



# Cutting Crime by Cutting Child Poverty

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

## A RESEARCH BRIEF BY FIGHT CRIME: INVEST IN KIDS

FIGHT CRIME: INVEST IN KIDS, is a national, bipartisan, nonprofit, anti-crime organization. The organization has a membership of more than 5,000 police chiefs, sheriffs, attorneys general, prosecutors, other law enforcement leaders and violence survivors. 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

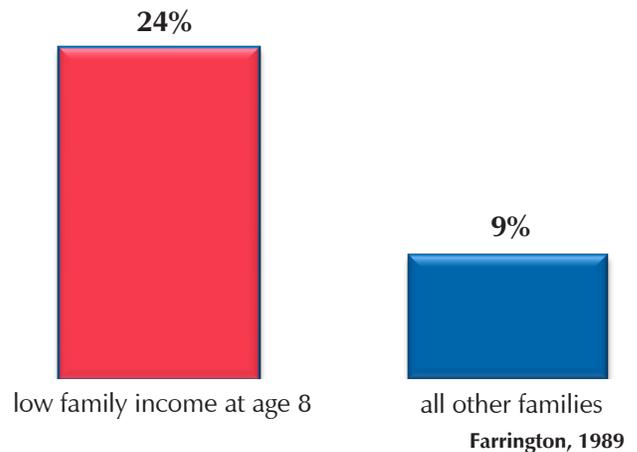
There are many obvious reasons for providing families with a Child Tax Credit. A reason often overlooked, however, is that a partially refundable Child Tax Credit will help cut future crime. The Surgeon General's report on youth violence showed that children from poor families have a much greater chance 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.<sup>1</sup> In other words, poverty is more closely associated with criminality than abuse or neglect. In both of the Carolinas, approximately one in five children are growing up in poverty. Research published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* showed that when Native American families in North Carolina were raised out of poverty because a casino opened up providing them with revenue-sharing funds and jobs, their children no longer experienced the high levels of behavior disorders that are closely linked to juvenile crime.<sup>2</sup> 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 consistently confirms that. For example, in a large study conducted by Cambridge University, children 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 children from the wealthier three quarters of all families in the study.<sup>3</sup> By comparison, in the Carolinas, the quarter of families with the lowest incomes would be families with incomes under \$35,000.<sup>4</sup>

### PERCENTAGE OF MALES CONVICTED OF A VIOLENT CRIME



### 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 8-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 big boost in income after a casino opened up four years into the study. The families received payments as a portion of the 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.

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 THE CAROLINAS		
	Violent Crimes	Murders
North Carolina	43,099	604
South Carolina	32,691	305
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%).<sup>5</sup> In both North and South Carolina, nearly one in five children in both states are living in poverty.<sup>6</sup> In the Charlotte metropolitan area, 12.5 percent of children under 18 are living in families under the poverty line.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> and the more unequal a country’s income levels are, the higher their homicide rates.<sup>10</sup> 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 rates in the Carolinas have spiked over the last year; between December 2008 and December 2009, North Carolina’s unemployment rate has climbed from 8 percent to just over 11 percent, while South Carolina’s rate climbed from just under 9 percent to 12.6 percent. In Charlotte, the unemployment rate has grown more than 3 percentage points (from 8.7% to 12.1%) during the same time.<sup>11</sup>

The Child Tax Credit – as enhanced by the recovery package – provides help to 481,000 North Carolina children and

253,000 South Carolina children who would otherwise stand to lose these benefits if no legislative intervention is taken.<sup>12</sup> In the United States as a whole, 39 percent of new recipients of the CTC came from central city households, 38 percent come from suburban households, and 23 percent come from rural areas.<sup>13</sup>

The recipients of the partially refundable credits are the families most likely to spend the money rather than bank it.<sup>14</sup> 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**

The Carolinas can continue to allow about one in five 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 Carolinas. 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 partially 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.

FIGHT CRIME: INVEST IN KIDS is supported by tax-deductible contributions from foundations, individuals and corporations. FIGHT CRIME: INVEST IN KIDS accepts no funds from federal, state or local governments.

Major funding for FIGHT CRIME: INVEST IN KIDS is provided by: The Atlantic Philanthropies · The Birth to Five Policy Alliance · The California Wellness Foundation · The Annie E. Casey Foundation · The Robert Sterling Clark Foundation · Dr. Scholl Foundation · East Bay Community Foundation · The Frey Foundation · Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation · The Grable Foundation · Grand Victoria Foundation · The George Gund Foundation · Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund · Hagedorn Foundation · The Irving Harris Foundation · The Heinz Endowments · The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation · The James Irvine Foundation · The Walter S. Johnson Foundation · W.K. Kellogg Foundation · The Marks Family Foundation · The Oscar G. & Elsa S. Mayer Family Foundation · McCormick Foundation · The Morris Family Foundation · The New York Community Trust · New Tudor Foundation · Ohio Children's Foundation · The David and Lucile Packard Foundation · William Penn Foundation · The Pew Charitable Trusts - Advancing Quality Pre-K for All · Rauch Foundation · W. Clement and Jessie V. Stone Foundation.

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## ENDNOTES

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