

High-Quality Early Care & Education is Crime Prevention

Early childhood programs set children on the path to success in Louisiana



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

About 60 percent of Louisiana children do not meet school readiness benchmarks at kindergarten entry.¹ Many of these children may never catch up—underperforming in third-grade reading and math, more likely to be held back in school, and less likely to graduate from high school on time. Some may even end up involved in crime.

High-quality early childhood care and education (ECE) programs can help reduce these risks by working with parents to give children a good start in life. Research shows that high-quality ECE can increase the likelihood that children succeed in school and steer clear of crime. Yet, publicly funded ECE programs currently reach only 29 percent of in-need children under the age of 5 in Louisiana.² Unmet need is concentrated among children ages birth to 3, with only 15 percent served.³

The Louisiana Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) provides financial assistance to parents with low incomes that allows them to access high-quality child care while they are working, attending school, or looking for work. Louisiana policymakers must create more CCAP slots for children ages birth to 3, by providing \$115 million in state funding per year for the next ten years, as recommended by the Early Childhood Care and Education Commission created by the legislature.⁴ When we invest in early learning programs, we put our children—and our state—on a path toward greater safety and prosperity.

Educational shortcomings contribute to crime in Louisiana

There were more than 25,500 violent crimes and 147,000 property crimes committed in Louisiana in 2019.⁵ Although

full data are not yet available, the murder rate in Louisiana increased more than 30 percent in 2020.⁶ There are more than 13,000 adults incarcerated in state prisons in Louisiana⁷ and the adult correctional institution budget is \$396.5 million per year.⁸

Law enforcement leaders in Louisiana agree that we cannot arrest and incarcerate our way out of this problem. We also need to address the root of the problem by preventing crime from occurring in the first place. Research shows a strong association between high school dropout and crime. Nationwide, six out of 10 inmates in state prisons do not have a high school diploma.⁹ In Louisiana, too many young people are doing poorly in school. For example, about three-fourths of eighth graders are not proficient in math or reading¹⁰, and 20 percent of students are not graduating high school on time, in four years (the fifth-worst rate in the nation).¹¹

Too many children are falling behind before they enter school

The path to poor educational outcomes and crime starts early in life. One study found that as much as 70 percent of the high school achievement gap between kids living in poverty and wealthy kids already exists at kindergarten entry.¹² Data from Louisiana's kindergarten entry assessments shows that about 60 percent of our state's children do not meet school readiness benchmarks at kindergarten entry.¹³ Children who enter kindergarten too far behind are likely to lag behind their peers throughout the K-12 years and may drop out before completing high school. These deficits create substantial obstacles to their prospects for gainful, legitimate employment and self-sufficiency as adults.

“I would rather prevent crime from happening in the first place. We can do that by ensuring our youngest Louisianans have access to high-quality early learning programs.”



Greg Champagne, Sheriff
St. Charles Parish
Sheriff's Office

The early years are key for brain development

The first few years of life are a period of rapid brain development in which one million new neural connections form every second.¹⁴ This “wiring” becomes the foundation on which all later learning is built. By preschool, it can be too late for preventing problems: gaps may have already emerged in the birth-to-age-3 years that are hard to reverse. For example, differences in cognitive abilities between disadvantaged and more advantaged children have been found as young as age nine months.¹⁵

High-quality early childhood programs put children on a path to success

Parents are their children's first and most important teachers. The most effective early childhood programs support parents in their

role as caregivers and educators, assisting them in guiding their children's development from birth onward.

The Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) is Louisiana's only state-funded ECE program for children under age 4.¹⁶ CCAP provides financial assistance to parents with low incomes that allows them to access high-quality child care while they are working or attending school.¹⁷

However, CCAP serves only 15 percent of in-need children in the birth-to-3 age range. The number of children served has dropped substantially in recent years, due to funding cuts. The younger the child, the lower the access, with 34 percent of 3-year-olds, 10 percent of 2-year-olds, seven percent of 1-year-olds, and three percent of infants served.¹⁸ In contrast, more than 90 percent of in-need 4-year-olds have access to publicly funded ECE (preschool or Head Start).

Quality child care supports young children and their families

Providing children from disadvantaged families with high-quality child care can help reduce the human and fiscal costs of crime in the future. For example, a longitudinal study of children who attended an Educare program is following the students into middle school. Results show that students who attended for at least two years had higher scores in math and reading on state assessments in elementary school, compared to similar peers who had not attended.¹⁹

Research also points to the importance of social-emotional development, mental health, and executive function skills as significant factors in school completion and later behavioral outcomes. Studies have



found connections between these capacities in early childhood and children's shorter-term academic outcomes, including being held back in school, receipt of special education, and being suspended or expelled from school.²⁰ High-quality ECE supports the development of these essential skills. A study, for example, found that children who were randomly selected to attend a high-quality ECE program from ages 2 to 3 had fewer behavior problems (as rated by parents) than children who were left out.²¹ A longitudinal study of more than 1,300 children found that children in higher-quality child care were better prepared for school at age 4 compared to children in lower-quality child care. At age 15, they were still performing slightly above their peers and had significantly lower levels of behavior problems.²²

High-quality preschool programs can reduce future crime

Louisiana has a relatively strong ECE system for 4-year-olds, with more than 90 percent of those in-need having access to publicly funded preschool or Head Start.²³

Research shows that quality preschool can enhance school performance, increase high school graduation rates, and decrease school dropout.²⁴ Some studies have found direct links between quality preschool and crime reduction: Most recently, an 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.²⁵ Children not served by the Chicago Parent-Child program were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime by age 18.²⁶ By age 24, the people served were 20 percent less likely to have served time in jail or prison.²⁷

Cost-benefit analyses of preschool programs have also demonstrated their positive return on investment, including through savings realized from crime

“Research has proven over and over again that high-quality early learning steers kids on the path to successful lives and away from crime.”



Tommy Clark,
Chief of Police
Grambling Police
Department

reduction. For example, the Chicago CPC program had a return of nearly \$11 for every dollar spent, with the savings related to crime at approximately \$5 saved for every dollar invested.²⁸ Estimates suggest that state preschool programs for children from low-income families yield more than \$4 for every dollar spent.²⁹

Conclusion

Many Louisiana children start school behind their peers and may never catch up, which can lead to high school dropout and involvement in the criminal justice system. Our state’s policymakers must create more CCAP slots for children ages birth to 3, by providing \$115 million in state funding per year for the next ten years. Greater investments in high-quality early learning from the ages of birth to 3 years—a crucial time of brain development—will benefit Louisiana children and families, as well as improve public safety in the years to come.

Endnotes

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