



BUREAU BRIEF SERIES ON WORCESTER COUNTY INSIGHTS The Research Bureau

INSIGHTS INSIDER

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PRE-K EDUCATION IN WORCESTER COUNTY

INTRODUCTION

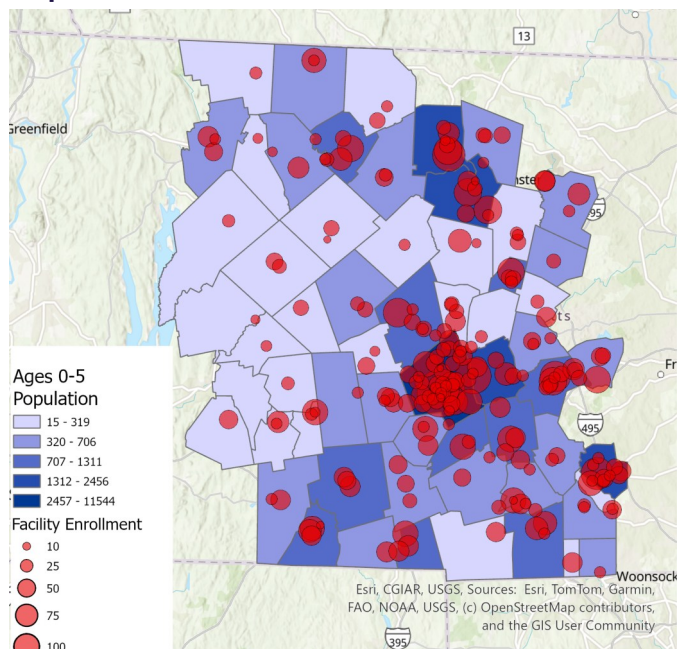
Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) education plays a fundamental role in early childhood development. A well-developed Pre-K program can **improve memory capabilities, social skills, task orientation, inhibition control, and emotional skills**. Children can also display a stronger academic performance in literacy and math, as well as a decreased likelihood of grade retention. On a familial level, Pre-K assists caregivers by functioning as a form of child supervision that reallocates time within their schedules from child care to other engagements. Extensive research consistently shows that high-quality pre-K access improves a wide range of outcomes, including higher test scores, graduation rates, college attendance, and lower rates of school discipline ([Gray-Lobe, Pathak, & Walters, 2021](#); [Barnett, 2008](#)). In addition, pre-K participation fosters emotional competence, self-regulation, and prosocial behavior—foundational skills linked to long-term wellbeing ([Mondi, Giovanelli, & Reynolds, 2021](#)). Under federal and Massachusetts law, districts must educate preschoolers (ages 3–5) with disabilities in the least restrictive environment—typically inclusive classrooms with their peers—with appropriate supports.

Despite the array of benefits of Pre-K participation, it is not always accessible. Both public and private Pre-K programs are oftentimes limited in capacity, with student acceptance subject to a lottery, testing, or an application system. Also, factors like program hours, proximity, and cost can pose further hurdles for caregivers. These factors contribute to the state's visible lack of enrollment among "Pre-K aged" children. In 2024, the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) found that **65% of four year old children and 77% of three year old children lack any Pre-K education in Massachusetts**. Building on Pre-K enrollment data accessible on *Worcester County Insights*, this *Insights Insider* expands the data's scope to include additional private Pre-K options, and assesses potential hurdles to program accessibility.

CURRENT ENROLLMENT

Enrollment in Worcester County is low in comparison to the rest of the state. Comparing the American Community Survey (ACS) estimates of the zero-to-five-year-old population in the county, to enrollment in public Pre-K and licensed private Pre-K, **only 9,238, or 20.36%, of all children in the age range are enrolled in programming**. Of those currently enrolled in Pre-K, **56.58% are enrolled in private programs and 43.42% in public programs**. Map 1 visualizes enrollment by highlighting the location of facilities and the size of their current enrollment, as well as the municipality's age group population. Especially in western Worcester County, there is a visible lack of facilities present with many only having one or two within their borders. Those that are present lack sizeable enrollment.

Map 1: Enrollment for Pre-K



Source: Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Enrollment Data 2025; Massachusetts Child Care License Lookup; American Communities Survey 5-Year Estimate 2023

Notably, based on available data, the town of West Brookfield lacks any Pre-K facilities within its municipal borders. Since the age range of the ACS estimate is two years larger than the age range of Pre-K, the expected population per municipality is likely lower and the percentage enrolled greater. Commuters may also shift Pre-K enrollment within a community. Enrollment of a community's children might decrease when subtracting those who commute into it, or increase when adding those who commute out. Some commuting caregivers may find more logistical ease in enrolling in a program close to work.

GEOGRAPHIC BURDENS TO ENROLLMENT

A key contributor to lower enrollment rates in Worcester County is the geographic accessibility of a Pre-K facility. As noted in a Pre-K access study published in March 2025 (*The Spatial Inequality of Early Care and Education Centers*), lower density in rural communities contributes to lower rates of enrollment. Map 1 also visualizes this barrier. As evident in the density and size of the circles, areas with lower populations also demonstrate fewer facilities with smaller enrollment. This lack of facilities is especially problematic if the closest Pre-K is at maximum capacity, too expensive, or substandard in quality.

In more urban areas, more Pre-K programs do not always translate to a higher share of children enrolled. Worcester, for example, demonstrates the highest density of facilities and greatest total enrollment in the county (with 1,773 enrolled). However, this only accounts for 15.36% of the population (11,544 children).

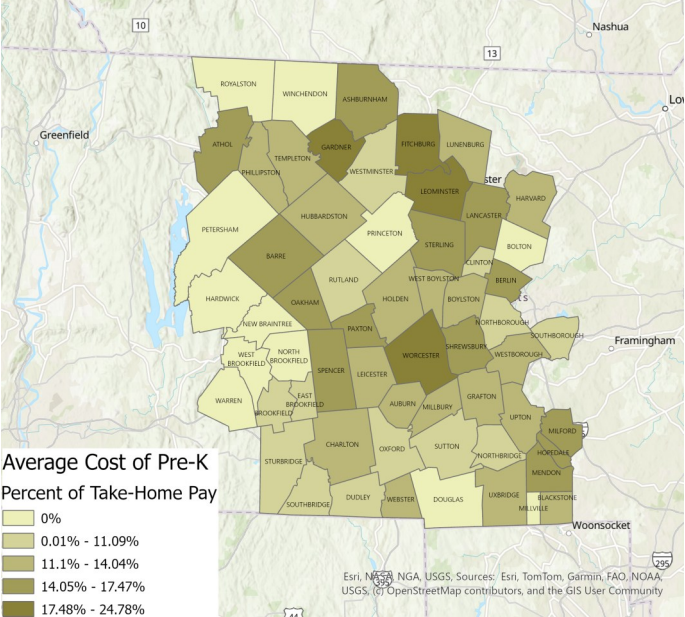
FINANCIAL BURDENS TO ENROLLMENT

Another major hurdle to enrolling in Pre-K is the monetary cost to enroll in a private program. As noted by both the U.S. Department of Labor and the Census Bureau, cost of child care is rising across the country. When factoring in related expenses, they find that the total oftentimes exceeds one-fifth of a family's annual income. **Massachusetts is nationally ranked as the second most expensive state for child care with a predicted annual cost of \$20,913 per child.** Based solely on enrollment, Worcester County has an average monthly cost of \$1,716, or \$20,592 annually. In the context of the county's median family income, \$116,982 before taxes, Pre-K enrollment alone costs 22.30% of take-home pay.

Map 2 depicts the financial burden on a household by depicting the municipal average annual enrollment cost, as a percentage of its median income after state and federal income tax. Pre-K costs do not scale with the median income of a given community. Residents may pay a larger or smaller percentage of their income for childcare, depending on where they live. For example, in the City of Worcester, average annual pre-K enrollment

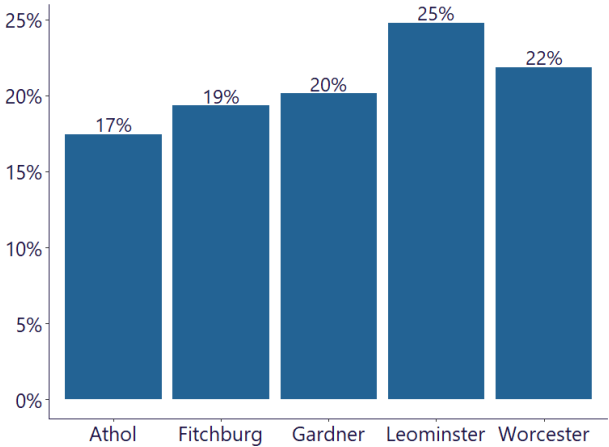
costs total \$15,671—just over one-fifth (21.87%) of the median family income for city residents. In contrast, the town of Webster, a similar median family income municipality, accounts for 10.19% at a cost of \$9,920. The five municipalities with the highest costs relative to median family income are Leominster, Worcester, Gardner, Fitchburg, and Athol. Graph 1 visualizes these costs.

Map 2: Private Pre-K Cost by Municipality



Source: Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Non-Public School Data 2025; Massachusetts Child Care License Lookup; ACS Income in the Past 12 Months 2023

Graph 1: Highest Burden as Percent of Take-Home Pay



Source: Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Non-Public School Data 2025; Massachusetts Child Care License Lookup; ACS Income in the Past 12 Months 2023

CONCLUSION

When examined independently, cost and access prove highly prohibitive barriers for residents of Worcester County. Furthermore, testing criteria and enrollment limits could decrease accessible options. Given these barriers, greater attention should be devoted to expanding Pre-K opportunities and improving affordability and geographic access to help bridge enrollment gaps.