RESEARCH BRIEF

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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND HANDGUN CARRYING, SERIOUS FIGHTING, AND ASSAULT CHARGES: A RETROSPECTIVE COHORT STUDY

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BACKGROUND

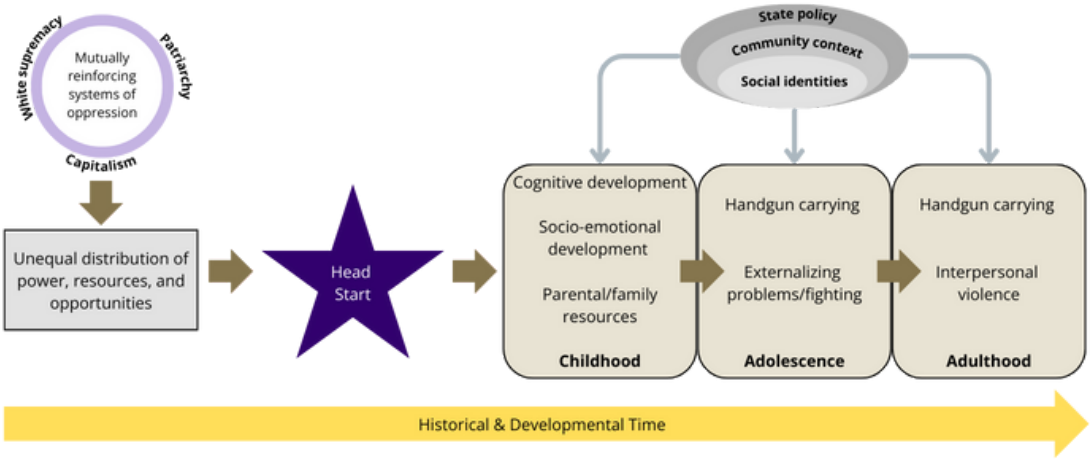
The likelihood of engaging in interpersonal violence and related risk behaviors (e.g., handgun carrying) increases in adolescence and young adulthood. However, risk for these behaviors is often rooted in early childhood experiences, including the resources and opportunities children had and the environments to which they were exposed.

High-quality early childhood education programs, such as Head Start, may prevent or buffer against early life adversity, improve access to resources, and promote optimal development, thus reducing the likelihood of interpersonal violence, especially for those at greater risk.

STUDY GOAL

This study examined the associations between **Head Start** (a large-scale high-quality preschool program for low-income children) and **handgun carrying**, **serious fighting**, and **assault charges**.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

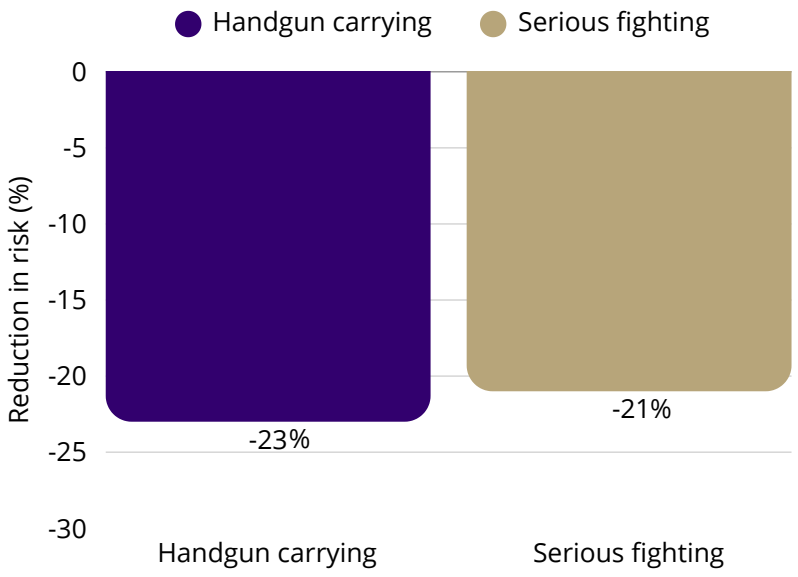


RESULTS

Of the 4,281 respondents included in the sample:

45.4%	26.7%	26.2%
had solely parental childcare	attended other childcare	attended Head Start

Figure 2. Association of Head Start and Risk of Handgun Carrying and Serious Fighting Among Black Males



For Black males, attending Head Start versus other childcare during ages 3-5 years was associated with:

- 0.77 times the risk of **handgun carrying** by age 31 (95% CI=0.60, 0.99)
- 0.79 times the risk of **serious fighting** by age 24 (95% CI=0.64, 0.98)

IMPLICATIONS

Results suggest that early life investments in the social, economic, and human capital of structurally-disadvantaged children and families may be effective and equitable tools to prevent violence and firearm-related harms.

APPROACH

Researchers used data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, which includes people born between 1980 and 1984 and who resided in the United States in 1997. Children whose responding parent had a high school degree or less were included as they were more likely to be eligible for Head Start. Respondents were classified into three groups: 1) ever attended Head Start between ages 3-5 years, 2) ever spent 20+ hours a week in childcare but never Head Start during ages 3-5 years ("other childcare"), and 3) never spent 20+ hours a week in childcare and never attended Head Start during ages 3-5 years ("solely parental childcare").

Head Start

Outcomes were age at first self-reported handgun carrying, serious fighting, and assault charges after age 12. Researchers examined heterogeneity by respondent sex, race, and ethnicity.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION, REFER TO:

Schleimer JP, Hajat A, Joseph G, Rivara F, Sun M, Rowhani-Rahbar A. Early childhood education and handgun carrying, serious fighting, and assault charges: A retrospective cohort study. *Health Affairs Scholar*. 2025 Apr 5:qxaf070. https://doi.org/10.1093/haschl/qxaf070

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