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Title: Analyzing the Head Start Impact Study Data: Analysis Issues and Implementation

First and Second Choice of Conference Section:

First Choice: Research Methods

Second Choice: Early Childhood Education

Symposium Justification:

The Head Start Impact Study (HSIS) was conducted with a nationally representative sample of 84 grantee/delegate agencies and included 4,667 newly entering 3- and 4-year-old children who were randomly assigned to either: (1) a Head Start group that had access to Head Start program services or (2) a control group. Data collection began in fall 2002 and continued through 2008, following children from program application through the spring of their 3rd grade year.

This study is unique in its design and differs from prior evaluations of early childhood programs in the following ways.

- A randomized control design was selected to determine if access to Head Start caused better developmental and parenting outcomes for participating children and families. This procedure ensured comparability between the two groups at program entry, so that later differences can be causally attributed to Head Start.

- Most random assignment studies are conducted in small demonstration programs or in a small number of operating sites, usually those that volunteer to be included in the research. In contrast, the Head Start Impact Study is based on a nationally representative sample of Head Start programs and children. This makes the study results generalizable to the full national program not just the selected study sample.

- The study quantifies the overall impact of Head Start separately for 3- and 4-year-old children in four key program domains—cognitive development, social-emotional development, health status and services, and parenting practices.
Control group children did not all stay at home. Parents of control group children could enroll their child in other non-parental care, non-Head Start child care programs or remain at home in parent care.

The impacts represent the effects of one year of Head Start for the 4-year-old cohort. However, the impacts for the 3-year-old cohort reflect the benefits of an earlier year of Head Start. At the end of one year of Head Start participation, the 3-year-old cohort had another preschool year before kindergarten. It was not feasible or reasonable to prevent 3-year-olds from participating in Head Start for two years. Thus, the study addresses the receipt of an earlier year—having Head Start available at age three, or whether those children would be just as well off, if the program did not enroll them until age four.

Early advantages found at the end of Head Start on most of the study outcomes were not maintained in the later years of the study. Scholars and practitioners have speculated that impacts may be larger or more persistent for those who participate in particularly high quality Head Start centers. The first presentation for the proposed symposium will address data analysis issues and implementation from preschool through 3rd grade for the Head Start Impact Study. The remaining presentations will address methods of ascertaining the effect of Head Start and early school quality on child outcomes. These presentations will provide analytic advances of interest to other researchers focused on measuring the effectiveness of educational interventions.

Full Methods Structured Abstracts: 3 abstracts in paper presentation order are attached with complete contact information and affiliation for the authors.

Paper Presentation Order:

1st paper: Methods for Analyzing Data from a Randomized Control Trial with a Nationally Representative Sample

2nd paper: Methods for Investigating the Role of Program Quality in Determining Head Start’s Impact on Child Development

3rd paper: Methods that Examine the Extent to Which the Quality of Children’s Experiences in elementary School Moderate the Long-Term Impacts of Head Start

Discussant: Winston Lin