FIGHT CRIME: Invest in Kids Maine

Cutting Crime by Cutting Child Poverty

The Child Tax Credit is a solid investment in crime prevention for Maine

A RESEARCH BRIEF BY FIGHT CRIME: INVEST IN KIDS *MAINE*

Fight Crime: Invest in Kids *Maine* is a national, bipartisan, nonprofit, anti-crime organization. The organization has a membership of more than 115 police chiefs, sheriffs, attorneys general, prosecutors, other law enforcement leaders and violence survivors throughout the state and more than 5,000 nationwide. The members take a hard-nosed look at what methods work—and what don't—to prevent crime and violence. They then recommend effective strategies to state and national policy-makers.

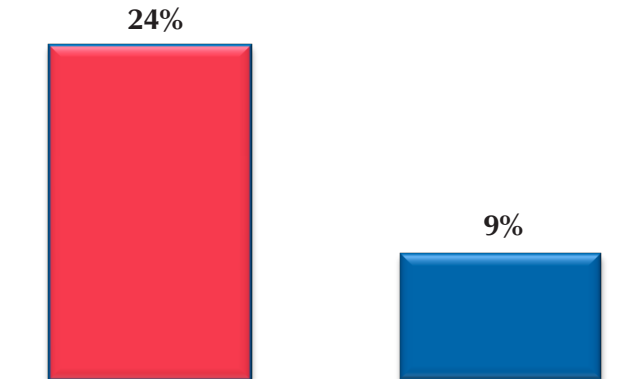
Summary

There are many obvious reasons for providing families with a Child Tax Credit. A reason often overlooked, however, is that a fully refundable Child Tax Credit will help cut future crime. The Surgeon General's report on youth violence showed that children from poor families have a much greater chance of becoming involved in violent crime than children from better-off families. In fact, children of poor families are more likely to become violent criminals than even children who are abused or neglected.[1] In other words, poverty is more closely associated with criminality than abuse or neglect. In Maine, one in six children are growing up in poverty. Research published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* showed that when North Carolina Native American families' income increased as a result of jobs and shared profits from a new casino, the rate of behavior disorders linked to juvenile criminality fell.[2] Lifting children out of poverty can cut crime.

The link between poverty and crime

Every law enforcement leader knows from years of experience that children immersed in poverty are more likely to turn to crime. Research also consistently confirms that. For example, in a large study conducted by Cambridge University, boys from the poorest quarter of all families were two and a half times more likely to be convicted of a violent crime as adults than boys from the wealthier three quarters of all families in the study.[3] By comparison, in Maine, the quarter of families with the lowest incomes would be families with incomes under $35,000.[4]

PERCENTAGE OF MALES CONVICTED OF A VIOLENT CRIME



Farrington, 1989

Poverty is linked to crime, but does poverty cause crime?

We know that poverty is closely tied to crime. But does poverty cause crime, or do some other factors, such as dysfunctional family problems, explain why a family experiences both poverty and criminality? A *Journal of the American Medical Association* article reinforces the argument that poverty is a crucial cause of crime.

Researchers had begun an eight-year study of 9, 11, and 13 year-old children's mental health problems in Eastern North Carolina when 25 percent of the children in the study – children from Cherokee families – received a large increase in income after a casino opened up four years into the study. The families received payments from the casino profits, and were first in line to receive jobs at the casino. In this "natural" experiment, about a third of Cherokee families moved from below the poverty line in the first four-year period to above the poverty line at the end of the second four-year period. The Cherokee children in those no-longer-poor families experienced a 40% decrease in conduct disorders and opposition defiant disorders – behavior disorders that are closely linked to juvenile criminality.[5]

The reduction in behavior disorders closely tied to crime was so great, and so rapid, that within four years the no-longer-poor families had the same lower rates of behavior disorders linked to crime as the never-poor Cherokee families.

The results for the non-Native American families in the study who also moved out of poverty were similar, providing further evidence that reducing poverty can cut crime.

CRIMES COMMITTED IN MAINE		
	Violent Crimes	Murders
Maine	1,547	31
		FBI Uniform Crime Report, 2009

Too many children living in poverty

In the United States, children are more likely to be living in poverty than any other age group. Children are twice as likely to be living in poverty, for example, as adults aged 45 to 54 (18% vs. 8.5%).[6] In Maine, one in six children are living in poverty.[7]

The younger the child, the more likely that child is living in poverty. Research shows that it is during the earlier years when living in poverty creates the greatest risk of becoming involved in violence later on. For example, a child growing up in a poor family when they are age 6 to 11 is at higher risk of becoming involved in later violence than a child living in a poor family from age 12 to 14 – a time when peer influences are more important.[8]

There is no income barrier over which a family can climb to totally remove the risk their child will become involved in violent crime. Some very rich families, of course, have violent children, and it is important to remember that most children of poor families will not become violent criminals. Therefore, a Child Tax Credit can reduce but not eliminate violent crime. But research shows a clear "dose-response" relationship: the more income a family has, the less risk there is that their child will be involved in ongoing violent crime,[9] and the more unequal a country's income levels are, the higher their homicide rates.[10] A fully refundable Child Tax Credit would help reduce economic deprivation among America's children, and crime in our communities.

Addressing the current economic crisis

The unemployment rate in Maine has risen since the beginning of the economic crisis; between October 2008 and May 2010, Maine's unemployment rate has climbed from 5.9 percent to 8 percent.[11] The Child Tax Credit – as enhanced by the recovery package – provides help to 60,000 Maine children who could lose these benefits if no legislative intervention is taken. The recipients of the partially refundable credits are the families most likely to spend the money rather than save it.[12] This is, therefore, one of the surest ways of pumping money into the economy.

A partially refundable Child Tax Credit would increase poor families' incomes & cut crime

Maine can continue to allow one in six of its children to grow up in poverty – so that their risk of becoming violent criminals is two and a half times higher than the rest of children in the state. Or our country can begin to make sure that all children have the right start in life to help ensure they are productive, law-abiding citizens. The fully refundable Child Tax Credit, which provides up to $1,000 per child for working families, will help stimulate the economy, and is a wise, family-friendly investment for many reasons. Preventing future violent crime is one of those reasons. As law enforcement leaders, we support this effort to help prevent crime.

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ENDNOTES

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