

# 25 Years In, We're More Sure Than Ever that Crime Prevention Starts in Early Childhood



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In the early 1990s, violent crime in the U.S. was reaching unprecedented rates. The response we saw was a wholly tough-on-crime approach, with talk of “superpredators” and stringent, punitive policies like the 1994 crime bill. These policies may have helped contribute to a slowing crime rate, but they undoubtedly inflated the country’s incarceration rates — and drained the nation’s checkbook — in the meanwhile.

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But, two years later, in 1996, a different movement took shape. U.S. Attorney General Elliot Richardson and Sandy Newman — a crime victim himself — looked at crime data and found that there is another story. In fact, they hypothesized, a preventative approach would work incredibly effectively. That approach: targeted investments in children that steer them away from crime and towards successful lives.

For many prosecutors, chiefs of police, and sheriffs across the U.S., the research gave credence to what we instinctively knew for years. We’ve interacted with kids who grew up

in neighborhoods that lacked opportunities, or who were traumatized, abused, or neglected. And we’ve watched as too many of those kids became involved in the criminal justice system later in life. We knew intuitively that giving kids the foundation they need to succeed would end up making our own jobs easier, and help our communities thrive in the long run.

Over the 25 years since Fight Crime: Invest in Kids was founded, its membership of chiefs of police, sheriffs, and prosecutors who believe this principle to be true has grown to 5,000 strong. These 5,000 voices have consistently reached state and federal policymakers on both sides of the aisle, helping them understand the importance of investments in high-quality early childhood education, voluntary parent coaching, afterschool programs, and juvenile anti-recidivism interventions when it comes to public safety.

To celebrate Fight Crime: Invest in Kids’ 25th anniversary, I want to pay tribute to my fellow prosecutors and attorneys general who have been instrumental in many of the legislative victories we’ve had over the past 25 years.

Some highlights of the past quarter century include historic new investments in:

## AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMMING

Today, the importance of afterschool programs in kids’ social-emotional development and in keeping kids safe after school hours is common knowledge. But, in 1997, afterschool programs were not yet part of the crime prevention conversation, and few federal dollars were dedicated to them.

Then, one year after the founding of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, the organization teamed up with U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno to release a research report: *The Prime Time for Juvenile Crime*. After analyzing the data, staff came to the key and novel realization that the afterschool hours of 3–6 PM are the time that juvenile crime is most likely to occur across the country. Many kids at this time were unsupervised, didn’t have a structured program, and too often ended up perpetrating, or becoming the victim of, crime after school.<sup>1</sup>

The case for investments in afterschool programs as a public safety strategy was born. The event with AG Janet Reno helped spread the message to 25 million people through its widespread media coverage, and, since then, this message has gained widespread bipartisan support.

With this research in hand, Fight Crime: Invest in Kids helped to win major investments in afterschool programs at both the state and federal level. In 2002, voters in my state of California passed the historic Proposition 49, which dedicated \$550 million annually for afterschool programs, effectively quadrupling the number of funded afterschool programs available in the state.<sup>2</sup> That same year, the funding of 21st Century Community Learning Centers, a federal program, was increased to \$1 billion. That funding has since remained steady; just this year, these programs were allocated \$1.2 billion and served over a million and a half kids.<sup>3</sup>

## HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Along with afterschool, high-quality early childhood programs — like pre-K and childcare — were shown to be important in keeping kids on a path to academic and lifelong success. This is especially true for children from disadvantaged circumstances.<sup>4</sup> As such, it became a key issue area that many of us have worked on through our advocacy with Fight Crime: Invest in Kids.



Sacramento, California District Attorney Anne Marie Schubert in 2017, at a rally on afterschool at the state capital.



Then-San Francisco, California District Attorney Kamala Harris speaking on the importance of investing in preschool expansion at a press conference in 2006.

<sup>1</sup> Fox, J.A., & Newman, S.A. (1997). *After-School Crime or After-School Programs: Tuning in to the Prime Time for Violent Juvenile Crime and Implications for National Policy. A Report to the United States Attorney General.* <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED412319.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Piha, S., Julian, J., & Cruz, R. (2012, July). *Examining California’s Afterschool Movement Post Proposition 49.* Learning in Afterschool & Summer. [http://www.learninginafterschool.org/uploads/1/1/0/6/110631901/examining\\_californias\\_afterschool\\_movement\\_post\\_proposition\\_49.pdf](http://www.learninginafterschool.org/uploads/1/1/0/6/110631901/examining_californias_afterschool_movement_post_proposition_49.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> *FY2021–FY2022 Comparison | Chart Budget Analysis of 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) Funding Levels — Updated June 2021.* Afterschool Alliance. (2021, June). <https://www.afterschoolalliance.org/documents/21stCCLC-budget-chart.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> *I’m the Guy You Pay Later.* Fight Crime: Invest in Kids. (2018, August). <https://strongnation.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/412/359ed53d-28d8-4b5a-8783-f87d2bce2e04.pdf?1582040192&inline;%20filename=%22I%27m%20the%20Guy%20National%20Brief.pdf%22>.

One highlight from our many state and federal legislative successes around early childhood education came in 2006, when Fight Crime: Invest in Kids member and then-San Francisco District Attorney Kamala Harris advocated for preschool expansion. She joined other members at an Oakland preschool to release a new research report, *Paying the Price for the High Cost of Preschool in California*, which demonstrated the connection between early childhood education and public safety.

The campaign was a success. Later that year, when California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed the 2006–2007 state budget, he provided half a billion dollars in new funding for children and families in my state, including a historic \$100 million for preschool expansion and facilities.<sup>5</sup>

### VOLUNTARY PARENT COACHING

Before most parents ever send their children to childcare, many vulnerable, impoverished, young or single mothers and fathers—who are often facing layers of complex or acute trauma as well—are left to their own devices as new parents. While overwhelmed, most wish to be the best parents they can be.



District Attorney Michael A. Ramos with fellow law enforcement leaders and Former California State Senate Minority Leader Jean Fuller (holding a mini Fight Crime: Invest in Kids police car).

That's where voluntary home visiting programs come in. These programs provide parent-skills coaching and social support from a trained professional, starting as early as pregnancy and often extending into the first few years of a child's life. Additionally, research shows that these programs dramatically reduce rates of child abuse and neglect, improve health and educational outcomes for the infants and toddlers, and even create better outcomes for the parents, such as decreasing their chances of becoming incarcerated.<sup>6</sup>

Because of this data, Fight Crime: Invest in Kids decided to kick off an intensive nationwide campaign in 2007, aiming to create federal funds to support these programs, so that parents across the country who need these critical services could access them if they so choose.

After years of sending letters, educating lawmakers, and testifying on the Hill, the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (MIECHV) — the first-ever federal support for voluntary home visiting — passed in 2010.<sup>7</sup> This victory of a \$1.5 billion investment in evidence-based home visiting for at-risk kids would not have happened without the intensive, three-year campaign by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids and its many champions, including, in particular, Brooklyn (NY) District Attorney Charles J. Hynes and Suffolk County (MA) District Attorney Daniel Conley.

### JUVENILE ANTI-RECIDIVISM PROGRAMS

By the 2010s, the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP) — first passed in 1974 — needed reauthorization and renewed investments. So, starting in 2015, Fight Crime: Invest in Kids members began educating Members of Congress on the proven benefits of certain juvenile anti-recidivism programs and how to effectively help rehabilitate those who have interacted with the criminal justice system early in their lives.

Thanks in part to the tireless advocacy of over 1,000 members who signed letters to Congress, and members like Carroll County (IA) Attorney John Werden, who traveled



Livingston County, Illinois State's Attorney Randy Yedinak and Sheriff Tony Childress at a 2017 visit to a preschool classroom in Pontiac, Illinois.

with Fight Crime: Invest in Kids to Washington, DC multiple times to meet with key policymakers, Congress reauthorized the JJDP for five years in 2018.<sup>8</sup> The bill received unanimous votes of approval in both the House and the Senate and included key new protections and significant new funds for preventative and anti-recidivism programs. With these programs' track records of preventing first-time crimes and re-offenses, we are excited to continue to see the impact they'll have on the next generation.

As Fight Crime: Invest in Kids reaches its 25th anniversary this year, I wish to thank all my fellow members, especially the many prosecutors and NDAA members from across the country. Because of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids' 5,000 current members, and all those past, we can look back today on a quarter-century of meaningful legislative progress on behalf of kids.

Looking towards the next 25 years, we will continue to hold true to the organization's founding principle: that one of the best ways to strengthen long-term public safety is evidence-based solutions that help vulnerable kids, no matter their familial situation or income level. As new research emerges, we will continue to advocate for both established and new evidence-based solutions: from child tax credits to career and technical education programs to school mental health supports, so that we continue to help ensure that all kids succeed.

*Michael A. Ramos served as District Attorney of San Bernardino County, CA, from 2002 to 2019. In office, he served as President of both the California District Attorneys Association (CDA) and the National District Attorneys Association (NDAA), and made victims' rights, public safety, protecting officers and implementing anti-gang programs the cornerstones of his office. Currently, he is a member of the National Leadership Council at Fight Crime: Invest in Kids and a board member of Council for a Strong America, the parent organization of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids.*

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<sup>5</sup> Legislative Analyst's Office. (2006, July). *Major Features of the 2006 California Budget*. [https://lao.ca.gov/2006/major\\_features/major\\_features\\_2006.html](https://lao.ca.gov/2006/major_features/major_features_2006.html).

<sup>6</sup> Clash, B., Berg, H., & Bishop-Josef, S. (2020, March). *Increasing Public Safety with Evidence-Based Home Visiting*. Fight Crime: Invest in Kids. <https://strongnation.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/1119/6619d391-0af4-45bc-8f6f-c3b329615889.pdf?1597418333&inline;%20filename=%22Increasing%20Public%20Safety%20with%20Evidence-Based%20Home%20Visiting%20.pdf%22>.

<sup>7</sup> Adirim, T., & Supplee, L. (2013). Overview of the federal home visiting program. *Pediatrics*, 132 Suppl 2, S59–S64. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2013-1021C>.

<sup>8</sup> Members applaud reauthorization of juvenile justice and delinquency prevention act. Council for a Strong America. (2018, December 13). <https://www.strongnation.org/articles/789-members-applaud-reauthorization-of-juvenile-justice-and-delinquency-prevention-act>.