

Segregated from the Start

Comparing Segregation in Early Childhood and K–12 Education

October 1, 2019

Children’s first learning experiences set the tone for the rest of their lives, in school and beyond. That’s why early childhood education (ECE)—which [enrolls](#) nearly half of infants and toddlers and three-quarters of preschoolers—has become a focus for public investment designed to promote educational equity and give children a strong start.

But [little attention](#) has been paid to the [racial and ethnic composition](#) of early childhood programs, even though the [roots of racial and ethnic bias](#) form during [children’s earliest years](#). In addition to experiences in the home and in the community, early childhood education is a key place for addressing—or exacerbating—issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Most research has focused on the [benefits](#) of [integration](#) in elementary and secondary schools, even though schools have become more segregated. But segregation in early childhood programs is even more pronounced than in K–12 classrooms, and that separation can lead to missed opportunities for contact and kinship during a critical point in child development.

Our analysis is the first that aims to characterize segregation across early childhood education in the US. To ensure the possibility of integration, we analyze only ECE programs that serve at least five children.

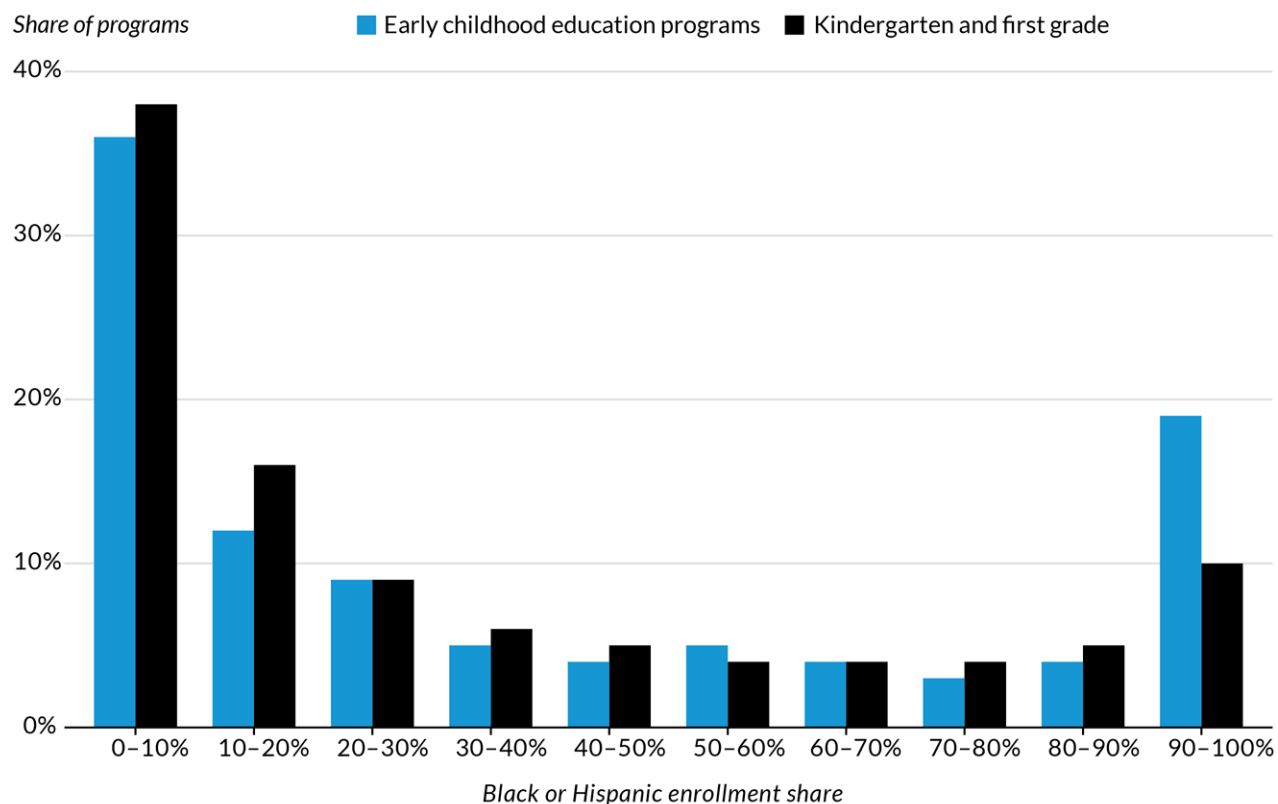
How does segregation in early childhood education compare with segregation in K–12 education?

School segregation is well documented and often understood in the [context of residential](#)

[segregation](#), using neighborhood characteristics to understand what is possible in public and private schools. Young children learn wherever they are: center-, school-, and home-based programs; preschools and sites serving infants and toddlers; or providers funded by public and private investment. How do early childhood programs stack up against the early elementary grades in terms of their black or Hispanic enrollment share?

Nationwide, early childhood education is more segregated than kindergarten and first grade, even while enrolling a similar number of students. Early childhood programs are twice as likely to be nearly 100 percent black or Hispanic, and they are less likely to be somewhat integrated (with a 10 to 20 percent black or Hispanic enrollment share).

How Early Childhood Programs Compare with Kindergarten and First Grade in Black or Hispanic Enrollment Share



Source: Authors' calculations of the distribution of black or Hispanic students using the 2012 National Survey of Early Care and Education, 2011-12 data from the Common Core of Data, and the 2011-12 Private School Universe Survey.

Note: Estimates for early childhood education include programs with at least five students enrolled.

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These findings may reflect [greater participation in early childhood education](#) among black children than children of other racial and ethnic groups, but the data show greater segregation than we would expect based on enrollment alone.

Even though integration is higher in kindergarten and first grade, it is still rare in those grades and in early childhood education. Few programs have a moderate black or Hispanic enrollment share (30 to 70 percent), as shown by the U-shaped distribution of blue and black bars in the chart above.

The dissimilarity index, a summary index of segregation, shows that early childhood programs are more segregated than later grades of schooling. This index captures the distribution of black or Hispanic students in a single estimate and represents the share of black or Hispanic students that would need to move to achieve perfect integration.

Early Childhood Education Is More Segregated Than Any Other School Level



Source: Authors' calculations of the distribution of black or Hispanic students using the 2012 National Survey of Early Care and Education, 2011-12 data from the Common Core of Data, and the 2011-12 Private School Universe Survey.

Notes: ECE = early childhood education. Estimates for early childhood education include programs with at least five students enrolled. The dissimilarity index is a summary measure of segregation that represents the share of black or Hispanic students that would need to move to achieve perfect integration. Findings are robust to alternative segregation indexes. See the technical appendix for more details.

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Segregation declines as students progress through formal education. The largest drop is between ECE and the elementary grades, with another sizable drop between middle and high school. Overall, using the dissimilarity index, early childhood education is 20 percent more segregated than high school.

Further research is needed to understand why this is the case, but larger school sizes and catchment areas; intentional desegregation efforts through magnet schools, charter

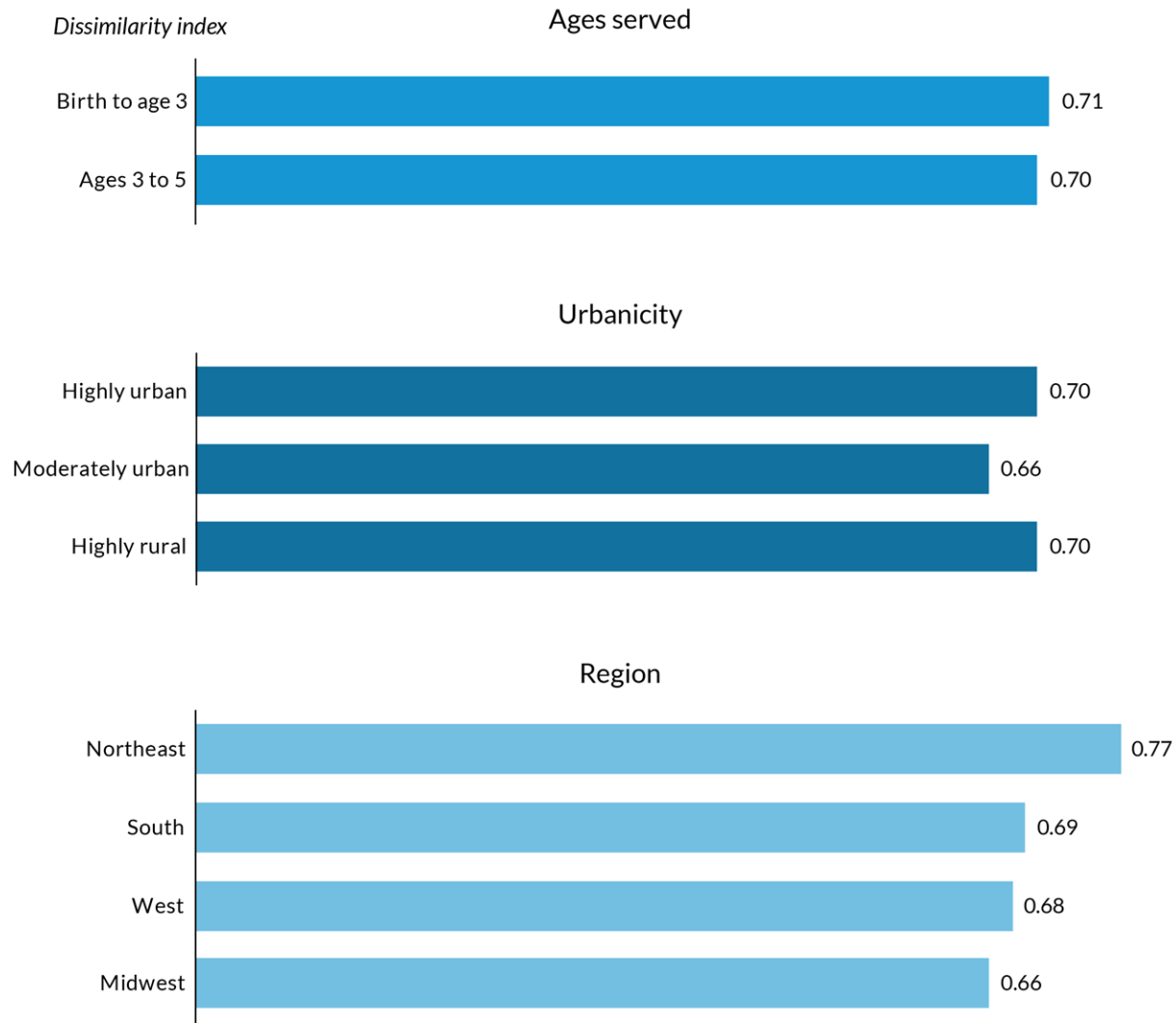
schools, and busing programs; and student age and ability to engage in school choice and transportation may explain these patterns.

How does segregation vary among early childhood education settings?

Between birth and age 5, children can experience various early learning settings, including child care centers and preschools; care by family members, friends, and neighbors; licensed home-based programs; and parental care. Delving into the differences between these settings can illuminate the sources of and potential solutions to segregation in early childhood education.

Nationwide, ECE programs serving infants and toddlers and those serving preschool-age children are similarly segregated. ECE programs in suburban communities are about 7 percent less segregated than their urban and rural counterparts. And ECE programs are most segregated in the Northeast and least segregated in the Midwest, with similar levels of segregation across the South and West.

Segregation in Early Childhood Education Programs by Ages Served, Urbanicity, and Region



Source: Authors' calculations of the distribution of black or Hispanic students using the 2012 National Survey of Early Care and Education.

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Notes: Estimates include programs with at least five students enrolled. The dissimilarity index is a summary measure of segregation that represents the share of black or Hispanic students that would need to move to achieve perfect integration. Findings are robust to alternative segregation indexes. See the technical appendix for more details. Suburban programs are located in moderately urban census tracts according to the National Survey of Early Care and Education.

The most striking difference in segregation within early childhood education is between centers and home-based programs. Home-based programs are 30 percent more segregated than centers—nearly as segregated as they could possibly be.

Home-Based ECE Programs Are Far More Segregated Than Center-Based Programs

Dissimilarity index



Sources: Authors' calculations of the distribution of black or Hispanic students using the 2012 National Survey of Early Care and Education.

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Notes: ECE = early childhood education. Estimates include programs with at least five students enrolled. The dissimilarity index is a summary measure of segregation that represents the share of black or Hispanic students that would need to move to achieve perfect integration. Findings are robust to alternative segregation indexes. See the technical appendix for more details.

Home-based programs include licensed home-based preschools, informal relative and nonrelative caregivers, and nannies. They are often less regulated and less publicly subsidized than centers, which include independent child care programs, private nursery schools, and public school–based prekindergarten. Home-based programs also [serve a large share of children](#): among kids participating in early childhood education, three-quarters of infants, half of toddlers, and one-fifth of preschoolers attend home-based programs.

Segregation in center-based ECE programs is comparable with segregation in elementary grades, which means it's mostly home-based programs that produce greater segregation in ECE programs versus other education levels.

Finally, we look within home-based programs to separate those listed in administrative databases (and licensed, regulated, registered, or deemed license-exempt) from those that are unlisted and identified by families with young children as providing regular weekly care. Unlisted providers are less likely than listed providers to participate in training and professional development and [most often report](#) that they provide ECE “to help children’s parents” rather than to build careers or support children’s development.

Unlisted home-based programs are the most segregated of any ECE program type. Even when we look only at programs that serve at least five children, unlisted programs are extremely segregated.

Unlisted Home-Based ECE Programs Are More Segregated Than Listed Programs



Sources: Authors' calculations of the distribution of black or Hispanic students using the 2012 National Survey of Early Care and Education.

Notes: ECE = early childhood education. Estimates include programs with at least five students enrolled. The dissimilarity index is a summary measure of segregation that represents the share of black or Hispanic students that would need to move to achieve perfect integration. Findings are robust to alternative segregation indexes. See the technical appendix for more details. Listed programs have been identified in administrative databases, while unlisted programs are reported (by families with young children) as providing regular weekly care.

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So why do unlisted home-based programs have such high levels of segregation? Home-based programs, particularly unlisted programs, receive little regulation, monitoring, and oversight, leaving room for family and provider biases to shape enrollment. Some unlisted providers operate informally, adjusting hours, schedules, and program size to meet changing family needs without time (or reason) for intentional planning. These programs are in homes and are less likely to advertise or recruit outside of social and familial networks, leading to patterns similar to residential segregation on a highly local scale.

How can we address segregation in early childhood education?

Segregation in early childhood education can [affect students' success in school and beyond](#). As [K–12 education becomes more segregated](#), ECE is at risk of following the same trend. That's why further research exploring these patterns is critical.

For new and ongoing [ECE investments](#) to realize their full potential, the field needs better information on segregation. Our analysis uses a single year of national data and doesn't

explore changes over time, across states and communities, or within program types defined by policy or by public funding. Further research can uncover strategies for mitigating segregation and increasing opportunities for integration in early childhood education. The quality and outcomes of children's earliest learning opportunities hang in the balance.

ABOUT

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Read the methodology [here](#).

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