

# Reducing Child Abuse and Neglect Through Evidence-Based Home Visiting

Parent-coaching programs in Illinois improve academic and health outcomes



## Acknowledgements

**Council for a Strong America** is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites five organizations comprised of law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, business executives, pastors, and prominent coaches and athletes who promote solutions that ensure our next generation of Americans will be successful, productive members of society.

### **Fight Crime: Invest in Kids**

Thousands of police chiefs, sheriffs, prosecutors and violence survivors protecting public safety by promoting solutions that steer kids away from crime.

*Supported by tax-deductible contributions from foundations, individuals, and corporations.*

Council for a Strong America and Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Illinois thank the Irving Harris Foundation and Robert R. McCormick Foundation for their generous support of this report. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of these funders

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**September 2020**

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**15,000**  
additional Illinois  
families need voluntary  
home visiting.

**Bringing a new child into the world is an occasion for joy—but also a complex and demanding experience. Child-rearing challenges are exacerbated for families that face difficult circumstances such as poverty, single parenthood, or drug addiction. The lack of proper supports for these families can lead to a multigenerational cycle of hardship. The law enforcement leaders of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids see first-hand how such a cycle can contribute to a continuance of crime and violence in our communities.**

On the other hand, Fight Crime members have also seen the benefits that evidence-based home visiting programs can provide. These programs provide “parent coaching” from a trained professional, starting as early as pregnancy and extending into the first few years of a child’s life—years during which the human brain goes through its most rapid development and is most vulnerable to the negative repercussions of adverse experiences.

Through periodic home visits, parents are equipped with the tools and skills they need to stimulate and nurture their child’s development and avoid harmful parenting practices.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the role that home visiting professionals play in the lives of families, as they pivot to visits through phone and video calls. These professionals have served as a life-line to families who are isolated from other means of assistance, conducting needs assessments and connecting parents to necessary services and supports.<sup>1</sup>

**Home visiting also has benefits that extend well beyond the family.** High-quality programs for families facing adverse conditions can reduce parental involvement in crime, lower rates of abuse and neglect, boost the ensuing academic achievement of participants’ children, and help curtail abuse of substances such as opioids in the long run. They can

also strengthen the economy by fostering families' financial independence and helping children become productive adults. When parents take advantage of the resources available through voluntary home visiting, entire communities can benefit.

### **What is voluntary home visiting?**

Home visiting is a term for numerous program models whereby mothers, fathers, or families opt to have trained professionals (e.g., nurses, social workers, or parent educators) visit their homes on a regular basis. Depending on the model, participation can begin as early as pregnancy or at other points during the first five years of a child's life. Home visiting programs aim to provide guidance and support by offering mentorship and educating parents about their child's early physical and emotional development. These efforts also provide tools for parents to manage stress, effectively guide their toddler away from problem behaviors, and connect to resources within the community. Ultimately, these programs help parents envision and work toward a positive future and put families on the path to self-sufficiency.

Illinois utilizes multiple home visiting models that are considered evidence-based by federal standards.<sup>2</sup> The primary home visiting programs that currently operate in Illinois and receive state and/or federal funding are:

- **Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP):** This program pairs nurses with first-time mothers from their pregnancy through their child's second birthday.
- **Healthy Families America (HFA):** This signature program of Prevent Child Abuse America starts with prenatal visits and works with parents up until as late as the child's fifth birthday.

“ The abuse and neglect of infants and toddlers is a gut-wrenching tragedy. Its prevention will help us break the cycle of violence that plagues too many of our families.”



**Chief Thomas Weitzel**  
Riverside Police Department

- **Parents as Teachers:** In this program, parent educators equip families with resources to prepare their children for a stronger life and greater success in school.
- **Early Head Start:** This federally-funded program serves pregnant women and families with children from ages birth to 3.

Furthermore, the Illinois State Board of Education-approved program BabyTALK works to empower and encourage parents, providing direct and innovative services to all participating households, with more intensive services dedicated to families who may be at-risk because of parents' income, age, or education. Additional newborn supports, such as the Family Connects program, serve to link families to home visiting and other resources.

These voluntary home visiting programs in Illinois are supported through four different public funding streams: the federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Act, the Illinois Department of Human Services (through the Healthy Families Illinois and Parents Too Soon budget lines), the Illinois State Board of Education's Prevention Initiative, and federal Early Head Start. In addition, there are local and private funds that support home visiting in some communities. In all, there are several hundred local programs in Illinois that served over 17,000 families in 2019.<sup>3</sup>

**Despite these funding streams, there remains a tremendous unmet need for these services.** An analysis completed for Illinois' Prenatal to Three Initiative found that Illinois would need to serve 15,000 additional families to meet the need for voluntary home visiting.<sup>4</sup> It is also significant to note that 17 Illinois counties have no home visiting services at all. These unserved counties see more than 1,500 births each year from families with incomes at or below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level.

### **Home visiting can reduce child abuse and may help prevent future crime**

More than 31,500 Illinois children were substantiated victims of maltreatment in 2018—which is nearly a 10 percent increase over 2017.<sup>5</sup> Psychologists warn that the family stresses and isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic could be increasing the rates of maltreatment.<sup>6</sup> Most child abuse and neglect occurs within families, particularly in those with young children. These traumatic experiences impact their childhood, life outcomes, and the well-being of our communities at large. While most child-maltreatment victims do not become criminals, **being**



**neglected or abused increases the risk of future involvement in crime.** For example, a national study found that children who have experienced abuse or neglect are twice as likely to commit a crime by age 19.<sup>7</sup>

Fortunately, high-quality home visiting programs can help prevent later crime by first preventing child abuse and neglect. The longest-running study of home visiting followed participants in the Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) program in Elmira, NY over two decades. It demonstrated that, by age 15, children in NFP had half as many verified incidents of child abuse and neglect as children in the control group who didn't participate.<sup>8</sup> Another program, Healthy Families America, led to a **36 percent reduction in child welfare referrals for maltreatment** among mothers with a history of abuse or neglect.<sup>9</sup>

“ Home visiting is a key component of the early care and education that can launch kids toward productive lives, and far away from my courtroom.”



**Randy Yedinak**  
Livingston County State's  
Attorney

Additionally, a 2019 comprehensive evaluation of all MIECHV-funded home visiting programs found that, after just 15 months of participation, parents showed a statistically significant reduction in the frequency of psychological aggression toward children.<sup>10</sup>

The Elmira study also found that home visiting reduced crime among parents, even beyond child abuse and neglect. Specifically, mothers in the control group had more than three times as many criminal convictions 15 years after the program, compared with mothers who participated in NFP.<sup>11</sup>

### **Home visiting and parental involvement boost academic achievement**

Law enforcement leaders also recognize the importance of helping parents become more positively involved in the development

of their infants and toddlers, and creating a foundation for success in educational settings.

**Home visiting programs offer an early intervention that can better prepare children for school.** For instance, a study of Healthy Families America found that children who participated in the program showed improved cognitive development and fewer problem behaviors that can interfere with learning at 2 years of age.<sup>12</sup> These early impacts lead to more success in school, with more children participating in gifted programs and fewer receiving special education services.<sup>13</sup>

Home visiting programs also increase parental involvement, leading to better outcomes for kids. One study, for example, found that Parents as Teachers participants read more frequently to their children and were also more likely to enroll their child in preschool, leading to increased school readiness.<sup>14</sup> National evaluations have found that Early Head Start leads to increased performance on cognitive, language, and social-emotional development measures, as well as positive effects on children's home environments and parenting behaviors, such as reading to children daily, having a large number of books in the home, and engaging in teaching activities with their child.<sup>15</sup>

Certain evidence-based programs can also help improve kids' readiness for kindergarten and performance in their early elementary years. For instance, a randomized controlled trial of children who received services from Nurse-Family Partnership found that students born to mothers with low psychological resources—who received visits from nurses—scored higher on tests of receptive language and math achievement at age 18, when compared with children who did not receive these visits.<sup>16</sup>



**Law enforcement leaders see the tangible advantages of enhanced academic achievement, which can result in multiple beneficial outcomes in adult life.**

In particular, there is an association between lack of high-school completion and incarceration for crime. Of Illinois' roughly 31,000 adult inmates in Department of Corrections custody, reporting their highest education level completed, 49 percent reported that they had not yet graduated from high school or obtained their GED.<sup>17</sup>

**Home visiting can help curb the opioid epidemic**

Evidence-based home visiting programs provide a solution to help combat substance abuse, including opioids. Illinois is no

stranger to the epidemic, as the state saw 2,169 drug overdose deaths in 2018 (a rate of 17 deaths per every 100,000 people).<sup>18</sup>

Prevention of substance use disorders can—and should—begin at, and even before,

**“ Through reducing children’s exposure to ACEs, home visiting can reduce the likelihood of engaging in opioid abuse later in life.”**



children's birth, as a correlation exists between early adversity and substance abuse later in life. In the past few decades, researchers have documented the effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which include abuse, neglect, and experiencing parental drug abuse or intimate partner violence. Studies have found that the toxic stress from such experiences can negatively affect health and well-being throughout life. **One study, for instance, found that children who experienced more than four childhood traumas were three times more likely to abuse prescription pain relievers, and five times more likely to engage in injection drug use in adulthood,** than their counterparts who did not experience any traumas.<sup>19</sup>

Through reducing children's exposure to ACEs, home visiting can reduce the likelihood of engaging in opioid abuse later in life. Moreover, these programs can help

addicted parents achieve sobriety through connecting them with treatment and supporting them through recovery.<sup>20</sup>

## Home visiting programs save money

Home visiting has been shown to help increase incomes, as mothers who participated in the Early Head Start home visiting program boosted their average annual earnings by \$3,600 following participation.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) has been found, in most studies, to more than offset its costs by reducing government spending on welfare and other public assistance.<sup>22</sup> In the most recent NFP study, the program accounted for approximately \$20,000 in lower spending per mother over 18 years, compared with program costs of \$15,000. Additionally, by 2031 NFP is expected to significantly reduce welfare spending among participants who enrolled in the program from 1996-2013. These estimates include a reduction in TANF by \$250 million, on food stamps by \$540 million, and on Medicaid by \$2.2 billion, which accrue to a total of \$3 billion. By comparison, NFP will have cost our nation roughly \$1.6 billion during this time frame; thus the program is estimated to yield \$1.4 billion cost savings nationwide.<sup>23</sup>

**\$3,600**  
average earnings  
boost for mothers in  
Early Head Start  
home visiting

## Conclusion

The positive impact that evidence-based, voluntary home visiting programs have on children and families during the prenatal-to-5-year-old period can be life-changing. The trusting and mentoring relationships that home visitors develop with parents who face multiple stresses lead to a number of positive outcomes that are of particular interest to law enforcement leaders. The COVID-19 pandemic has served to increase those stresses, and has made proven parent-coaching all the more essential as a tool to protect public safety in the long-term.

Home visiting can help reduce the terrible toll of child abuse and the risk of future crime it bears, improve parenting skills that lessen behavior problems and lead to increased child literacy and academic achievement. These programs can also help reduce the toxic effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences that can lead to future opioid use, while supporting parents currently grappling with substance-abuse disorders. Ultimately, the two-generation approach that home visiting offers to address these and other intractable challenges creates stronger families and strengthens the fabric of our communities. This, in turn, increases public safety and reduces burdens on taxpayers.

Illinois already has taken some positive steps on which we can—and should—build further and move forward, starting with a strong tradition of bipartisan support for evidence-based home visiting programs<sup>24</sup> in both the Illinois Department of Human Services and through the Early Childhood Block Grant Prevention Initiative. The work of the Illinois Prenatal to Three (PN3) Initiative and the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding represent a significant step forward towards reaching more families with evidenced-based home visiting. The PN3 Initiative brought together a diverse group of more than 100 Illinois expert stakeholders to develop an ambitious, comprehensive, multi-year, strategic policy agenda to ensure that Illinois' youngest children and their families—especially those furthest from opportunity—are on a trajectory for success. By 2025, the PN3 Initiative recommends expanding home visiting services to reach an additional 15,000 children and families, implementing a number of measures to strengthen and expand the early childhood workforce, and extending universal newborn supports to reach 31,000 more families. Additional federal, state, and local resources will be needed to meet these goals, and one avenue other states have successfully pursued is securing Medicaid funding for home visiting services. Illinois needs to do the same. The Illinois Funding Commission mandate to recommend full and equitable funding goals and mechanisms will also play a key role in the expansion of home visiting.

Moving forward with the Illinois PN3 Initiative and Funding Commission policy recommendations—while requiring increased state support for home visiting, over time—will help more families build foundations for future success, help reduce early childhood adversity and its lifelong impacts, and make our communities safer in the long-term.

## Endnotes

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