POVERTY TRACKER

CENTER ON POVERTY & SOCIAL POLICY at Columbia University

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ROBIN HOOD

MONITORING POVERTY AND WELL-BEING IN NYC

SPOTLIGHT ON 3-K FOR ALL:

New York City's 3-K for All Supports Mothers' Labor Force Participation

CONTRIBUTORS:

EUNHO CHA, JEANNE BROOKS-GUNN, JILL GANDHI, YAJUN JIA, MATTHEW MAURY, KATHRYN NECKERMAN, JANE WALDFOGEL

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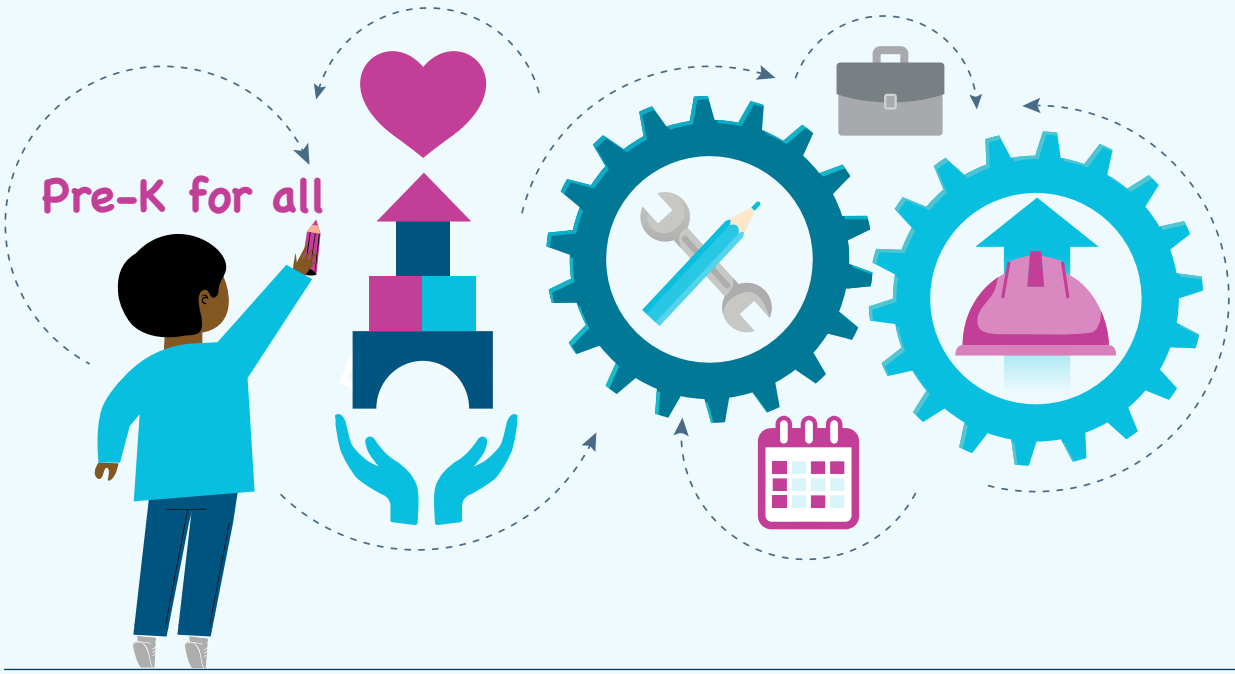
KEY FINDINGS

- New York City's **3-K for All** program was first introduced to a few districts beginning in 2017 and was gradually made available to all districts by 2021. The rollout prioritized the highest-need districts for prekindergarten services.

- Evidence from the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker suggests that **availability of 3-K for All supported mothers' labor force participation**. After children became age-eligible for 3-K for All, mothers who lived in districts with higher 3-K availability were more likely to be in the labor force than those who lived in districts with lower 3-K availability.

- Mothers with greater 3-K availability also had **higher rates of full-time employment**.

- Even after the 3-K year, mothers with more access to 3-K had **higher rates of labor force participation and full-time employment**.



INTRODUCTION

High-quality early childhood education (ECE) is known to be beneficial for young children's cognitive and socioemotional development.[1] Mothers, who are most often the primary caregivers for their young children, can also benefit from ECE, which may allow them to enter the labor force or work more hours. When ECE is only available at a high cost, mothers may be forced to move from full-time to part-time work or even leave the labor force to care for their children.[2] The decision to cut back on work can be particularly costly for mothers who are in the critical early years of building their careers. In this regard, affordable ECE is an important policy tool that promotes both children's development and mothers' employment.

In 2017, New York City launched the 3-K for All (3-K) program, an expansion of its universal prekindergarten program, with the goal of providing free full-day care for all three-year-old children in the city. The program rollout plan aimed to make ECE availability more equitable and began in two school districts with the highest need.[3] 3-K was then offered in more districts over the following four years, again prioritizing neighborhoods with higher poverty rates. Previous work using the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker (ECPT) found that parents showed high interest in the program,[4] with the number planning to apply far exceeding the available 3-K seats. In the 2021-2022 school year, 3-K served around 35,000 3-year-old children–approximately 40% of eligible children in the city – across all 32 districts.[5]

This report focuses on the role of New York City's 3-K in supporting mothers' labor force participation and employment. Using data from the ECPT, which repeatedly surveyed the same New York City families with young children from 2017 to 2021, we investigate whether 3-K availability was associated with increased labor force participation and employment among mothers of preschool-age children in New York City. By comparing mothers in districts with early 3-K rollout to those in districts without 3-K, we aim to answer the following questions:

- Did labor force participation and employment increase for mothers of age-eligible children in districts with 3-K programs compared to those without 3-K programs?
- Did the increased labor force participation and employment for mothers in districts with 3-K programs continue, even after their children had aged out of 3-K eligibility?

This report sheds light on the maternal employment benefits of providing early childhood education to young children and highlights the potential longer-term effects of such programs.

[1] Gormley, Gayer, Phillips, and Dawson (2005); Gormley, Philips, Newmark, Welti, and Adelstein (2011)
[2] Madowitz, Rowell, and Hamm (2016); Neckerman, Brooks-Gunn, Collyer, Doran, Jia, Kennedy, Maury, Wimer, and Waldfogel (2021)
[3] Veiga (2017)
[4] Gandhi, Brooks-Gunn, Cargill, Cha, Greeley, Maury, Neckerman, Ross, and Waldfogel (2023)
[5] Drobnjak, Kimiagar, and Onea (2023)

About the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker

The Early Childhood Poverty Tracker (ECPT), a collaboration between Robin Hood and Columbia University, is a longitudinal study of New York City families with young children. Launched in 2017 when the children were between the ages of 0 and 3, the ECPT is following a representative sample of families with young children in New York City, to provide a detailed description of the challenges and resources that shape the development of children during the critical early years of life. The ECPT study uses repeated surveys with the same parents to understand how families' circumstances change as their children grow and develop. The baseline survey included 1,576 parents, each of whom reported on a "focal child" who was 0–35 months old in June 2017 or was born in the subsequent year. Since the baseline survey, parents have been surveyed several times per year about the focal child's health and development, enrollment in school or child care, and family circumstances, including economic conditions, health, and well-being. The figures presented in this report exclude families who have moved out of New York City. The report draws on the baseline through 36-month follow-up surveys (fielded from 2017 to 2021). For more detail about the methods used in the ECPT, and for a profile of our sample, see our baseline report.[6]

About this report

The report utilizes information from 12 ECPT surveys collected between late 2017 and early 2021. The surveys include data from the baseline through 36-month follow-up surveys. This report focuses on the 438 families whose focal child was born in 2016 and was eligible for 3-K in the 2019–2020 academic year when 3-K seats expanded greatly from 3,300 to 17,500 seats.[7] Of these families, 43% lived in one of the 12 school districts where 3-K was rolled out, while 57% lived in districts where 3-K was not yet available.[8]

The surveys asked respondents about their current employment status and that of their domestic partner or spouse. Using this data, we identified the employment status of the mothers during each semiannual period. If a mother's employment status changed within a six-month period, we used the most active paid-work status to represent her employment status for that period. For example, if a mother once was a full-time caregiver but became a part-time worker between January and June of 2018, we counted her as a part-time worker for the first half of 2018. Families who did not participate in a survey during a six-month period were excluded from the employment rate calculation for that period but were included in other periods. The figures presented in this report are statistically predicted values that adjust for demographic and socioeconomic differences between families living in school districts with and without 3-K.

[6] Neckerman, Brooks-Gunn, Doran, Kennedy, Maury, Waldfogel, and Wimer (2019)
[7] Drobnjak, Kimiagar, and Onea (2023)
[8] The sample sizes of families living in 3-K and non-3-K districts were 187 and 251, respectively.

Mother's Labor Force Participation and Employment

We examine three different measures of mothers' work in this report: labor force participation, employment, and full-time employment. Each measure indicates a different level of engagement with the labor market, with labor force participation being the broadest measure, employment being a narrower measure, and full-time employment being the most specific measure.

Labor force participation

Includes mothers who are either working (full-time or part-time, including those who are freelance or self-employed) or looking for work.

Employment

Includes mothers who are working (full-time or part-time, including freelance or self-employed) and earning income from their employment.

Full-time employment

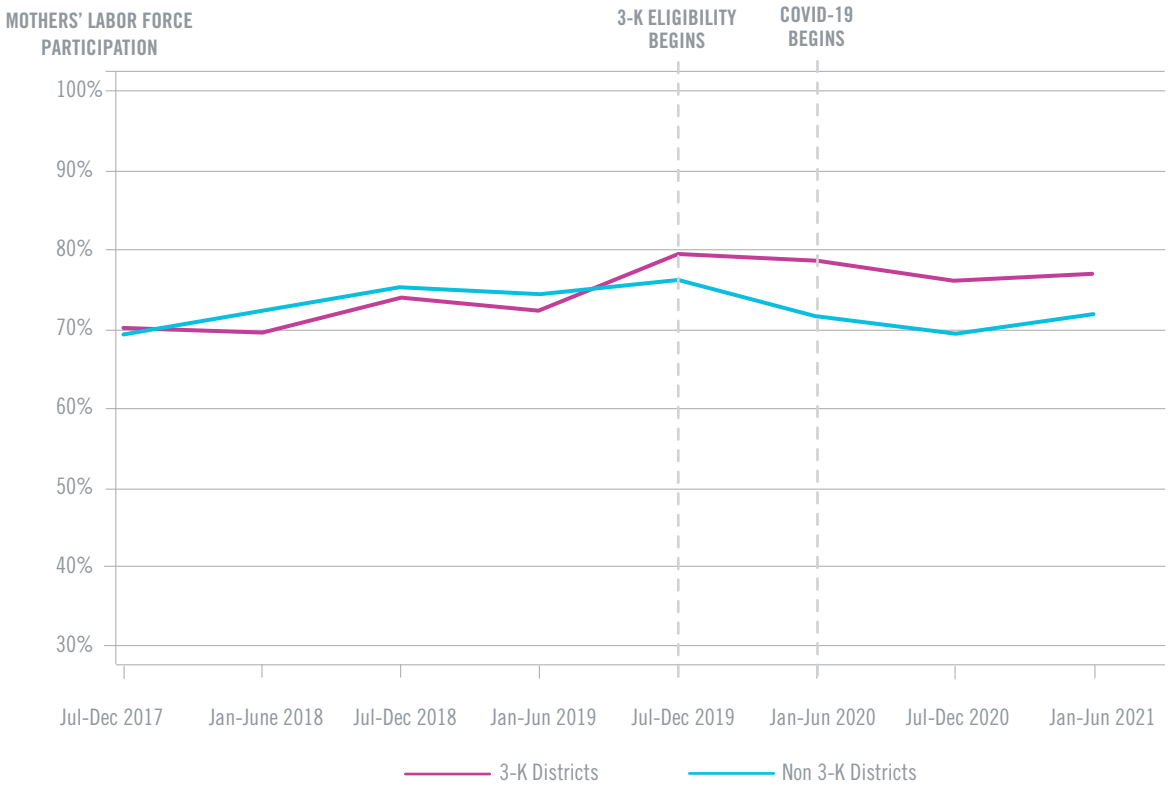
Includes only mothers who are working full-time. This measure is an indicator of stable employment and is also of interest because full-time employment is often associated with higher wages and benefits.

We track these three measures between 2017 and 2021, comparing mothers living in districts that had 3-K in 2019-20, when their child became age-eligible to attend, to mothers who had a child of a similar age but did not have 3-K available. Of course, mothers could apply for 3-K outside their own school district, but those living in the district had priority; given the limited supply of 3-K seats, we assume that relatively few children attended 3-K out-of-district. Our 3-K measure reflects 3-K availability, not actual participation in the 3-K program. We refer to mothers residing in districts with 3-K sites as "mothers in 3-K districts" and those residing in districts without 3-K sites as "mothers in non-3-K districts."

Labor force participation

Figure 1

Mothers' labor force participation from 2017 to 2021, by 3-K availability



Source: ECPT data from baseline survey to 36-month survey.

Note: Sample is restricted to families living in New York City whose focal child was born in 2016. Details on the sample sizes for each semi-annual period can be found in Appendix Table 1. The figures presented in this report represent the predicted rates of mothers' labor force participation, adjusted for differences in demographic characteristics between families in 3-K and non-3-K districts. These characteristics include the respondent's gender, race and ethnicity, immigration background, age, education level, poverty status at baseline, living with a spouse or domestic partner, and the number of children. Due to the small sample size in the first and second half of 2020 (n = 202 and n = 151, respectively) relative to other periods (n = 347–421), the estimations for these periods may be less precise.

Figure 1 displays the labor force participation rates from 2017 to 2021 for mothers with children born in 2016, with the pink line representing mothers in 3-K districts and the blue line representing mothers in non-3-K districts.[9] The first dashed vertical line indicates the six-month period when the children in our sample became eligible to enroll in 3-K (in the fall of 2019). The second vertical line marks the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before the children in our sample became eligible for 3-K in the fall of 2019, labor force participation was lower for mothers who lived in 3-K districts compared with mothers who did not. This makes sense, since the 3-K program was introduced earlier in higher-need districts.

[9] As indicated in the note to Figure 1, the labor force participation rates are adjusted for differences in demographic characteristics between mothers in 3-K and non-3-K districts.

However, when children became age-eligible for 3-K, mothers' labor force participation increased by 7 percentage points among those living in 3-K districts, compared with only 2 percentage points among those in non-3-K districts. This pattern suggests that the availability of 3-K helped mothers in 3-K districts to begin work or to enter the labor market and look for employment.

Mothers' labor force participation dropped after the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020. Nonetheless, throughout 2020 and the first half of 2021, labor force participation remained higher among mothers in 3-K districts than in non-3-K districts, suggesting that the impact of the higher availability of 3-K for mothers continued after children aged out of 3-K eligibility.

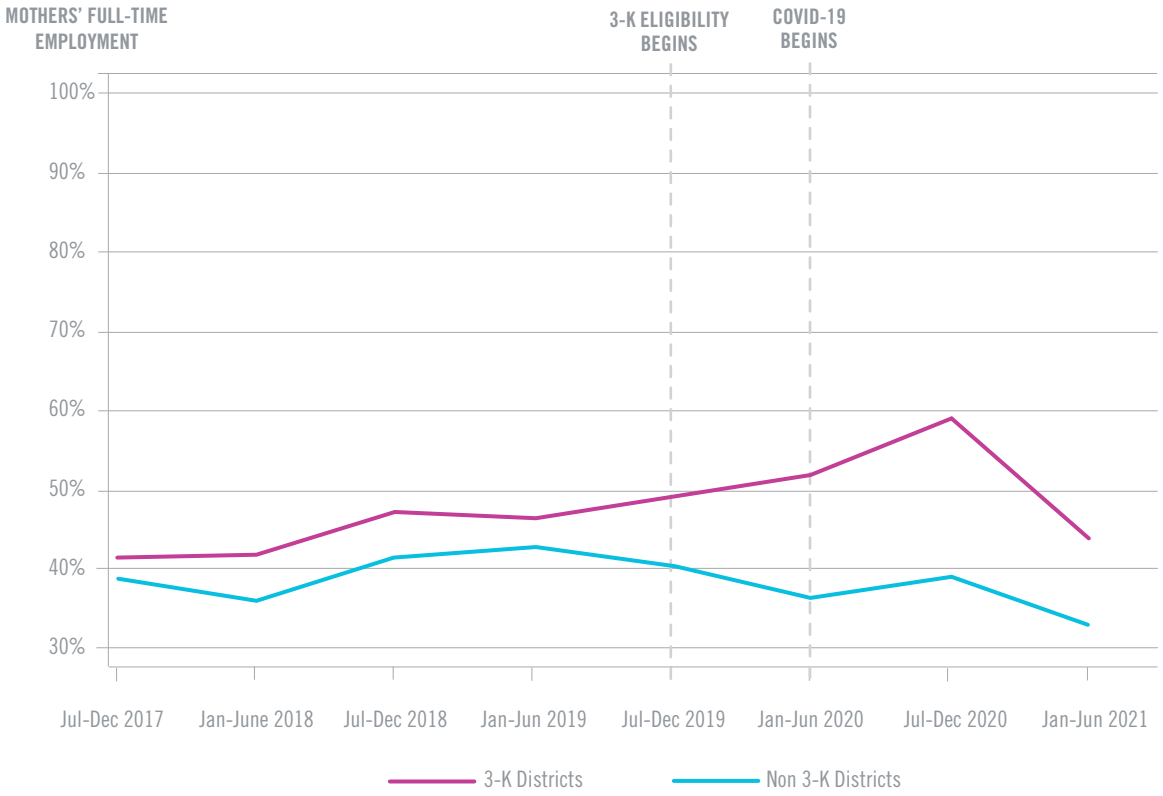
Employment

We see a similar pattern for employment as was found for labor force participation: mothers in 3-K districts become slightly more likely to be employed than those in non-3-K districts when their children could enroll in 3-K in the fall of 2019. However, the difference in employment rates is small and statistically insignificant.

Full-time employment

Figure 2

Mothers' full-time employment from 2017 to 2021, by 3-K availability



Source: ECPT data from baseline survey to 36-month survey.

Note: Sample and methods behind this figure are detailed in Figure 1 footnotes.

In Figure 2, we show the trends of mothers' full-time employment in 3-K (pink line) and non-3-K districts (blue line). The share of mothers working full-time was slightly higher for mothers in 3-K districts than mothers in non-3K districts, before their 3-K eligibility began. However, after children became eligible for 3-K, the rates of full-time employment further diverged. During this period, the predicted proportion of mothers working full-time rose from 46% to 50% in 3-K districts but fell from 43% to 40% in non-3-K districts. Despite the disruptive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, full-time employment remained higher in 2020 and 2021 for mothers in 3-K districts compared to those in non-3-K districts.

Conclusion

The findings of this report point to a positive effect of New York City's 3-K for All program on mothers' labor force participation and employment. Drawing on our repeated interviews with families in the ECPT, we found higher labor force participation and full-time employment for mothers with young children in districts with higher availability of 3-K programs compared to those living in districts with lower availability. We also found suggestive evidence that these benefits continued beyond the year of the 3-K program. There are a few possible explanations for these continuing impacts: 3-K could have helped mothers gain additional work experience or encouraged mothers to continue enrolling their children in Pre-K and kindergarten, contributing to persistence in paid work. These results indicate the potential of offering one extra and earlier year of free ECE at age 3 to support more stable labor force participation and employment among mothers of young children.[10]

While this report highlights the potential of free early childhood education programs to support mothers' labor force participation and employment, other benefits could be explored. A 3-K program might allow mothers to invest in their own education or help mothers achieve higher wages and earnings. Further research is warranted to learn more about the benefits of New York City's 3-K for All program.

[10] Schiman (2022)

Appendix

Table 1

Sample sizes of semiannual periods, by 3-K availability

	FAMILIES IN 3-K DISTRICTS	FAMILIES IN NON 3-K DISTRICTS	TOTAL
2017 July–December	150 (41.4%)	212 (58.6%)	362 (100%)
2018 January–June	181 (43.0%)	240 (57.0%)	421 (100%)
2018 July–December	169 (43.2%)	222 (56.8%)	391 (100%)
2019 January–June	164 (44.1%)	208 (55.9%)	372 (100%)
2019 July–December	167 (44.2%)	211 (55.8%)	378 (100%)
2020 January–June	89 (44.1%)	113 (55.9%)	202 (100%)
2020 July–December	64 (42.4%)	87 (57.6%)	151 (100%)
2021 January–June	148 (42.7%)	199 (57.3%)	347 (100%)

Source: ECPT survey responses from baseline survey to 36-month survey.

Note: Sample is restricted to families living in New York City whose focal child was born in 2016. Families' districts of residence are determined by their residential zip code of fall 2018 or spring 2019 and classified based on the rollout status of the 3-K for All program.

Table 2

3-K enrollment rates by 3-K availability

	FAMILIES IN 3-K DISTRICTS	FAMILIES IN NON 3-K DISTRICTS	TOTAL
Enrolled in 3-K	74 (42.5%)	46 (20.9%)	120 (30.5%)
Not enrolled in 3-K	100 (57.5%)	174 (79.1%)	274 (69.5%)
Total	**174 (100%)**	**220 (100%)**	**404 (100%)**

Source: ECPT survey responses from baseline to 32-month survey.

Note: Sample is restricted to families living in New York City whose focal child was born in 2016. Families' districts of residence are determined by their residential zip code of fall 2018 or spring 2019 and classified based on the rollout status of the 3-K for All program.

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