



Highlights of [GAO-04-17](#), a report to Congressional Requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Head Start, created in 1965, is designed to prepare low-income preschool children for school by providing a comprehensive set of early child development services primarily through community-based organizations. Over the last decade there have been a number of changes in Head Start's operating environment, including a decrease in the number of poor children; an increase in the number, size, and scope of other federal and state early childhood programs; and an expansion in Head Start spending and enrollment. Given this environment, GAO was asked to determine (1) what is known about the extent to which Head Start programs are underenrolled, (2) ACF regional officials' and Head Start grantees' views on what factors contribute to underenrollment, and (3) what actions ACF and grantees have taken to address underenrollment.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of HHS direct ACF to (1) ensure the accuracy of national enrollment data, (2) develop a standard criterion for regional offices to use in identifying grantees whose underenrollment merits action, (3) develop an additional enrollment measure that takes into consideration the different levels of service provided by full-day and part-day programs, and (4) develop a more systematic process for regional offices to collect reliable enrollment data during the program year.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-17](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-17).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Marnie S. Shaul at (202) 512-7215 or [shaulm@gao.gov](mailto:shaulm@gao.gov).

## HEAD START

# Better Data and Processes Needed to Monitor Underenrollment

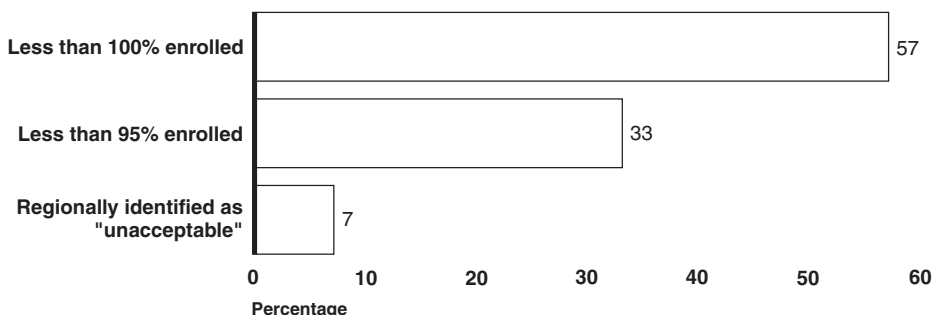
## What GAO Found

The extent to which Head Start programs have enrolled fewer children than they are funded to serve is unknown because the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) does not collect accurate national data and does not monitor underenrollment in a uniform or timely manner. While some modest fluctuations in enrollment are to be expected, regional offices had differing definitions of unacceptable underenrollment, and the approaches they used to identify it were either not timely or not systematic. The regional offices identified a total of about 7 percent of grantees as unacceptably underenrolled in 2001-02, significantly less than the percentage of grantees reporting enrollment ratios below 100 and 95 percent on ACF's survey of grantees (see chart below). As a result of differences in regional definitions of what constitutes an unacceptable level of underenrollment, grantees with similar levels of underenrollment may be treated differently across regions.

ACF regional officials and officials of underenrolled Head Start grantees often cited a mixture of factors that made it difficult to achieve full enrollment, including increased parental demand for full-day child care, a decrease in the number of eligible children, facilities-related problems, and more parents seeking openings with other sponsors of early education and care.

ACF national and regional offices and grantees all report taking action to address underenrollment through the issuance of guidance, increased monitoring by regional offices, and more aggressive outreach attempts by grantees. The ACF national office issued a memo in April 2003 that instructed regional offices to address underenrollment with a variety of measures depending on its causes. While this guidance was clear on the actions to be taken, it lacked clear criteria for prioritizing grantees for corrective actions. Also, while many grantees we spoke with had taken steps to address underenrollment, some told us of their concern to maintain total funded enrollment levels, even as they were converting unfilled part-day openings to full-day. While 18 of the 25 grantees we contacted had made progress toward full enrollment, others cited continuing problems.

Percentage of Underenrolled Grantees Using Three Different Definitions



Source: GAO analysis of ACF regional office survey responses and Program Information Report data.