Abstract

The Child-Parent Center (CPC) program in the Chicago Public Schools offers the most comprehensive services of any well-known, evaluated early childhood program and requires parent involvement in children’s education. The Chicago Longitudinal Study, which has tracked CPC program participants into their twenties, shows increased school success, as well as decreased juvenile crime and child maltreatment rates, for children who participate in this public program. Parent involvement has been shown to have separate benefits including improved child outcomes and increased contact with other parents. Benefits to society have been estimated as high as $10.15 per dollar invested in this program. Given the importance of parent involvement in early childhood education, this family impact analysis suggests that greater attention is needed in the recruitment process to ensure participation of all types of families, even those whose work or personal situation makes the parental involvement component difficult to maintain. Also, encouraging employers’ flexibility at work and enacting paid parental leave laws would allow employed parents to participate in their child’s education. Further studies are needed to determine if the benefits observed for African-American children will accrue for other racial/ethnic groups.

Introduction

Recently, policymakers have shown heightened interest in early childhood programs which might improve the life prospects of children and return certain benefits to society. This family impact analysis examines one of the oldest, most comprehensive, and well-evaluated early childhood programs—the Child-Parent Center (CPC) program. This paper begins by providing some historical background, describing the program, and summarizing its evaluation. Next the paper examines the specific ways in which the program impacts families, followed by several questions this family impact analysis raises for policymakers developing early childhood and education programs.

In 1965, Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which included the well-known Title I, directing school districts to “employ imaginative thinking and new approaches to meet the educational needs of poor children” (U.S. Senate, 1967, p. 1455).

In 1967, Title I funds were allocated to District 8 of Chicago’s Public Schools. Superintendent Dr. Lorraine M. Sullivan established four Child-Parent Centers using her strategy of: 1) parent involvement, 2) instructional approaches designed to develop children’s speaking
and listening skills, 3) small class size, and 4) attention to health and nutritional services (Naisbitt, 1968).

The four Centers were initially comprised of six mobile units, housing half-day preschool and kindergarten programs for 40 weeks, plus an additional 8-week summer program. As proposed by Dr. Sullivan, parent involvement was required for ½ day per week. Parents were offered classes in home-related skills such as cooking and sewing, and were encouraged to offer each other social support and participate in the classroom learning of their children.

Background

Many programs were created with Title I funds. This family impact analysis will focus on the Child-Parent Center (CPC) program in Chicago. The Chicago school system was the first school district to use Title I funds for preschool to establish the CPCs in 1967. After Head Start, this program is the second oldest federally-funded early childhood program in the United States. It has received multiple awards for its exemplary educational achievements, and is the only public early childhood program with a cost-benefit analysis of long-term effectiveness. Additionally, this program is unique in that it has a comprehensive family support component for parent involvement in children’s education and in developing family-school partnerships.

Program Description

Currently, the CPC program operates in 13 Centers throughout the Chicago Public Schools. All Centers provide preschool services for 3- and 4-year-olds, and most also offer kindergarten programs. A few Centers also offer services through third grade. The program emphasizes early intervention, parent involvement, a structured language/basic skills learning approach, and program continuity between the preschool and early school-age years (Reynolds, 2000).

Each Center is directed by a Head Teacher, and is located either in a wing of the feeder elementary school or in a separate building in close proximity. The program has six main features. First, each Center has a parent component, which is supervised by the parent-resource teacher in the parent resource room. Second, the program maintains low student-teacher ratios (17:2 in preschool; 25:2 in kindergarten). Third, the educational focus of the program is literacy and school readiness within an activity-based instructional philosophy. Fourth, each Center has continuing outreach activities including home visitation by the school-community representative. Fifth, the Centers give attention to health and nutrition, including health screening and referral. Finally, the program provides school-age services including small classes and instructional supports up to third grade to promote successful transitions to elementary school. Overall, the program provides the most comprehensive services of any of the well-known and evaluated early childhood programs (Temple & Reynolds, 2007).

To be eligible, families must meet three criteria. First, children must live in a neighborhood that qualifies for Title I funds. Second, children cannot be enrolled in another preschool program (e.g., Head Start). Third, and of most relevance here, parents are expected to participate in the parent component of the program, approximately ½ day per week. However, the program allows flexibility in meeting this goal. There are many types of involvement and not all parents participate to this extent (Reynolds, 2000).
To encourage parent involvement, the CPC Program hired paraprofessionals, typically parents of former students, to serve as liaisons between the Center and the families. The paraprofessionals also conduct home visits and help families access community resources. As explained by PI Arthur Reynolds (cited in Galinsky, 2006, p. 16):

It’s a family-school partnership model of parent involvement. Parents were expected to volunteer in the classroom, to go on field trips with the kids and to participate in parenting skills workshops at the center. Although there were some home visits, the parents primarily went to the center instead of the staff going to visit the parents at home.

Program Evaluation

In the fall of 1985, the Chicago Longitudinal Study was begun to investigate the effects of the Child-Parent Center (CPC) program on that year’s kindergarten graduates. The study group consisted of 974 children who enrolled in 20 CPCs beginning in the fall of 1983 and then finished kindergarten in 1986. The matched comparison group consisted of 389 children from randomly selected schools who also graduated from kindergarten in 1986, but attended government-funded, all-day kindergarten programs (which was another common intervention for at-risk children at the time). Also included in the comparison group were 176 children who started CPC services in kindergarten but had not received the preschool component. Thus, the entire sample consisted of 1,539 children, of which 93% were African-American and 100% lived in low-income, Title I neighborhoods (Reynolds, 2000).

The Chicago Longitudinal Study (CLS) has found that children who participated in the CPC preschool had positive long-term educational and social outcomes (see Table 1). Furthermore, the longer a child participated, the better were his/her outcomes. Children who participated in the CPC program for 4-6 years (as opposed to 1-4 years) had higher reading and math achievement, and lower rates of special education, grade retention (being “held back”), and child maltreatment (Reynolds & Clements, 2005).

Over 80% of the study children were followed successfully into adulthood. At age 20, the CLS found that the preschool group had a 33% lower juvenile arrest rate than the comparison group, and a 29% higher rate of high-school completion. Grade retention rates were also 40% lower for the preschool group (Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2001). For a full list of the findings see Table 1.

One additional finding of note is that a child’s participation in the program contributed to greater family support (i.e., parent involvement), and parent involvement, in turn, contributed to greater school achievement and less grade retention, special education, and delinquency (Reynolds & Clements, 2005). According to lead evaluator Arthur Reynolds, higher parental involvement has been observed throughout the elementary school years, “leading us to see a link to [lower levels of parental] abuse and neglect, juvenile crime and juvenile delinquency” (cited in Galinsky, 2006, p. 18). In fact, by age 17, court petitions for maltreatment were 33% lower for those who participated in the center for 4 to 6 years compared to alternative treatments (Reynolds & Robertson, 2003). Reynolds explained why he thought that the program had such substantial impacts on parents’ behavior:
One of the biggest causes of maltreatment in inner-city areas is social isolation from the social institutions that support the family—whether it’s health care or the schools. And the whole point of this program was to make those relationships stronger. (p. 18)

In addition to benefiting the children enrolled in CPC, the program has been found to impact parents’ own personal and educational development as well.

**Cost-Benefit Analysis**

Of particular interest to policymakers is the cost-benefit analysis of the CPC program which reveals a return to society of $10.15 per dollar invested. In other words, for an average cost per child of $8,512 (2007 dollars), the average return per child was $87,000. These returns are a result of lower rates of remedial education services, juvenile delinquency, and child maltreatment. This is a higher benefit-cost ratio than that of the well-respected High/Scope Perry Preschool and Carolina Abecedarian Project, due in part to the lower costs of the CPC program (Temple & Reynolds, 2007).

Whereas the positive effects of this intervention and the high marks on cost-effectiveness offer great incentives to policymakers to implement similar programs in their home cities and states, there has been no comprehensive analysis of the impact of this program on family well-being. This paper asks just that question.

**Family Impact Analysis**

To analyze the impact of the CPC program on families, we will use the five main principles of family impact analysis, originally developed by Ooms and Preister (1988) and revised by the Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars (Bogenschneider et al., 2012; Bogenschneider, Little, Ooms, Benning, & Cadigan, 2012a, 2012b). Each of these five main principles will be detailed by one or more specific questions, which follow.

**Principle #1: Family responsibility**

- How well does the policy or program help families build the capacity to fulfill their functions and avoid taking over family responsibilities unless absolutely necessary?

One of the main philosophies of the Child-Parent Center (CPC) program is the family support hypothesis, which suggests that greater family involvement in children’s education will lead to greater positive benefits. Therefore, parental involvement of enrolled children is highly emphasized; in fact, ½ day per week of involvement is required.

A parent-resource teacher staffs the parent resource room and offers training in areas including consumer education, health and safety, homemaking arts, nutrition, and personal development. GED classes are also offered at the Centers. Parents have the opportunity to serve on the School Advisory Council which helps staff plan the educational program. While at the CPC, parents are encouraged to volunteer in the classroom, participate in school activities, help make meals, and chaperone class field trips (Reynolds, 2000).
All of this involvement is obviously supportive of parents’ responsibilities to their enrolled children. But what about parents’ other functions and responsibilities? The answer to that question is more complicated. To the CPC program’s credit, they work hard at offering parents opportunities for improving their overall skill sets, relating to both the home and workplace. For example, they support a parent’s responsibility to cook meals, and to become more qualified in the job market. Furthermore, at least in some Centers, younger children were allowed to come with parents to the CPC, so parents could fulfill the CPC requirement while being responsible for their other younger children.

The CPC Program tries to design their diversity of activities in an attempt to meet different needs and accommodate the schedules of different parents (Reynolds, 2000). And indeed, parent surveys showed that 86% of Center parents were very satisfied, and 12% were somewhat satisfied with the CPC program. Moreover, 92% said that they liked going to their children’s school (Reynolds & Stevens, 2002).

On the other hand, participation in the program itself may be a conflict of interest with parents’ responsibility to work and support their family monetarily, given that the hours of operation are during many parents’ workdays. This conflict may be even more pronounced for welfare families in the wake of work requirements implemented under the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program. Parents who are unable to attend the CPC program during the day may not opt to enroll their children in the program at all. From a family impact perspective, this requirement should be continued with more attention to (a) adapting the program so parents can be involved outside normal business hours, (b) encouraging employers to provide more flexibility as to when and how many hours are worked (Casey & Corday, 2009), or (c) enacting paid family leave laws that allow parents to take time off work to participate in their child’s education.

Principle #2: Family stability

- How well does the policy or program strengthen the commitment to couple, marital, parental, and family obligations, and allocate resources to help keep the marriage or family together when this is the appropriate goal?

One of the unique strengths of the CPC Program is its parental involvement component, which has as its main purpose to strengthen parental commitment to the education of their children. Parents are essentially required to be involved in their child’s class work as well as in adult development activities, all of which have the potential to increase the closeness and stability of the family.

Schuster and Jennings (1982) found that more than 80% of CPC parents reported visiting their child’s Center or being involved in the instructional program. A review of some site records showed that more than 50% of parents were involved in the child’s Center at least two days per month.

One encouraging finding is that children enrolled in the CPC program had a 52% reduction in court petitions of child maltreatment by age 17 (Reynolds & Robertson, 2003). Granted, this is not exactly the same as parental commitment, yet it suggests participation in this program improved parents’ treatment of their children.
To date, no data exists on the effect of this program on marital commitment or other family obligations, although this is a complex question, due to the fact that the program serves many different family structures. In fact, when the first CLS data was collected, almost 70% of enrolled families were single parents (Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2002), but it is not clear how many of these parents were in a cohabiting relationship.

**Principle #3: Family relationships**

- How well does the policy or program assess and balance the competing needs, rights, and interests of various family members?

This program focuses primarily on the needs of the enrolled preschool or kindergarten student. The parental involvement component is likewise emphasized because of its potential positive influence on the enrolled child’s education and development. To its credit, this program does better than most preschool programs at incorporating the needs of the entire family. Personal development programs are offered for parents, and small siblings are allowed in the parent resource rooms. However, it is possible that the needs of younger siblings, or even of parents, are put on the back burner in order to comply with the parent involvement requirements. For example, if parents need to work during the day, they may be unable to comply.

**Principle #4: Family diversity**

- How well does the policy or program identify and respect the different attitudes, behaviors, and values of families from various cultural, economic, geographic, racial/ethnic, and religious backgrounds, structures, and stages of life?

In some ways, the CPC program is untested in its ability to deal with variety in family background, because the students who participated in the Chicago Longitudinal Study were 93% African-American and all had reasonably similar environmental surroundings.

However, the CPC program does deal with all types of guardian situations and family structures. For example, on their parent surveys they ask the guardian to identify if they are a mother, father, grandparent, etc. As previously discussed, part of the CPC’s eligibility criteria is that this parent or guardian come in ½ day per week. As no evening or weekend hours are offered, this can be difficult for working parents or for other guardians whose work arrangements are not conducive to this. This is an understandable and certainly beneficial mode of operation for the CPCs, because of staffing and their desire to have parents work with their children when children are at school during the day; however, it is an unrealistic expectation for some families with a different type of structure or schedule.

It should be noted that many children participate in the program despite non-compliance from their parent or guardian. However, it is probable that there are children who are never enrolled in the program because their parents or guardians know they cannot, or simply do not agree to comply with this requirement. In this sense, the parent/guardian involvement requirement can have a negative effect on these families. From a family impact perspective, parent involvement is an important requirement that should be continued with increased attention to developing strategies to allow parents/guardians to be involved, whatever the structure of the family or its lifestyle.
One other type of family that may not be well-served by this program is the family who does not qualify because they are not “needy” enough. There are limited openings in these classes (17 per preschool class), and part of the recruitment process involves screening interviews to determine which children have the greatest educational need.

To start, the CPCs are located in the most impoverished and vulnerable neighborhoods in Chicago. When the program began, the served area was described as having the “most serious educational needs in Chicago: last year, only 8% of the sixth grade students in District 8 were reading at or above grade level” (Naisbitt, 1968, p. A). Other characteristics of these areas are high density, crowded schools, severe health problems, high unemployment, high crime rate, low-income level, and sub-standard housing (Naisbitt, 1968).

Within these Title I-qualified neighborhoods, Center staff then interview children and families to identify those in greatest educational need. In addition, the Centers conduct outreach activities, disseminating program information and advertising, even visiting homes door-to-door to make sure they enroll the local children with the fewest resources (Reynolds, 2000). So in this respect, the CPC program is doing a good job of identifying the most educationally vulnerable. This is a strategically justifiable mode of operating, but there are undoubtedly some needy families who do not qualify due to space limitations.

There is some evidence also that the effects of this program on child maltreatment vary by the family’s level of need: Reynolds and Robertson’s (2003) study of CPC impact found that child maltreatment was decreased differentially, and actually to a greater extent, for the children who were more underprivileged.

**Principle #5: Family engagement**

- How well does the policy or program train and encourage professionals to work in collaboration with families, to respect family autonomy, and to allow families to make their own decisions (within the confines of the law)?

- How well does the policy or program build on social supports that are essential to families’ lives (e.g., community, neighborhood, and faith-based organizations, volunteers, friends)?

In terms of family autonomy, parents are given great decision-making opportunities through their participation at the CPC. They are able to participate in Advisory Councils, and parents are allowed to make some of their own programming decisions. Likewise, they never really lose authority over their own families. Short of a situation which calls for legal intervention (such as suspicions of child maltreatment), there does not appear to be any situation in which staff authority usurps the parent’s authority. Staff members may encourage the parent in terms of how they raise their children, but ultimate decisions and behaviors still rest with the parent.

Of course, parents are mandated to participate in the program, which takes place during particular hours, for a specified amount of time. This may feel disempowering to some parents, and be impossible for others.

To develop social supports for families, the Child-Parent Center (CPC) program is unique in that it partners with schools, and often shares a building with them. This contrasts with many
other preschool interventions which are run independently. Some would argue that this partnership with schools is one of the most significant features of the program (Reynolds, 2001).

The CPC’s school-community representative does home visits for each family enrolled, and can connect families with needed resources such as community agencies, education opportunities, employment training, mental health programs, or welfare services. The school-community representative can also organize transportation if necessary (Reynolds, 2000).

Every enrolled child undergoes a health screening with an on-site nurse, and has their vision and hearing checked. Prevention services and referral to other medical and educational services, such as speech therapy, are available to students who need them (Reynolds, 2000).

Social support is one of the main goals of the parent involvement component. Even in its first year of operation, mothers exchanged services such as babysitting, finding apartments for families, and neighborly give and take. One parent was quoted as saying, “What I like about the Child-Parent Center is it gives the parents a chance to get together. I think it is the best thing that could happen for the parents” (Naisbitt, 1968, p. 168).

Questions for Policymakers

1. *Are the benefits of early childhood education programs worth the costs?*

   Title I funds are available to aid states in the start-up of programs like this one, but one viable concern for states is obtaining the funding to create and maintain such a comprehensive service program. A 2002 estimate puts a per-child cost at $7,384 for 18 months of part-day services (Temple & Reynolds, 2007). In addition to this cost is the challenge of identifying sufficient space for classrooms, parent facilities, and administrative space, within close proximity of the feeder schools. The estimated long-term benefit per child of $74,981 translates into a return of $10.15 for every dollar invested in this program (Temple & Reynolds, 2007). The temptation for cash-strapped states, schools, or local municipalities is to cut services. However, these cuts in service may cut the benefits too. One way to cut costs without violating the integrity of the program is to target a limited number of families that are most in need.

2. *How important is parental involvement?*

   The Chicago Longitudinal Study found that more parental participation equaled greater school achievement and less grade retention, special education, and delinquency for their children (Reynolds & Clements, 2005). Parental involvement was also associated with lower rates of child maltreatment and improvements in parents’ own personal and educational development as well (Reynolds & Robertson, 2003). Research on other exemplary early childhood programs also suggests parental involvement is a key to positive outcomes and results (Haskins, 2006; Rolnick, 2006). Therefore, although it requires more coordination, involving parents in their children’s education appears to increase the likelihood that children will succeed, thus contributing to the potential returns from any early childhood program.
3. **How important is the comprehensive community support of families?**

The CPC program recognizes that parents’ involvement in their child’s education does not occur in isolation. Many forces beyond the family either support or discourage such involvement. The CPC program’s coordination with school systems, and its connection to other community supports such as health care and transportation services, has contributed to its success by supporting families more broadly. Could future programs extend this support in new ways, such as partnering with community employers in a work release program that would allow parents time off of work during school hours to participate in their child’s education?

4. **Which families are most likely to benefit?**

The sample in the Chicago Longitudinal Study was indeed large, but it was very homogeneous: all the children were in one class (kindergarten in the 1985-86 school year), 93% were African-American, and all had reasonably similar surroundings and educational vulnerabilities.

Yet unknown are what trends and effects the CPC program will have across different populations in different environments, who are vulnerable in different ways, to different degrees. One indication of the varying effects of this program was found in Reynolds and Robertson’s (2003) study of CPC impact on child maltreatment. In this study, maltreatment was decreased differentially, and actually to a greater extent, for the children who were more underprivileged.

Available evidence provides reason to hypothesize that the comprehensive and time-tested CPC program will have positive effects in any group of children and families. Any state, school, local jurisdiction, or employer implementing such programs should track outcomes carefully to better understand whether any differences occur and, if so, how the benefits accrue.

5. **How can the most vulnerable families be recruited?**

As noted in the analysis above, the greatest family-related implementation challenge to the CPC program is recruiting children and families who may have no parent/guardian available during school hours, or no parent/guardian willing to participate at all.

To have the maximum impact on families, lessons can be learned from the recruitment efforts of the CPC to encourage parent/guardian interest and commitment (e.g. outreach activities, disseminating program information, even going door-to-door). Procedures can also be developed that allow greater flexibility in parental involvement. For instance, the program can be adapted with parent-child sessions offered at non-traditional times for parents who work during normal school hours. The private sector can be encouraged to respond by making employers aware of the benefits to worker loyalty and productivity when they provide greater workplace flexibility. The public sector can respond through the enactment of parental leave laws that allow parents time off to participate in their child’s school activities. Creative implementation strategies will be helpful to gain and maintain participation by the greatest number of families in need.
Conclusion

The CPC program gets undisputed A’s for its effects on children’s educational achievement and long-term social benefits. In addition, its parental involvement component has taken it a long way beyond its contemporaries in terms of family support and empowerment. However, this parent component, which is one of its greatest strengths, can also hinder some families from participating. Several strategies will help to assure that vulnerable families are not missed: 1) continuous examination of recruitment policies, to assure that families and children are encouraged to enroll even if the parental involvement component is overwhelming and/or difficult to fulfill; 2) continuing attention to flexibility in schedule for these same families; 3) encouragement of employers to provide more flexibility in the workplace for parents’ involvement in their child’s early childhood education; and 4) enactment of state family leave laws to allow paid leave for parents to participate in their child’s education and lives.
Table 1. Proportion of Child-Parent Center Preschool and Comparison-Group Children Achieving School and Social Competence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child Outcome</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Program Group</th>
<th>Comparison Group</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>Change (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At/above national norm on scholastic readiness</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child maltreatment</td>
<td>4-17</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive ratings of parent involvement (3 or more)</td>
<td>8-12</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioemotional adjustment</td>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeated a grade</td>
<td>6-15</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td>6-18</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenile arrest</td>
<td>10-18</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrest for violent offense</td>
<td>10-18</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acting out</td>
<td>12-13</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At/above grade level on reading achievement</td>
<td>13-14</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>36</td>
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<tr>
<td>Completed high school</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>63.1</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adult felony arrest</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adult incarceration</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adult depression</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average income equal to or higher than nat’l average</td>
<td>22-24</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>College attendance or stable employment</td>
<td>22-24</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attended a 4 year college</td>
<td>22-24</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>67</td>
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References


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Further Reading


