A report by: Fight Crime: Invest in Kids



Saddle Up, Montana

It's Time to Make Early Investments in Kids

Acknowledgements

Fight Crime: Invest in Kids is a national, bipartisan, nonprofit, anti-crime organization. The organization has a membership of more than 5,000 police chiefs, sheriffs, district attorneys, other law enforcement leaders and violence survivors. The members take a hard-nosed look at what approaches work–and what don't–to prevent crime and violence. They then recommend effective strategies to state and national policymakers. It operates under the umbrella of the Council for a Strong America.

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Executive Summary

In the old west when a bank robbery was committed the Sheriff would round up some "deputies," and they would saddle up to ride after the robbers. As 5,000 modern law enforcement leaders in our nationwide organization Fight Crime: Invest in Kids and 78 members here in Montana, we want to stop crime before it happens by keeping focused on some of Montana's wildest individuals: our babies, preschoolers and elementary school children!

Joking aside, it is never too early to invest wisely in helping young families to raise confident, competent, and successful children. Whether it entails having nurses offer voluntary coaching to individual new mothers, helping child care providers to improve their services, coaching early education providers to get children to "use your words," or showing teachers how to get their first graders competing to behave well, there is strong evidence that effective early investments can prevent later crime.

One prime example of this is the Nurse-Family Partnership, a parent coaching program for at-risk parents-to-be, which cut children's future crime in half. Another early care and education effort for at-risk children from the age of six months to five years resulted in them being four times more likely to graduate from college. North Carolina is seeing success in its effort to help the state's private child care providers up their game. Low-income kids left out of an early learning program in Chicago were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime by age 18. And children who didn't participate in a simple behavioral intervention in first grade were twice as likely to have a substance abuse disorder by age 19.



The cost of failure is steep. Our state currently spends $185 million every year on corrections to incarcerate 2,400 criminals, and the average cost to Montana taxpayers of one year in prison for the average inmate is more than $30,000. These estimates do not include the cost of county jails.

Meanwhile, sophisticated analyses of high-quality parent coaching and early education programs for at-risk children – interventions that can help to prevent the costs of crime and other problems – demonstrate that these interventions can return an average profit (economic benefits minus costs) to society of between $17,000 and $26,000 per child.

The evidence is clear: if we invest wisely in helping to strengthen our communities by helping our children get the right start in life and pay attention to what's working, our communities will be safer and more prosperous. It's time for Montana to saddle up and do what works for our kids.

Saddle Up, Montana

It's Time to Make Early Investments in Kids

The Cost of Crime in Montana

As law enforcement leaders, we see firsthand the impact of crime on our communities in Montana. While we can arrest and, if necessary, incarcerate criminals, a smarter approach is to keep people from becoming involved in crime in the first place. Just as we in law enforcement use strategies and approaches that have proven impacts on crime reduction, so too should state policymakers.

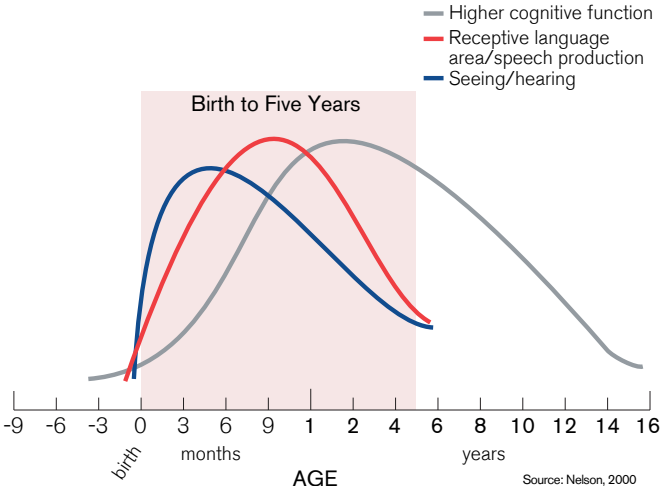


Source: Montana Department of Corrections

Our current situation is unsustainable:

- Although crime rates have fallen over the past 20 years, there are still nearly 2,700 violent crimes in Montana communities every year, a rate of 272 per 100,000 people.[1]
- Montana spends $185 million a year to incarcerate 2,400 adults in our state prisons. The average cost to taxpayers of incarcerating one individual for one year is more than $30,000 in Montana;[2] and
- In Montana state prisons, almost 80 percent of male inmates and 75 percent of female inmates are high school dropouts.[3] Nearly one-fifth of Montana students fail to graduate from high school on time.[4]

Synapse Formation in the Developing Brain



Source: Nelson, 2000

There are ways to change this course. But we have to act with urgency if we want to prevent the devastating impacts of crime in our neighborhoods and divert from this fiscally unsustainable path our state is on.

Start Early to Prevent Crime

Our best opportunity to prevent crime is to start early. By getting our most at-risk kids on the right track early in life, we can help more young adults earn diplomas rather than criminal records. It has been proven that high-quality early education and care can lead to less abuse and neglect, better performance in school, fewer high school drop-outs and, ultimately, fewer crimes committed and a reduction in the number of prisoners.

Why are the early years so crucial? One reason is that rapid brain development occurs during the early childhood period (often defined as birth to age five), and that hundreds of new connections in the brain form every second.[5] Early experiences play a large role in determining how brain connections are formed and this early "wiring" becomes the neural foundation on which all later learning is built.

For instance, by the time they are six months old, babies start to understand the link between words and their meanings. This sets the stage for language development and later reading. However, children from different backgrounds have very different early experiences. In one study, researchers observed children in their own homes monthly for over two years, until the age of three, and

Almost 80 percent of male inmates in Montana and 75 percent of female inmates are high school dropouts.

recorded how many words their parents spoke to them. There were large differences in the average number of words spoken to the children by parents of different income levels:

- professional parents 45 million words
- working-class parents 26 million
- parents receiving welfare 13 million.[6]

These differences affected the children's vocabulary development: by age three, children with professional parents had average vocabularies of over 1,000 words, compared to approximately 750 words for children in working-class families and 525 words for children of parents receiving welfare.

This is just one example. By the time children reach kindergarten, too many are not only far behind in vocabulary development, but also on pre-literacy and pre-math skills (such as knowing their alphabet or being able to count to ten). Many also face challenges in learning to control their impulses and behavior, which is necessary for getting along with other students and teachers.

James Heckman, a Nobel-winning economist, has conducted groundbreaking work with economists, statisticians and neuroscientists and has proven that the quality of early childhood development strongly influences health, social and economic outcomes. He argues that we should invest sufficiently in younger children and in coaching their parents because those early investments will generate the greatest return. But the opposite is happening: we actually spend far less on younger children than on older children and adults.[7]

A Way Forward

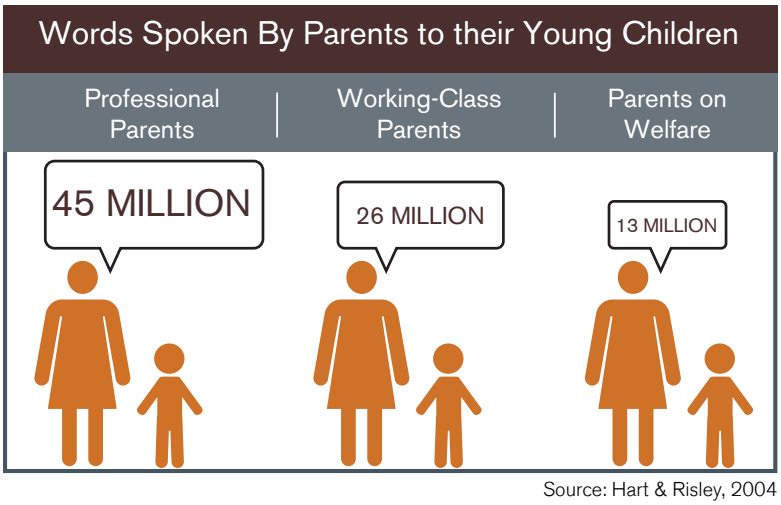


Across Montana's 56 counties and nine reservations there are thousands of children who need a little extra help getting the right start in life.

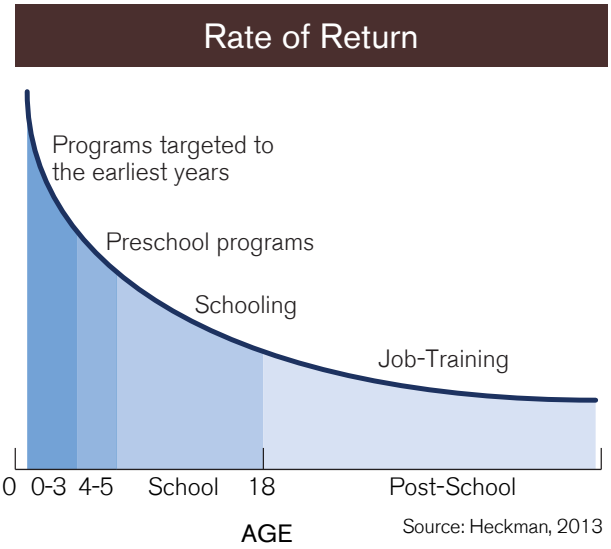
High-quality early education and care can help at-risk children get on track in terms of health, behavior and academics, to ensure they will be ready for kindergarten. Importantly, many high-quality approaches to early learning work extensively with parents to support them in their role as their child's first teachers.

One approach is to provide young, inexperienced and at-risk parents with the coaching they need through voluntary home visits. This coaching helps them understand their children's health needs, create safer home environments and develop parenting skills. One home visiting program, the Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP), has a proven impact on reducing infant mortality, preventing abuse and neglect and improving children's health and success in school. Studies also found that the program cut future convictions by more than half among the children who participated.[8] The Partnership Project in the Gallatin Valley is an example of this type of parent coaching.

For children at high risk, quality early education and care can also make a huge difference in their lives. It also makes a huge difference for parents, given that 65 percent of Montana families with children under the age of six have all available parents in the workforce. One program, the Abecedarian project, provided children with high-quality early education from the age of six



Source: Hart & Risley, 2004



Source: Heckman, 2013

months up until age five. A study found that later in life, the children who were randomly assigned to participate were not only four times more likely to graduate from college; they were also more consistently employed as adults, and the males in the program had a lowered risk of heart disease, stroke and diabetes.[9]

There is emerging evidence, as well, that promoting quality in private and public child care settings can help at-risk children. North Carolina is one of a handful of states where child care providers with higher ratings receive increased funding. This provides an incentive for providers to offer high-quality care and helps pay for the improvements necessary to do so. In addition to helping parents access the ratings and make more informed choices about where to send their children, evaluations of the program show that this method caused overall quality to improve among all providers, including the quality teacher-child interactions.[10]

At the same time, high-quality early education can effectively steer at-risk children toward success and away from crime. Randomized trials of early learning programs for disadvantaged children in Illinois and Michigan found that children who participated committed less crimes and were imprisoned less as adults: for example, by age 18, children who did not participate in the Chicago Child-Parent Centers were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime than the individuals who participated, and by age 27, children left out of the Perry Preschool program were five times more likely to be chronic offenders with five or more arrests than those who participated.[11]

Other classroom-based approaches for young, at-risk children can also have long-term impacts. For instance, a classroom management strategy for first graders called the Good Behavior Game increased the children's later likelihood of graduating high school and attending college while reducing conduct disorders. The children not served were twice as likely to have substance abuse disorders at age 19. These impressive long-term results are based on a simple and cheap approach that divides first grade classes into two or more teams who then compete to behave well, thereby allowing children to teach their peers self-control.[12]



In sum, there are many successful approaches to help young parents, childcare providers, early-education providers and teachers in putting at-risk children on the path to success. And the economic benefits from these early interventions are far-reaching. For example, a conservative estimate found that the NFP home visiting program returns an average benefit of $17,000 per family served back to society. Similarly, due to its impact on crime and other outcomes, a well-respected, independent analysis of more than 20 different studies of pre-k programs showed that it can return, on average, a profit (economic benefits minus costs) to society of over $26,000 for every child served. Meanwhile, the Good Behavior Game costs just $158 per child and returns nearly $60 for every dollar invested.[13]

Stronger Parents

Parents are their children's first and most important teachers. However, some parents do not have the knowledge or experience necessary to fully support their children's development. The most successful early education and care programs with long-term results work with parents to teach them how to reinforce positive behaviors and encourage them to routinely read and speak to their children, so they are better prepared for success in the years to come.



Increasing graduation rates decreases serious crime:

Economists Enrico Moretti and Lance Lochner studied the relationship over time between changes in graduation rates and crime. They concluded that a 10 percentage point increase in graduation rates – going from 50 percent to 60 percent, for example – reduces murder and assault rates by about 20 percent.

Source: Lochner & Moretti (2004)
The American Economic Review



A Different Path for Our State

As Montana law enforcement leaders, our job is to protect our communities and put criminals behind bars. But we all agree that a better and less expensive way to stop crime going forward is to prevent as many young children as possible from growing up to become involved in crime in the first place.

If Montana invests wisely in high-quality early education and care for its at-risk children, thousands more children can become successful, productive adults, instead of individuals who too often cost taxpayers dearly. Saddle up, Montana, and support what works for our at-risk children. This will put them – and our state – on a different, safer path.

ENDNOTES

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