FIGHT CRIME: INVEST IN KIDS
COUNCIL FOR A STRONG AMERICA
CALIFORNIA

BRIEF



Preschool Key to Boosting School Success and Enhancing Public Safety in California

Our state could realize billions in societal benefits by increasing access to high-quality preschool programs

The law enforcement leaders of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids have advocated for 25 years for investments in policies and programs that put kids on the path toward productive lives. We know that one of the best ways to keep young people from becoming involved in crime later on is to make sure they have a foundation for educational success in their earliest years. In particular, by providing access to high-quality preschool education for kids today, we can see less crime and incarceration in the future, while reaping enormous economic and societal benefits. Policymakers must help our state realize these benefits by investing in early education.

High-quality early education helps prevent crime

Research shows that the experiences children have in their earliest years, during a period of critical brain growth, set the foundation for future development and success.[1] Voluntary, quality preschool education can improve academic performance—including high school graduation—and reduce the risk that participants will become involved in crime later. Decades of research, across numerous states, show the short- and long-term benefits of high-quality preschool for children's development, particularly for children from families with low incomes.[2]

School readiness and success

Children who attend high-quality preschool are more likely to arrive at kindergarten ready to learn, with enhanced early math, language, and literacy skills.[3] They are also less likely to be held back in school or to need special education,[4] and more likely to be proficient in reading and math (higher test scores).[5] Preschool participants also have an increased probability of graduating from high school.[6] The fact that six out of 10 prisoners



nationwide do not have a high school diploma illustrates the connection between education and crime prevention.[7]

Decreased behavior problems

Students who participate in high-quality preschool are less likely to have behavioral infractions in elementary and middle school and to be suspended from high school.[8] Research has demonstrated a link between childhood behavior problems and later crime,[9] underscoring the significance of these findings.

Reduction in crime and incarceration

Some long-term studies directly examine the link between preschool participation and crime prevention. A recent MIT study of the Boston preschool program found that enrollees were less likely to have been incarcerated in a juvenile facility during high school, compared to non-enrollees.[10] By age 24, the people served by the Chicago Child-Parent Centers early education program were 20 percent less likely to have served time in jail or prison.[11] Another analysis found that Black children who participated in Head Start were less likely to engage in crime in their early 20s.[12]

Demonstrated economic benefits

An independent cost-benefit analysis of universal preschool programs, such as California is beginning to implement, showed that they can return, on average, a "profit" (economic benefits minus costs) to society of more than $15,000 for every child served (or approximately $3 for every dollar spent). The benefits accrue due to increased test scores, which are associated with higher earnings in adulthood, as well as decreases in costs to society, such as children being held back in school or needing special education.[13]

A previous cost-benefit analysis by the same researchers found that the "profit" increased to more than $22,000 per child served when preschool programs targeted children from families with low incomes and the calculation included the programs' benefits due to crime reduction.[14]

Applying the estimated $15,000 per child net benefit to approximately 781,000 additional children who would be served by expanding preschool to all 3- and 4-year-olds under recent federal proposals,[15] **our state could realize a return on investment of nearly $12 billion** over the lifetime of these children.



California policymakers must continue to invest in early education

California is beginning to implement a universal preschool program (UPK) which, by 2025-26 will exist for all 4-year-olds.[16] While this is a huge step toward ensuring comprehensive care for California's 4-year-olds, policymakers must continue their commitment to a mixed-delivery system, with diverse care options available that center parental choice and ensure all families—particularly those who need non-traditional hours—can access the care they need. To that end, California must expand its investments by increasing the rates paid to providers, waiving family fees, and increasing the number of spaces available including a commitment to financing facilities and providing technical assistance to those who wish to create new child care facilities.

Given the myriad benefits of high-quality early education programs, California policymakers must work to increase access to these programs. High-quality early education provides one of the best ways to set children on the path to success and help them avoid becoming involved in crime later. California policymakers should act now to bolster the early education system, to reap economic and societal benefits, including increased public safety.

Endnotes

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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.

Council for a Strong America is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites membership organizations, including law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, and business executives, that promote solutions that ensure our next generation of Americans will be successful, productive members of society.

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