early childhood education and family support services in the Tacoma area. While the Head Start program provides crucial support, the gap between eligible children and those served remains significant. The findings suggest a need for strategic expansion and continued investment in early childhood education. The Head Start program remains a vital resource for supporting low-income families and promoting early childhood development in the Tacoma community, offering a critical lifeline for children and families facing economic challenges.

Head Start Purpose and Community Importance

Head Start Preschool is a federally funded early childhood education program designed for children ages 3-4 from low-income households. The program extends beyond traditional educational paradigms to promote comprehensive school readiness by fostering cognitive, social, and emotional development through integrated education, health, nutrition, and family engagement services.

The program employs a multigenerational approach, engaging both children and their families while recognizing parents and caregivers as children's primary educators. Head Start addresses developmental needs holistically, encompassing educational, health, nutritional, social, and emotional domains. Participants receive comprehensive health screenings, nutritious meals, and access to medical, dental, and mental health services.

Head Start's significance to the Tacoma community manifests through multiple channels.

The program aims to disrupt intergenerational poverty cycles through early intervention and academic preparation while also addressing achievement disparities between the general population and vulnerable demographic groups. The program effectively identifies developmental delays and learning disabilities at key early intervention points and facilitates community integration by connecting families with support resources and strengthening community networks. Outcome measurements demonstrate program efficacy with increases in multiple kindergarten readiness scores.

Why do we conduct an assessment?

This report provides comprehensive data analysis relevant to Head Start Annual Report requirements while offering detailed insights into early childhood education needs throughout the Tacoma area. Federal Head Start Program Performance Standards (45 CFR §1302.11) mandate all Head Start programs conduct a community assessment once during their five-year grant cycle, with annual updates documenting significant demographic or community changes. This regulatory requirement ensures programs maintain responsiveness to evolving community needs and demographic shifts. The assessment must evaluate the eligible Head Start population,

available child development programs, community resources, and specific needs of eligible families to inform strategic program planning and service delivery optimization.

This assessment functions as an essential tool for strategic planning, resource allocation, and program development. Additionally, the assessment demonstrates accountability to decision-makers by documenting both programmatic achievements and persistent challenges, while establishing baseline measures against which future progress can be evaluated.

What do we want to learn?

Through this assessment, we aim to learn about the population served by Head Start in the Tacoma area, going beyond basic data analysis to understand the complex interrelationships between factors affecting child development and family stability. We have prioritized utilizing the most current data available, predominantly from 2022-2024, to ensure decisions reflect current circumstances.

The assessment examines data across multiple geographic delineations—Pierce County, Tacoma School District, and Tacoma Census County Division—to illuminate variations in needs and resources across geographic and demographic boundaries. This multi-dimensional approach facilitates the identification of underserved communities and populations experiencing unique challenges. By disaggregating data according to race, income levels, household composition, and other critical variables, we can identify disparities in service access and developmental outcomes, leading to more specific intervention strategies.

How did we conduct this assessment?

This assessment employed a mixed-methods approach combining analysis of secondary data sources with qualitative research methodologies to provide comprehensive context and enhanced understanding of findings. In addition to quantitative analysis, we conducted a focus group with the Parent Policy Committee and structured interviews with Head Start administrative, educational, and medical personnel. These qualitative components proved essential for contextualizing statistical data through both experiential and professional perspectives.

For quantitative data, we implemented a systematic analytical approach: initially identifying key indicators aligned with Head Start program requirements and community priorities, then methodically identifying the most current and reliable data sources for each indicator. Analytical procedures included standardizing information from diverse sources, and identifying significant patterns and trends. Most quantitative data originated from publicly available secondary sources, ensuring methodological transparency and analytical replicability.



Our Head Start Service Area

Tacoma Public Schools (TPS) is an essential public education system serving approximately 30,000 students. This network includes 36 elementary schools, 12 middle schools, 5 innovative high schools, and K-12 online school, creating a robust educational landscape that reflects the city's needs. The Tacoma Head Start program is an important part of this system.

The school district's geographic boundaries extend beyond the strict limits of Tacoma, covering portions of the city, areas of Pierce County, and parts of neighboring communities. Pierce County is a broad population of nearly one million residents, including 113,056 households with children under 18. The TPS District serves approximately one-quarter of Pierce County's population. The TPS District

and Tacoma Census County Division represent distinct geographic areas within the county. The School District is an educational jurisdiction governed by an elected school board. In contrast, the Tacoma Census County Division encompasses approximately twice the population and serves as a statistical area defined by the U.S. Census Bureau rather than an administrative entity.

Our Head Start program is situated in the TPS district, but we will share data from our larger region when it's important to tell the story of our community.

Relationship Between the Geographic Data Areas You Will See in this Report

- **Tacoma Public School District:** Covers most of the City of Tacoma but does not perfectly match city limits. It includes some areas just outside the City of Tacoma proper.
- **City of Tacoma:** This is the formal geographical city limits and is close to the school district boundary.
- **Tacoma Census County Division:** A statistical area used for Census data that covers approximately twice the population of this school district. This includes the City of Tacoma and suburban areas.
- **Pierce County:** The county in which Tacoma is situated. Data includes all cities and population centers within the county.

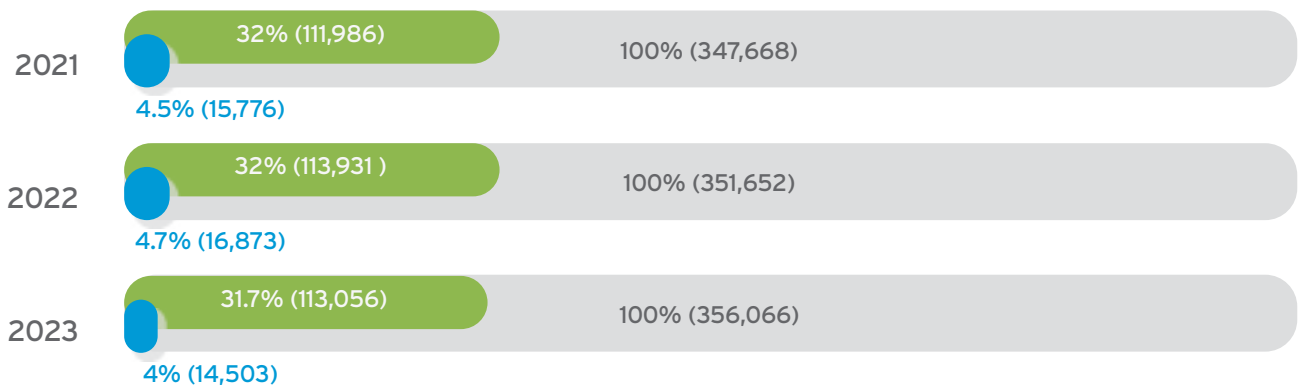
On this page are details about households in the City of Tacoma and Pierce County.

“Household” is defined by the ACS as all individuals who occupy a housing unit as their usual place of residence, including related and unrelated people, and excludes those staying for less than two consecutive months.

Households

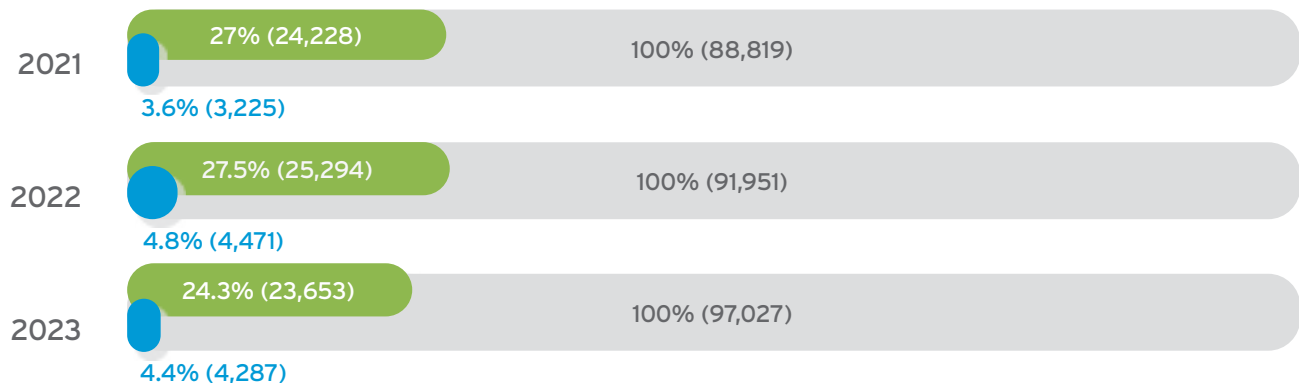
- Total households
- Households with one or more people under 18 years
- Female households, no spouse/partner present, with children of the householder under 18 years

Households in Pierce County



Source: ACS Table DP02 Pierce County

Households in the City of Tacoma



Source: ACS Table DP02 City of Tacoma

Population and Demographics

The total population within the Tacoma Census District shows growth between 2021 and 2023. When considering race, the number of individuals identifying as two or more races is increasing, while those identifying as white in decreasing.



Population trends in Tacoma show the number of people who identify as more than one race have increased.

**Tacoma Census District Population
by Race 2021-2023**

	2021	2022	2023
All	474,542	476,879	477,498
White	293,335	286,232	277,133
Black	48,139	49,964	49,386
AI/AN	6,971	7,184	6,612
Asian	40,058	40,559	40,143
NH/PI	9,734	9,591	9,504
Other	19,401	19,841	22,081
2+	56,904	63,508	72,639

**Tacoma Census District Population
by Ethnicity 2021-2023**

	2021	2022	2023
Latinx	925,708	927,380	92,8696
Non- Latinx	812,507	810,835	807,176

Source: ACS Table DP05





Nearly one half of the population living in the Tacoma School District is non-White.

Tacoma Head Start Service Area Demographics

	2023
AI/AN	1%
Black or African American	8%
Asian	9%
Some Other Race	1%
Latinx	14%
Two or More Races	10%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1%
White	56%
Source: Census Reporter	



Birth rates for Pierce County
have varied since 2021.

These numbers show the number of women between the ages of 15-50 who gave birth in the last 12 months in Pierce County. There was an increase in 2022, but a decrease in 2023. We do not have data for 2024 so it's too soon to say this is a declining trend.

Number of Births in Pierce County, 2021-2023

2021	2022	2023
10,714	12,930	11,412

Source: ACS Table B13002 - Pierce Co.

Data for grandparents caring for grandchildren has not changed in recent years, but the number of households led by a female in the house without a partner or spouse has slightly increased.



Family structure data in Pierce County show that more children are living in households led by a single female.

Pierce County Family Structure 2021-2023

	2021	2022	2023
Percentage of grandparents caring for grandchildren	1.2%	1.1%	1.1%
Percentage of children that live in a household headed by a female householder with no spouse/partner present	4.7%	4.3%	5%

Source: ACS Table B10063, ACS Table DP02



The population of children under the age of 5 has decreased in the City of Tacoma, the Census County Division, and the County since 2021.

Population under 5: City of Tacoma

	2021	2022	2023
Total Population	925,708	927,380	928,696
Population Under Age 5	56,424	55,187	54,936

Source: ACS Table DP05: City of Tacoma

Population under 5: Tacoma Census District

	2021	2022	2023
Total Population	474,542	476,879	477,498
Population Under Age 5	29,263	28,236	27,793

Source: ACS Table DP05: City of Tacoma

Population under 5: Pierce County

	2021	2022	2023
Total Population	925,708	927,380	928,696
Population Under Age 5	56,424	55,187	54,936

Source: ACS Table DP05: City of Tacoma

Food Access

Access to healthy food is important for community health, and low-income families who are eligible for Head Start often face challenges affording highly nutritious food. The map of the Tacoma area below shows the location of grocery stores, as well as food pantries and organizations where meals are served to low-income families. The fully interactive map with the names of these organizations is maintained by Pierce County government in collaboration with food bank organizations.¹ There are a variety of organizations providing access to food in Pierce County. There are 43 food banks listed on the Pierce County website with links to websites for community partner organizations providing free food, gardens, urban farming, gleaning, and drive-through grocery options.

¹[Food Banks | Pierce County, WA - Official Website ; Find Food - Emergency Food Network; Partner-Programs-by-City-2023](#)

Tacoma area
food banks and food pantries



Source: Pierce County government website, 2025

Pierce County Food Access Resources

- 43 food banks/pantries in City of Tacoma
- Senior nutrition program
- Home-delivered meals for different populations

Access to primary care doctors, mental health providers, and dentists.

Access to medical resources in Pierce County varies in comparison to what is available across the state, with less access to primary care physicians, about the same access to dentists, and better access to mental health providers.

2021

There was one primary care physician per 1,390 people in Pierce County. This is a bit worse than the state rate of 1,200:1.

2022

There was one dentist per 1,170 people registered in Pierce County. This is about the same as the state rate of 1,150:1.

2023

There was one mental health provider per 170 people registered in Pierce County. This is slightly better than the state rate of 200:1.

Sources: County Health Rankings. These data are the most recent dates reported for each indicator.

Head Start Eligible Population

Head Start Eligibility Criteria



Poverty Status in Pierce County, meaning those who have income below the federal poverty level, has changed for some races but not others.

Poverty Status in the Last 12 Months by Race in Pierce County

	2021	2022	2023	Trend*
All	904,999	904,534	904,852	≈
White	583,520	582,512	571,900	∨
Black	63,892	63,908	63,021	∨
AI/AN	13,648	9,626	6,944	∨
Asian	59,182	60,723	62,588	∧
NH/PI	15,014	15,562	14,524	∨
Other	31,419	29,043	36,702	∧
2+	138,324	143,160	149,173	∧

Poverty Status in the Last 12 Months by Ethnicity in Pierce County

	2021	2022	2023	Trend*
Latinx	109,925	111,781	117,659	∧
Non-Latinx	563,645	557,919	549,823	∨

Source: ACS Table S1701 - Pierce Co.

Head Start eligibility is primarily determined by family income and the child's age, with priority given to those in greatest need. To be income-eligible, families must have an income at or below the federal poverty level, set at \$31,200 for a family of four for the 2024-2025 program year. Families with incomes between 100-130% of the poverty threshold may also qualify if there is available enrollment capacity. Program regulations allow up to 10% of children from families exceeding income limits and up to an additional 35% from families with incomes up to 130% of the poverty threshold under specific conditions. (Currently, 11% of the Tacoma Head Start). Standard Head Start programs serve preschool age children ages 3-4, while Early Head Start serves pregnant women and children under age 3. **This assessment includes the standard Head Start programming provided by the Tacoma School District.**

Children experiencing homelessness, in foster care, and with disabilities, and children in families receiving public assistance like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) are categorically eligible. At least 10% of enrollment capacity must be reserved for children with disabilities.

Programs may use alternative eligibility criteria with federal approval in high-poverty areas. Eligibility verification requires documentation of household income, residential status, and the child's age. Once enrolled, children remain eligible for the entire program year, regardless of changes in family circumstances.

*We determined trend by a change of 500 people or more between 2021 and 2023

Income and Earnings

Income, receipt of public assistance, and poverty levels are critical factors for understanding the needs of families. They are also important for understanding the need for low-income education programs such as Head Start. Overall, incomes have increased across Pierce County and within the Tacoma School district since 2021, however, as will be demonstrated later in this section, poverty levels have risen.



Earnings for individuals in Pierce County with year-round jobs have increased.

Earnings in the last 12 months Pierce County	2021	2022	2023
Median Income	\$47,462	\$51,829	\$52,254

Source: ACS Table 2001 Pierce County



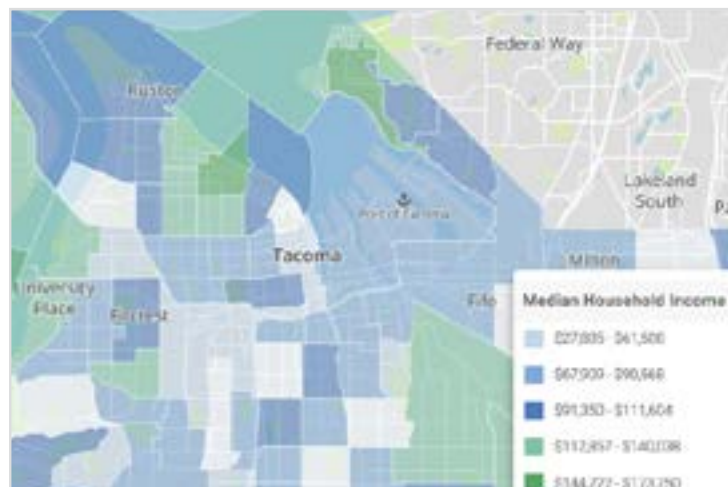
Earnings for households in the City of Tacoma have also increased.

Earnings in the last 12 months in the City of Tacoma	2021	2022	2023
Median Income	\$46,411	\$52,008	\$52,279

Source: ACS Table 2001 City of Tacoma



Despite the increase in earnings, the City of Tacoma has some of the lowest median incomes in the region.



Source: Pierce County Government, 2023 Median Household Income by Census Tract.²

²[Median Household Income across Pierce County Map](#) | [Open Pierce County](#)

Poverty Trends

Poverty levels have decreased or remained unchanged in the Tacoma census county division and across Pierce County and the City of Tacoma.



In the City of Tacoma, poverty has decreased slightly since 2021, but almost half of all families are still experiencing poverty.

City of Tacoma Poverty 2021-2023	2021	2022	2023
Percentage of people under age 18 in poverty	20.4%	19.5%	18.6%
Percentage of families with [related] children under 18 living below poverty level	44.6%	46.0%	42.6%

Sources: ACS Table S1701, 1702



Poverty for those under age 18 in Pierce County is unchanged from 2021, but a substantial proportion of families remain in poverty.

Poverty Status Pierce County	2021	2022	2023
Percentage of people under age 18 in poverty	23.1%	22.8%	22.8%
Percentage of families with [related] children under 18 living below poverty level	46.7%	47.3%	47.4%

Sources: ACS Table S1701, 1702



The number of children under the age of 5 experiencing poverty in the City of Tacoma and Pierce County as a whole has decreased slightly since 2021. However, the number of people below the poverty level in the City of Tacoma overall is still substantial.



The number of children under age 5 in poverty has decreased in the City of Tacoma but only decreased slightly in Pierce County.

Poverty Status in the Last 12 Months in the City of Tacoma (age under 5 years)

2021	2022	2023
13,276	12,854	9,193

Poverty Status in the Last 12 Months in Pierce County (age under 5 years)

2021	2022	2023
54,222	54,050	53,624

Source: ACS Table S1701 - City of Tacoma, Pierce County



Unhoused Population Trends



Homeless trends in Pierce County show that unhoused people have more than doubled since 2021.

The point-in-time (PIT) count for Pierce County shows an increase in those counted as homeless and a decrease of households with children counted as homeless. The PIT Count is performed once per year by teams of individuals going throughout the community and counting those who are visibly homeless either in shelter, unsheltered, or living in a vehicle. While this is considered one of the best indicators of homelessness rates, it is important to recognize that it is a one-time snapshot and that circumstances can change.

Pierce County Point-in-Time Count 2021-2024

Homelessness (PIT)	2021	2022	2023	2024
All	1,005	1,851	2,148	2,661
Households with children	11%	7%	7%	7%

Source: Pierce County Point-in-Time Count



Pierce County's homeless crisis response teams are serving an increasing number of people.

Pierce County's homeless crisis response system counts those who receive shelter services or assistance with rent. This data shows that they served nearly 3,000 more people in 2023 than in 2021.

Homeless Crisis Response 2021-2023

	2021	2022	2023
Total served	13,622	16,937	19,309
Under 18	21%	20%	20%

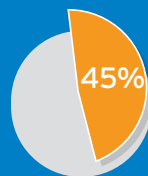
Source: Pierce County Homeless Crisis Response System

In addition to population numbers, the Point-in-Time Count also captures information on the reasons for being unhoused, with housing affordability, family crises and eviction, the major contributing factors. Almost half (45%) of people reported having some income.

Pierce County's Point-in-Time count shows the top three reasons for being unhoused are:

- No affordable housing
- Family crisis
- Eviction

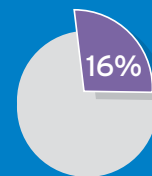
It's important to understand that some people who report being unhoused in Pierce County do have income.



**Report
some
income**



**Report
no
income**



**Not
reported**

Housing Cost Trends

Housing costs can have a significant impact on the economic well-being of families, including their ability to retain stable housing, and afford high quality nutrition, medical care, and childcare



Rent prices in Pierce County have increased while home purchase prices have stayed about the same.

Pierce County Housing Trends 2022-2024

	2022	2023	2024
Median house sales price	\$530,000	\$525,000	533,750
Median Rent	\$1,546	\$1,691	\$1,802
Sources: Redfin, ACS Table DP04 - Pierce Co.			

Disability Data

Disability	2022	2023	2024
City of Tacoma	13,745	13,327	9,452
Tacoma Census County Division	29,263	28,236	27,793
Pierce County	56,424	55,187	54,936

Source: ACS Table S1810 City of Tacoma, Tacoma Census County Division, Pierce County



The Under Age Five Populations with Disabilities in the City of Tacoma, the Tacoma Census County Division, and Pierce County have decreased.



Nutrition

The use of nutrition support services is a crucial indicator of need for families and children. Key services include the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the receipt of Basic Food resources, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).



The number of households with children under 18 receiving SNAP have fluctuated since 2021.

Receipt of SSI, cash public assistance income, or food stamps/ SNAP in the past 12 months by household type for children under 18 years in households, 2021-2023, Pierce County

2021	2022	2023
50,174	53,137	48,675

Source: ACS Table B09010



The number of women, infants, and children accessing WIC services in Pierce County has stayed about the same since 2021, but the dollar amount redeemed has increased.

Women, Infant, Children (WIC) for Pierce County

WIC Data	2021	2022	2023
Total participants	24,362	23,350	24,289
Infants and children participating	17,561	16,907	17,470
Women participating	6,801	6,443	6,819
WIC food dollars redeemed	\$8,970,341	\$9,532,743	\$11,409,971

Sources: WA DOH



of children receiving Basic Food in Pierce County are between the ages of 1-5.
Source: ESA Briefing Book pg. 44

TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) for Pierce County

TANF Data	2024
Monthly average caseload	4,623

Sources: TANF/SFA/WorkFirst 2024



Kindergarten Readiness

Kindergarten readiness is assessed across six different domains: social-emotional, physical, language, cognitive, literacy, and math. The chart shows a child's overall readiness to enter kindergarten at the beginning of their Fall enrollment in Head Start and their readiness at the end of their Spring enrollment in Head Start, which approximately follows a school year. **The enrolled population shows varying levels of initial kindergarten readiness across the six domains but shows consistent increases across all domains from fall to spring.**

Data in this section reflects the Tacoma School District Head Start enrolled population.

Head Start Progress (Fall vs Spring)



Head Start Enrolled Families and Children

This section of the report discusses the demographics and characteristics of the families and children currently enrolled in TPS’ Head Start program.

Demographics of Enrolled Population

The TPS Head Start program has a capacity of 400 students, and as of March 2025 the program had cumulatively enrolled 429 children. The program can only serve 400 at one time, and as children leave the program, empty spots are filled from those on the waiting list. As of February 2025, there were 30 on the waiting list. This marks a significant improvement from the 2021 Head Start Community Assessment, which indicated under-enrollment. Enrollment data as of February 2025, based on income eligibility as well as child experiences with homelessness, foster care, and disabilities, is provided in the tables below.

Head Start Cumulative Enrollment	
Enrollment for 2024-2025 school year	Children Served
Enrolled children	429
Enrolled 3-year-olds	171
Enrolled 4-year-olds	258
Over income children	2
Enrolled children at <100% FPL	67
Enrolled children 100-130% FPL	34
Enrolled children on public assistance	240
Source: TPS Head Start as of February 2025	

Students Experiencing Homelessness, Foster Care, and Disabilities	
Enrollment for 2024-2025 school year	Children Served
Homeless children in the enrolled population	76
Children in foster care in the enrolled population	10
Children with disabilities in the enrolled population	40
Children with Individual Education Plans (IEP)	40
Source: TPS Head Start, 2025	

Child Care

Licensed childcare in Washington is provided by Child Care Centers and Family Child Care (FCC) programs. Centers have high capacities and multiple classrooms, while FCCs are housed in individual homes with smaller capacities. Since 2022, the overall capacity and number of childcare programs in Pierce County have fluctuated.

Pierce County Licensed Child Care Capacity, 2018 - 2024



The number of licensed childcare programs and overall capacity in Pierce County has fluctuated since the pandemic.

Pierce County Licensed Child Care Capacity				
	2021	2022	2023	Sept 2024
Licensed childcare capacity aged 0-5+ years (among DCYF licensed childcare providers)	20,290	21,229	21,606	21,879
Number of childcare programs	472	496	513	509
Sources: Child Care Aware of Washington, Pierce County Reports				



The cost of preschool-age childcare in Pierce County has increased sharply for both Child Care Centers and Family Child Care programs.

Centers

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024 (Partial Year)	Percent Increase from 2020
Median Cost	\$775	\$953	\$1,030	\$1,213	\$1,213	56.5%
Cost as % of Median Income	13.0%	15.0%	15.0%	17.0%	16.0%	23.1%

FCCs

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024 (Partial Year)	Percent Increase from 2020
Median Cost	\$700	\$823	\$867	\$975	\$975	39.3%
Cost as % of Median Income	12.0%	13.0%	13.0%	14.0%	13.0%	8.3%

Source: Child Care Aware of Washington, 2024

The number of children that all licensed programs are able to serve in Pierce County has increased slowly. However, according to Child Care Aware of Washington this growth is occurring among large childcare centers, and the number of neighborhood-based FCC programs is declining. This is consistent with patterns occurring across the state.³ One of the results of these changes is the existence of child care “deserts,” and areas where the availability is extremely insufficient to meet the need. This has created barriers for families, especially for low-income families who lack access to reliable transportation, to access the childcare and preschool early learning program they and their children need. A study published by the State Department of Commerce in 2020 found that 50% of Washington families found no childcare openings near their home or work, and 12% found no openings that accepted the state’s child care subsidy (Working Connections Child Care).

Data from the Washington Department of Children Youth and Families⁴ indicates that in the Tacoma School District, only 18% of families have their child care and early learning needs met, even when considering all types of care (licensed Centers and FCCs, ECEAP, Head Start, and Family Friend and Neighbor programs). Only 36% of low-income families in Pierce County (less than 60% of state median income) with preschool age children have their needs met for child care and early learning.

³ [MountingCostsReport_FINAL.pdf](#)

⁴ [Child Care and Early Learning Need and Supply Data | Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families](#)





The number of working parents in a household with children under the age of 6 has decreased in the City of Tacoma since 2021.

Parents in the Labor Force

The number of children with working parents is another indicator to help understand the need and demand for child care and early learning programs such as Head Start.

As the number of available child care slots decreases and the cost of child care increases, it's possible that parents are unable to work without access to child care services.

Households with Children Under Age 6

	2022	2023	2024
Household with children under 6 years where at least one parent works*	14,853	14,238	10,977
Household with children under 6 years & all parents in the family work*	9,633	9,885	6,988

Source: ACS Table DP03
*Children in a family is defined by the ACS to include the children of the householder, such as biological, adopted, or stepchildren



Publicly funded state and local preschool programs

The 2022 DCYF ECEAP Head Start Saturation study shows that the Tacoma School District has a large outstanding need for HS and ECEAP and was categorized as “Priority Group 2” for expansion of slots. The table below shows the number of ECEAP slots in the region.⁵

⁵[2021-22 ECEAP & Head Start Saturation Study](#)

Current ECEAP eligibility and enrollment for the Tacoma school district and surrounding areas.

ECEAP Eligibility for 2024-2025 school year	Number of Children
Pierce County	5,911
Tacoma School District	1,629
ECEAP enrolled children	226
Source: Head Start Program, 2024-2025 school year	

TPS Head Start and ECEAP programs can serve less than half of eligible children.

2024 DCYF data for Pierce County estimates that only 8% of income-eligible preschool-age children are currently being served by TPS Head Start and ECEAP.⁶

⁶ [ECEAP and Head Start Uptake Dashboard | Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families](#), Pierce County data for preschool age youth, <36.5% of SMI, standard Head Start and ECEAP with and without subsidy.

What We Heard from Head Start Parents & Staff

We spoke to parents of Head Start children who are members of a parent policy group as well as Head Start staff, to better understand needs and challenges.



This is my son's second year in Head Start, and I really love this teacher.

- Head Start Parent

Strengths

Key identified strengths included:

- High quality educators, the consistency of educators, and the stability this provides for children and classrooms.
- Program designed intentionally to provide developmental benefits for children.
- Community and family engagement.

Needs

Resource Accessibility

- Participants reported difficulties in accessing essential community resources and support services. These included accessing community resources, such as SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and low-income dental care. Transportation constraints also impacted their ability to access resources and participate in this no-cost program.

What We Heard from Head Start Educators & Staff

Strengths

- **Integration with Tacoma School District**

By integrating Head Start programs within school buildings, children can transition more easily into the K-5 system. This partnership also provides access to personnel, salaries, and benefits that support the Head Start program. Additionally, being connected to the Tacoma School District simplifies the process for children to receive special education services and access other district resources.



Being in the Tacoma School district environment is also one of the amazing things because we can lean on other departments that are with Tacoma Public Schools. And it also gives a natural flow for the preschoolers as they go into kindergarten and first grade."

- Head Start Educator

- **Comprehensive Wraparound Services**

The program offers comprehensive support to children and families through a range of services and resources. Its services specifically address the needs of families by providing mental health referrals and additional resources. By functioning as a thorough wraparound initiative, the program guarantees holistic assistance for both children and their families. Notable success stories, such as helping an unhoused family, highlight the program's dedication to delivering essential support and resources.



I love that we have a strong focus on social, emotional learning. I love that we are kind of a comprehensive wraparound program. We work with the families, the parents, as well as the kids."

- Head Start Educator

- **Including Everyone**

Ensuring everyone is included is a core focus of the program, which aims to enhance family engagement and access to services. The program actively bridges communication gaps with families by providing translated healthcare plans and employing interpreters. Additionally, ongoing efforts are being made to address the disparities between Head Start and other preschool programs, including improving access to transportation and specialty classes.



Some of the greatest needs we're seeing right now are basic food, housing, and utility needs. I just want us to be able to keep helping families meet those needs, keep our kids in school to grow and learn, and support the families the best that we can."

- Head Start Educator

Needs

- **Transportation Issues**

Challenges related to transportation affect families' ability to access Head Start programs. The lack of transportation options makes it difficult for families living farther from the schools to transport their children to and from the program.

- **Housing Instability**

Housing instability significantly hinders families' ability to access Head Start programs. An increase in the number of families who qualify for Head Start due to experiences of homelessness highlights the challenges related to housing stability. Additionally, the overall cost of living, especially housing expenses, creates a major obstacle for families trying to enroll in Head Start programs.

- **Resource and Support Limitations**

There is a shortage of community resources and support systems for families and staff involved in Head Start programs. Funding instability among various agencies impacts the availability of resources and support for families. Additionally, the limited number of slots available for families above the federal poverty threshold makes it difficult to accommodate those who are in need.

- **Childcare and Scheduling Conflicts**

School District and Head Start program hours do not always align with the needs of working families. This presents child care challenges for working families and can be a barrier to enrollment in Head Start. There is also a shortage of before and after-school care options, which complicates transportation and childcare for these families. Additionally, increasingly complex family schedules, including shift work and unpredictable hours, make it difficult for parents to engage with the program.



There are language barriers. There are transportation barriers. There are barriers to parents who maybe have learning disabilities and have a hard time navigating any systems.”

- Head Start Educator

Discussion of Program Need and Demand

As discussed earlier in this report, a number of key indicators have shown that the need for Head Start programs in the Tacoma area far exceeds current capacity. The TPS Head Start program is full and currently has a waiting list, and its 400 slots can only serve 4% of Head Start eligible children within the program's service area. This demonstrates a large gap in available services.

Data throughout this report paint a picture of a community with a growing complexity of needs including increasing numbers of unhoused individuals, increased child care costs and declining child care availability, higher utilization of WIC, and increasing poverty rates for some demographics in the City of Tacoma. Providing much needed early education services is crucial to supporting early childhood development and family engagement.



The number of children under the age of 5 experiencing poverty in the City of Tacoma and Pierce County has decreased.

Poverty Status in the Last 12 Months in the City of Tacoma (age under 5 years)

Poverty Status in the Last 12 Months in the (age under 5 years)	2021	2022	2023
City of Tacoma	13,276	12,854	9,193
Pierce County	54,222	54,050	53,624

Source: ACS Table S1701 - City of Tacoma, Pierce County



In the City of Tacoma, poverty has decreased slightly since 2021, but many families are still experiencing poverty.

City of Tacoma Poverty 2021-2023	2021	2022	2023
Percentage of people under age 18 in poverty	20.4%	19.5%	18.6%
Percentage of families with [related] children under 18 living below poverty level	44.6%	46.0%	42.6%

Sources: ACS Table S1701, 1702

This community assessment described demographic and socioeconomic trends that are important for future TPS Head Start program planning. Low-income, Head Start-eligible families continue to face severe economic challenges as well as the persistent critical shortage of early childhood education and childcare programs in the Tacoma area. The TPS Head Start program can only serve a fraction of eligible children. These factors illustrate the vital importance of the TPS Head Start program, and the need to strategically expand its services to meet the community's unmet need for quality early learning programs for low-income children.

Community-Based Resources and Services Available for Eligible Families

Community services are essential resources for families in the TPS Head Start program. These organizations offer support to address the unique health, development, and basic needs of both children and families. The services provided include assistance with foster care, homelessness, child development, disabilities, parenting, mental and behavioral health, nutrition, and medical care, among others. The appendix at the end of this report contains a comprehensive list of these organizations, detailing the services they offer, their geographic areas of service, target populations, and contact information.

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Appendix: Community Resource Information

Provider	Primary service	Contact info	Geographic Service Area	Population served
A Step Ahead in Pierce County	Full service ESIT early intervention	www.asapc.org	Pierce Co	Families of infants and toddlers with developmental delays or disability
Amara	Foster care services, child welfare, developmental screenings & referrals, family support groups	Home - Amara (amarafamily.org)	Puget Sound region	Families and children involved in Foster Care and Adoption
Associated Ministries	Housing reentry, housing stabilization, rehousing, temporary housing	Associated Ministries of Tacoma Pierce County	Pierce County	Families and adults
Atlantic Street Center	Home Visiting; Educational, family support, and behavioral health counseling services for children, youth, and their families.	Mission Atlantic Street Center	S. King and N. Pierce Co.	Primarily no- and low-income African American families and other families of color
Birth to Three Developmental Center	Full service ESIT early intervention services	Birth to Three Developmental Center	Pierce County; Federal Way	Infants, toddlers and their families,
Bright Spark Early Learning Services	EHS (FCC based), Homeless CC subsidy and Navigation	https://www.brightspark.org/	King & Pierce Co	Services to child care providers & families
Catholic Community Services; Catholic Housing Services	Child and family supports, foster care, early learning, housing, homelessness, mental health, prenatal, immigration and refugee services	Homepage - Catholic Community Services and Catholic Housing Services of Western Washington (ccsww.org)	King and Pierce Co	Individuals, children, families, and communities struggling with poverty and the effects of intolerance and racism.
Childhaven	Full service ESIT, home visiting, WiSE, IECMHC, parenting, play and learn	Programs - Childhaven	Puget Sound region	Families and children B-24
Children's Therapy Center	Pediatric therapy for children with developmental differences and disabilities; ESIT	Home - Children's Therapy Center (ctckids.org)	S. King and N. Pierce Co.	Young children and families with developmental disabilities and differences
Children's Home Society - South King County Resource Center-Kent & Federal Way	Early HS, ECEAP, Home Visiting, parenting, Foster Care	Children's Home Society of Washington (childrenshomesociety.org)	South King and north Pierce County	Children B-20+
Community & Family Services Foundation (CFSF)	Support for foster parents	- CFSF -	Tacoma and other locations	Foster children Birth-21
Community Health Care Foster and Adoption Clinic Center of Excellence	Trauma-informed, comprehensive medical care for youth involved with the child welfare system	Foster and Adoption Clinic Community Health Care (commhealth.org)	Tacoma, Pierce Co	Families and children involved in Foster Care
Comprehensive Life Resources	Health care, homelessness navigation, reentry	Comprehensive Life Resources Home	Tacoma	Adults and families
Fusion Transitional Housing	Transitional housing, emergency shelter, parent supports, referrals	FUSION Transitional Housing Assistance Federal Way King County (fusionhousing.org)	Federal Way, Northeast Tacoma	Families with at least 1 child under 18
Hearing Speech and Deaf Center	ESIT Services for Deaf, hard of hearing or have speech/language differences	Hearing, Speech & Deaf Center	Tacoma	Deaf, hard of hearing, speech/language differences.

Helping Hand House	Emergency shelter, temporary housing, rapid rehousing, permanent housing, financial supports, light case management, referrals	Housing Programs Helping Hand House Pierce County, WA	Puyallup, Pierce County	Families with children
HopeSparks - Children's Development Services	Full service ESIT early intervention, other supports	HopeSparks - Family Services	Tacoma, Pierce Co	Children and families in Pierce County who face trauma, abuse, and overwhelming life challenges.
Horn of Africa Services	Parenting, early learning, home visiting.	About Us - Horn of Africa Services (hoas.org)	King & Pierce Co	Low income East African immigrants and refugees
Hummingbird Indigenous Family Services	Home Visiting; Family Spirit	Hummingbird Indigenous Family Services (hummingbird-ifs.org)	Pierce, King and Snohomish Counties	Indigenous babies and families from birth to three
Institute for Family Development	Home Visiting; Intensive Family Preservation, Reunification, Evidence Based Child Welfare Programs. Crisis intervention.	Institute for Family Development	Located in Federal Way; service State and nationwide	Children at imminent risk of placement in state care; foster, group, or institutional care. Families whose children are being returned from out-of-home care, and for difficult post-adoption situations.
Intercultural Child and Family Services	Child development services and community-based parenting supports; Home Visiting	Family Intercultural Children And Family Services Renton (iccf.org)	S. King and N. Pierce Co.	Underserved and low-income adults and children, families of color for families with children B-5
LIHI-Low Income Housing Institute	Temporary shelter, low income housing, Tiny House villages, housing support services	Housing Low Income Housing (lihihousing.org)	Tacoma, Puget Sound region	Low-income, homeless and formerly homeless
Listen and Talk	Listening and spoken language program for deaf or hard of hearing children ESIT, B-3, classroom, preschool, therapy	Listen and Talk - No Child Is Limited By Hearing Loss	King and Pierce Co	B-3 and preschool children who are deaf and hard of hearing.
Mary Bridge Children's Hospital	Home Visiting; medical health and wellness	MultiCare Mary Bridge Children's Hospital & Health Network	Tacoma; Pierce & King	
Multicultural Child and Family Hope Center	Foster care supports & respite care, early learning, EHS & HS, ECEAP, early ECEAP, Diaper bank, Parenting, Homeless prevention & navigation, Tiny Homes housing, transitional housing, intervention, recovery	Multicultural Child And Family Hope Center	Tacoma area	Children and families, all ages
Multiservice Center	King County Regional Homelessness Authority; Rent and Utility Assistance	Get Help Multi-Service Center (mschelps.org)	Federal Way	Homeless and housing unstable
Northwest School for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children. Family Conversations	ESIT: DHH, speech, hearing, language supports	Northwest School for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Children WA	King, Pierce, Snohomish Co.	Low income deaf and hard of hearing; B-3 and Preschool
Open Arms Perinatal Services	Home Visiting	Open Arms Perinatal Services	Pierce & King	Pregnancy through age 2.
Pierce County government	Referrals for ESIT	Early Support for Infants and Toddlers (ESIT) Pierce County, WA - Official Website (piercecountywa.gov)	Pierce County	Children B-3

Pierce County Homeless and housing supports	Eviction prevention, rent support, coordinated entry, housing interventions and supports	Homeless Programs Pierce County, WA - Official Website (piercecountywa.gov)	Pierce Co	Pierce County residents experiencing housing instability or homelessness
SeaMar Tacoma for the Homeless Clinic	Showers, laundry, medical and dental care is available	Sea Mar -Community Health Centers	Tacoma	Families experiencing homelessness
Step by Step	Pregnancy support (home visiting)- food, nutrition, childbirth, housing, feeding, mental health, baby items, prenatal and pediatric care, health and wellness. Parenting and family support.	Step By Step (stepbystepfamily.org)	Pierce, King and Snohomish Counties	Enrolled in Medicaid, and currently pregnant or parenting an infant.
Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department	Nurse-family partnership, home visiting, Black Infant Health, low cost perinatal services, parenting, health services	Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department Home (tpchd.org)	Pierce Co	Pierce County residents
The Wishing Well	Clothing, diapers & formula, infant/toddler supplies, experiences for foster children; addressing financial barriers to accepting foster placements.	ABOUT The Wishing Well (thewishingwellwa.org)	Pierce and 7 surrounding counties	Children 0-18 years of age who are currently placed in the foster care system in Pierce County and 7 surrounding counties.
United Indians of All Tribes Foundation	Home Visiting; indigenous preschool, Foster Care placement;	Home » United Indians of All Tribes Foundation - Daybreak Star	Western Washington	Urban indigenous people of W. Washington
Within Reach (Help Me Grow)	Referrals for family supports: ESIT, Child development, food, parenting, health, etc	Who We Are • WithinReach WA	Statewide	Families statewide
Washington Sensory Disability Services (WSDS)	Deaf and Hard of Hearing services	Deaf/Hard of Hearing - Washington Sensory Disabilities Services	Statewide	Families statewide
Tacoma Community College	GED classes	https://www.tacomacc.edu/	Tacoma and Pierce County	Adults
Bates Technical College	GED classes	https://www.batestech.edu/	Tacoma and Pierce County	Adults
Pierce College	GED classes	https://pierce.ctc.edu/	Tacoma and Pierce County	Adults
Clover Park Technical College	GED classes	https://www.cptc.edu/	Tacoma and Pierce County	Adults
Goodwill Youth	GED Program (partnership with TPS)	https://goodwillwa.org/event/youth-ged-16-24-years-old/2024-11-20/	Tacoma and Pierce County	Adults
Tacoma Community House	Adult Basic Education classes	www.tacomacommunityhouse.org/	Tacoma and Pierce County	Adults
REACH Center	GED classes	https://www.reachtacoma.org/	Tacoma and Pierce County	Adults



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