

Law Enforcement: High-Quality Pre-K Helps Drive Children's Path to Success and Protects Public Safety



Acknowledgements

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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

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Summary

At birth, incarceration is an unimaginable future for a child. However, when children are faced with adversities such as poverty, childhood abuse and neglect, under-resourced communities, inadequate preparation for school, learning disabilities, and behavioral problems, the susceptibility for criminal behaviors that lead to incarceration is heightened. All too often that path toward crime can be established in the early years of a child's life. However, research shows high-quality early childhood education (ECE) has the potential to positively change the life path trajectory for children, particularly children from disadvantaged backgrounds who face compounding challenges. Pre-k plays an important role in helping make that progression.

Studies have found that children who attend high-quality pre-k are more likely to self-regulate, get along with others, complete high school, and avoid juvenile delinquent behaviors and crime in adulthood. A study that followed children who participated in a high-quality pre-k and “parent-coaching” program through Chicago’s Child-Parent Centers found that children not served by the program were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime by age 18 than those who participated.

While we know that “crime doesn’t pay,” our state incurs significant losses in connection with the costly results of crime. Pennsylvania spends nearly \$3.2 billion annually on incarcerating adults at the local and state levels. **By contrast, prioritizing high-quality early childhood education can yield substantial economic benefits.**

Quality pre-k programs return an average “profit” (economic benefits minus costs) to society of more than \$22,000 for every child served. This analysis accounts for the economic benefits of both cutting crime and the cost of incarceration, reducing other costs such as special education and grade retention, and increasing participants’ future wages. Applying that cost savings estimate to the approximately 30,000 Pennsylvanian children from low-income families who are currently served by the Pre-K Counts and Head Start State Supplemental Assistance programs, Pennsylvania could realize about \$660 million in societal benefits over their lifetimes. If we invest in our kids today, we will pay far less for the costs of crime and lack of educational success in the years to come. That’s being “smart” on crime.

Educational shortcomings contribute to crime in Pennsylvania

The link between low educational attainment and poorer life outcomes is well known. In Pennsylvania, too many young people are doing poorly in school, putting them at risk for academic failure. For example, over two-thirds of eighth graders are not proficient in reading, and about one-third are not proficient in math.¹¹ Thirteen percent of students are not graduating from high school in four years.¹² While poor academic performance does not mean a child is destined for crime, it does increase vulnerability for delinquency,¹³ which heightens risk for future crime and incarceration.¹⁴ Children who engage in juvenile delinquency and children who have learning disabilities often experience similar educational outcomes, including grade retention, disengagement, and dropping out of high school.¹⁵ In fact, 1 in 4 prisoners has a cognitive disability.¹⁶

Pennsylvania spends \$3.2 billion on corrections each year



Although crime rates have fallen over the past 20 years, including in Pennsylvania, there are still 1.2 million violent crimes and 7 million property crimes committed against people in our communities across America every year.¹ **More than 44,400 violent crimes are committed annually in Pennsylvania, which is a rate of 306 per 100,000 people.**²

As of 2023, Pennsylvania has more than 38,000 inmates in state institutions and contracted Community Corrections Centers.³



Nationally, we spend \$305 billion per year on police protection, judicial and legal functions, and corrections.⁴ Pennsylvania spends almost \$3.2 billion a year on incarcerating adults at the state and local levels,⁵ and \$63,813 per person incarcerated in the state,⁶ which is more than three times what the commonwealth spends on its public students annually (\$19,900).⁷

Six out of 10 prisoners nationwide do not have a high school diploma and finding employment after incarceration is very challenging.⁸ **In Pennsylvania, 39 percent of incoming inmates have less than a 12th grade education.**⁹

Some continue their education in prison, so 24.1 percent of people who are currently incarcerated in the state have less than a 12th grade education and the average reading level is middle 8th grade.¹⁰



The Pathway to Less Crime

High-quality pre-k can give young children the boost needed for future success by identifying developmental delays earlier and reducing the need for special education placement later.¹⁷ For example, a longitudinal study tracking the achievements of lower-income children who had previously participated in high-quality early learning found that they were more likely to be identified for special education earlier and moved to mainstream classes sooner.¹⁸ Similarly, a longitudinal study of 1,539 children who grew up in high-poverty Chicago neighborhoods, found that participation in the Child-Parent Centers (CPC) early education program significantly reduced special education diagnosis.

Numerous research studies have also reported the benefits of high-quality pre-k on academic achievement and social development. Research has shown that high-quality pre-k will result in more successful outcomes:

1. Better school outcomes:

- **Ready for school:** Boston's pre-k program improved mathematics, literacy, and language skills among participating children equivalent to seven months of additional learning, compared with children who did not attend.¹⁹ State pre-k programs are also reporting similar important improvements in academic skills among the children that attend their programs.²⁰
- **Not Held Back in School:** Participants in Michigan's state pre-k, the Great Start Readiness Program, were held back in school 51 percent less often than non-participants.²¹ New Jersey's pre-k program found its children were held back 40 percent less often.²¹ New Jersey's pre-k program found its children were held back 40 percent less often.²² Children who participated in the New Mexico preschool program were 50 percent less likely to be held back a grade in school.²³
- **Increases in reading and math scores that persist:** A study of Pennsylvania's Pre-K Counts program found that in kindergarten, children who had attended the program had significantly higher levels of language and math skills compared to children who did not attend.²⁴ North



Carolina's Smart Start and More at Four initiatives to improve early education found that the children in counties that spent more per student were two months ahead in reading at fifth grade and 1.5 months ahead in math by fifth grade when compared with children in counties that spent less per student.²⁵ In addition, these results were maintained at least through eighth-grade, with both programs leading to increased math and reading test scores.²⁶ New Jersey's pre-k program, which served disadvantaged school districts statewide, reported that participating children were three-fourths of a year ahead in math and two-thirds of a year ahead in literacy in fourth and fifth grades.²⁷ The benefits of the New Jersey program persisted at least through 10th grade.²⁸ These findings show that academic gains from high-quality pre-k continue to have a positive impact for students, and that investing in early education can lead to greater academic achievements later on.

2. Less high school dropout:

- The Chicago CPC pre-k program reported a 29 percent increase in high school graduation rates by age 20 among its participants;²⁹
- Michigan's Great Start Readiness program reported a 35 percent increase in graduates,³⁰ and
- Students who attend the Tulsa, OK pre-k program were eight percentage points more likely to graduate from high school on time.³¹

It's significant to note that in Pennsylvania, 13 percent of high school students still fail to graduate in four years.³²

3. Fewer behavior problems:

- Pennsylvania's Pre-K Counts Public-

Private Partnership program (the precursor to the current Pre-K Counts program) cut—from 22 percent to 4 percent—the number of children at risk for problematic social and self-control behaviors.³³ This program was also found to help children learn self-control and self regulating behaviors, which led to fewer of those children needing special education.

- Alabama's First Class Pre-K program resulted in enrolled students being about half as likely to have a behavioral infraction in school as those who did not receive pre-k.³⁴ Further, the differences between the two groups were larger in middle school and high school, when the rates of infractions increased.

4. Less crime:

Two longitudinal studies of high-quality preschool programs, following children for nearly 40 years, found that children who had not attended high-quality ECE were more likely to engage in crime in adulthood. In one study, children who did not attend a high quality preschool were five times more likely to be chronic offenders by age 27.³⁵ In the other study, those who did not attend were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime by age 18.³⁶

Increasing graduation rates decreases serious crime

Economists studied the relationship over time between changes in graduation rates and crime. They concluded that a 10 percentage point increase in graduation rates reduces murder and assault rates by about 20 percent.

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

It's significant to note that in Pennsylvania, 14 percent of high school students still fail to graduate in four years.

5. Less incarceration:

High-quality ECE has been found to reduce the risk of future criminal activity. A 2021 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. An evaluation of Chicago's CPC program found that children who attended were less likely to have served time in jail or prison by age 24.³⁸

It All Adds Up

No baby is destined, at birth, to become involved in the criminal justice system. Adversities such as poverty, childhood abuse and neglect, under-resourced communities, inadequate preparation for school, learning disabilities, and behavioral problems increase the susceptibility for negative life outcomes. ECE has the potential to positively change the life path trajectory for children, particularly children from disadvantaged backgrounds who face compounding challenges.³⁹ Pennsylvania needs to continue building on its investments in high-quality pre-k to ensure that more children have the opportunity for quality early education and care to help them become successful and law-abiding members of society. Of course, pre-k is not a "silver bullet" that can protect against all future challenges, including criminal activity, which is also committed by people who have faced few, if any, foundational impediments. Unfortunately, too many children face a myriad of disadvantages that can be difficult to overcome, as well as systemic disparities in the criminal justice system that impact some groups disproportionately.



Quality is Key

To attain lasting results, programs must be high quality. The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) maintains a checklist of program features that support quality, focusing on teacher credentials and training, professional development, class size, teacher-child ratios, learning standards, curriculum supports, screening and other services, and program oversight. Both Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts and Pennsylvania Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program meet 6.9 of 10 NIEER benchmarks for quality.⁴⁰

The heart of any program is the interaction between the teacher and the child. To be able to deliver an evidence-based curriculum that supports all aspects of children's development—cognitive, social, physical, and emotional—teachers must be well-trained and receive quality, ongoing professional development training. They also must be fairly and appropriately compensated to reduce turnover and create a more stable workforce. The current average salary for a pre-k teacher in Pennsylvania is \$31,380 compared to \$66,160 for kindergarten teachers.⁴¹

Supporting parents

The most successful early childhood programs with long-term results—such as the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, and New Jersey’s state pre-k—work with parents to support them in reinforcing 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.

Parents are their children’s first and most important teachers. However, some parents in challenging circumstances need support to bolster their children’s development. High-quality early childhood programs partner with parents to help them foster their children’s academic and behavioral development.

Pennsylvania Must Expand Access to Pre-k

There are 153,210 children ages 3 and 4 who are eligible for Pennsylvania’s publicly-funded pre-k programs. Of those, 87,288 (57 percent) do **not** have access to high-quality, publicly funded pre-k.⁴² They are missing out on the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that will provide a solid foundation for future learning as well as the aforementioned benefits that high-quality pre-k is shown to provide.

Demonstrated Economic Benefits

A well-respected, independent cost-benefit analysis of studies of high-quality pre-k programs showed that pre-k can return, on average, a “profit” (economic benefits minus costs) to society of more than \$22,000 for every child served. Applying these benefits to the nearly 30,000 children who are currently served by Pre-K Counts and the Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program, Pennsylvania could realize a return of about \$660 million over the lifetime of these children. These economic benefits accrue due largely to reductions in the cost of future crime and increases in participants’ future wages, as well as decreases in other costs to society, such as children being held back in school or receiving special education. These benefits would accrue for each new cohort of children served by high-quality pre-k. Clearly, pre-k works and more than pays for itself. These benefits would accrue for each new cohort of children served by high-quality pre-k. Clearly, pre-k works and more than pays for itself.

Conclusion

High-quality pre-k helps provide a solid educational and life skills foundation for Pennsylvania children, especially for those living in challenging circumstances. Prioritizing early learning for our children today is the key to securing a safe and strong future for our state and our nation. Policymakers must invest further in improving access to our state’s Pre-K Counts program and Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program. If Pennsylvania continues to invest wisely in quality pre-k opportunities for its disadvantaged children, thousands of children can receive a boost on the path to becoming successful, productive adults. When we support what works for our children, we put them—and our state—on an improved and safer path.

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