



Method for Counting the Number of Children Served in the IDEA Part C Early Intervention Program May Be Underestimating State Efforts

Carl J. Dunst, Jill Fromewick, and Deborah W. Hamby

Abstract

Enrollment in IDEA Part C Early Intervention Programs occurs throughout the year as children are found eligible for early intervention. Federal reporting requirements have states count the number of infants and toddlers served on December 1 each year as the estimate of the number of children served in each state's Part C program. These headcounts were found to differ significantly from the number of children served during an entire calendar year. The way states are required to report "children served," in most cases, appears to be underestimating states' efforts.

State Lead Agencies for the IDEA Part C Early Intervention Program report the number of children served by their states on December 1 of each year to the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). These numbers are included in OSEP's annual reports to Congress for showing the extent to which efforts to serve children eligible for early intervention and special education are being realized.

State headcounts on December 1 each year have been required since the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) in 1975. The headcounts include the number of children receiving special education in each state on this day. The December 1 headcount is a reasonable estimate of the number of children receiving special education during a school year because the number of children served is likely to be relatively stable three months into the school year. This would be the case inasmuch as children both with and without disabilities are more often than not enrolled in school according to means-tested, age-based state eligibility criteria and are generally enrolled at the beginning of a school year (see Zill, Loomis, & West, 1997).

Whereas the December 1 headcount may be appro-

priate for counting children receiving special education, it may not be appropriate for counting infants and toddlers participating in the IDEA Part C Early Intervention Program. This is the case because infants and toddlers are likely to be enrolled throughout the year as they are identified and found eligible for services (Dunst & Stuart, 1999). The focus of this *Snapshots* is the degree to which there is a discrepancy between the number of infants and toddlers included in states' December 1 headcounts and the number of infants and toddlers served by states during an entire calendar year.

Method

Requests were made to Part C Coordinators or their designees in all states for the number of infants and toddlers served by the states for the most recent three reporting periods for which December 1 and calendar-year headcount data were available. Fourteen states were able to provide the requested headcount data. Three consecutive years (2000, 2001, 2002) of data provided by these states were used to discern whether the December 1 headcounts underestimated state efforts to serve eligible children.

Both the December 1 headcounts and calendar-year headcounts were converted to the percentage of children birth to 36 months of age served in a state by dividing these numbers by the U.S. Census Bureau's (2004) yearly estimates of infants and toddlers living in the states. These estimates include all births during the years cor-

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responding to the reporting periods, minus deaths, plus net migrations during the same time periods.

A mixed group ANOVA was used to test for similarities in the percentage of children served in Part C early intervention programs. Using the 2002 December 1 headcount data as a reference point, states were divided into two groups, those serving less than 2.5% of the birth to three population (low percentage states) and those serving more than 2.5% of the birth to three population (high percentage states). A 3 Between Year (2000 vs. 2001 vs. 2002) X 2 Between Percent of Population Served (<2.5 vs. >2.5) X 2 Within Type of Headcount (December 1 vs. Yearly) ANOVA was used to analyze the data.

Results

Figure 1 shows the percentage of infants and toddlers served by the 14 states in 2002 according to both the December 1 headcounts and calendar-year headcounts. Whereas only four states were serving an estimated 3% of the birth to 36-month-old population based on the December 1 headcounts (see Dunst, Hamby, & Fromewick, 2004), all but two states (Alabama and North Carolina) reached the 3% criterion based on the calendar-year headcount. Five states (New Mexico, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Indiana, and Massachusetts) were serving 6% or more of the birth to 36-month-old population based on the calendar-year headcount.

The differences in the percentage of infants and toddlers served by the 14 states for the contrasting headcounts ranged from 0.45% (Florida) to 5.22% (Massachusetts). The average percentage difference between the two headcounts was 2.47% ($SD = 1.32$) which was statistically significant, $t(13) = 7.01$, $p < .0001$.

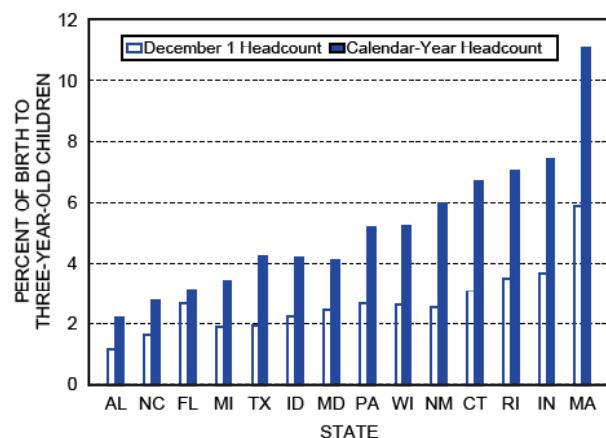


Figure 1 Percentage of the birth to 36-month-old population served in 2002 according to contrasting headcounts.

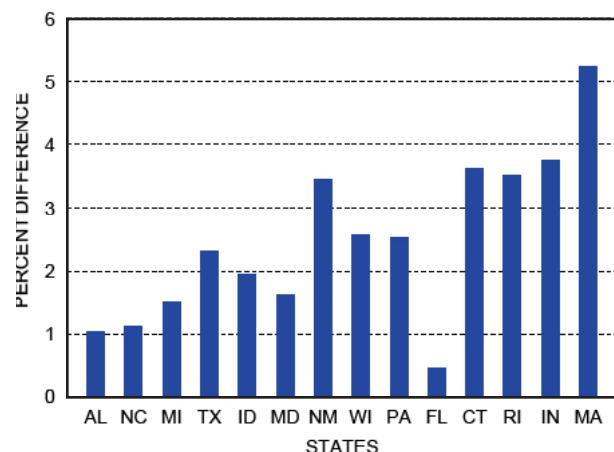


Figure 2 Relationship between the percentage of infants and toddlers served by states ordered according to their December 1, 2002, headcounts (see Figure 1) and the percentage difference between the December 1 and calendar-year headcounts.

Figure 2 shows the relationship between the states organized according to the 2002 December 1 headcount data and the percentage difference between the two headcounts. The correlation between the two measures was $r = .83$, $p < .001$, indicating that the larger the percentage of children served on the December 1 headcounts, the more this headcount tended to underestimate state efforts.

Results from the between level of participation (low-percentage states vs. high-percentage states) by between year (2000 vs. 2001 vs. 2002) by type of headcount (December 1 vs. calendar year) ANOVA are shown in Figure 3. States serving a larger percentage of children according to the December 1 headcount (high-percentage states) were serving a larger percentage of children according to the calendar-year headcount compared to the low-percentage states, $F(1, 12) = 10.63$, $p < .01$. The average percentage difference was 3.13 ($SD = 1.37$) and 1.58 ($SD = 0.49$) for the high- and low-percentage states respectively. These differences were relatively the same for each of the three reporting periods, $F(2, 24) = 1.24$, $p > .30$.

Discussion

Findings show that most states serve considerably more infants and toddlers during a calendar year than is estimated from the December 1 headcount, where the differences between the two ways of counting children is greater in states serving larger percentages of the birth to age three population (Figure 3). The discrepancy found between the December 1 and calendar-year headcounts is relatively similar for the three years for which data were available (Figure 3).

Results indicate that the December 1 headcount re-

porting requirement underestimates state efforts to serve eligible infants and toddlers with disabilities or delays. Whereas the average percentage of the infant and toddler population served was 2.71% ($SD = 1.14$) in 2002 according to the December 1 headcounts, the percentage of the population served according to the calendar-year headcounts was 5.17% ($SD = 2.35$) for this same year. These differences averaged 2.47% (Figure 2), indicating that the states as a group serve almost twice as many infants and toddlers when the calendar-year data is used to ascertain state efforts to reach and serve eligible children.

Differences reported in this *Snapshots* are accounted for by the fact that enrollment of infants and toddlers in early intervention programs occurs on an ongoing basis as children are found eligible for services, rather than at only a designated time of the year. What cannot be discerned from the findings in this *Snapshots* is the factor or factors explaining the large between state variations in

the percentage of infants and toddlers served using either December 1 or calendar-year headcounts for ascertaining state efforts to serve eligible children (Figures 1 and 2). Further analysis of state enrollment data will focus on identification of the reasons for this variability (see e.g., Dunst & Hamby, 2004).

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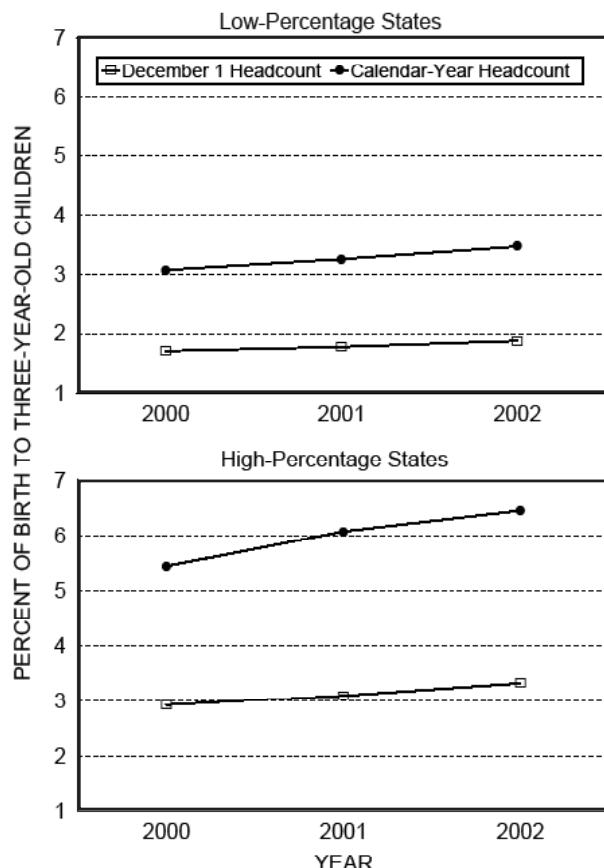


Figure 3 Patterns of participation in Part C early intervention programs according to states serving less (low-percentage states) or more (high-percentage states) than 2.5% of the infant and toddler population on December 1, 2002.