



Reducing Crime Begins with Early Learning

High-quality early childhood programs provide the foundation for success in school and reduce the risk of future involvement in crime

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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More than 64,000 children under the age of five in Nebraska are at risk of failing in school.¹ Many of these children experience developmental delays because they live in families with risk factors such as poverty or teenage parenthood. These deficits follow children throughout their school years, putting them on a path toward future high school dropout and potential involvement in crime.

Early childhood programs help offset these risks by working with parents to give children a good start in life. Research shows that high-quality programs can increase the likelihood that children succeed in school and steer clear of crime.² Yet high-quality early childhood programs currently reach less than eight percent of at-risk children under the age of three in Nebraska.³

Given the pressure on Nebraska's corrections system, policymakers cannot afford to

Less than 8% of at-risk children under the age of three in Nebraska have access to a high-quality early childhood program

overlook proven strategies that prevent crime and add more productive, contributing citizens to our communities and workforce.

Poor education is contributing to Nebraska's crime problem

While crime rates have fallen over the past two decades, there are still over 5,200 violent crimes and 42,500 property crimes committed in Nebraska each year.⁴ The state's prison system is tasked with the consequences. In total, **there are more than**

5,000 adults incarcerated in state prisons in Nebraska at a cost of roughly \$200 million per year, and there have been multiple reports of prison overcrowding, poor programming, understaffing, and rioting.⁵

Improving Nebraska's prison system is necessary but not sufficient; we also need to address the root of the problem by preventing crime in the first place. The path to crime starts early in life. Research shows a strong association between high school dropout and crime. Nationwide, **seven out of 10 inmates in state prisons do not have a high school diploma.**⁶ In Nebraska, too many young people are doing poorly in school. For example, 62 percent of eighth graders are not proficient in math or reading, and 11 percent of students are not graduating high school on time, or at all.⁷

Too many children are falling behind before they enter school

One study found that as much as 70 percent of the high school achievement gap between poor and wealthy kids already exists at kindergarten entry.⁸ Children who enter kindergarten too far behind are likely to lag behind their peers throughout the K-12 system and drop out before completing high school. These deficits create nearly insurmountable obstacles to their prospects for gainful, legitimate employment and self-sufficiency as adults.

“Investing in high-quality early childhood programs is one of the best steps we can take to reduce crime in Nebraska.”



Timothy Dunning
Douglas County Sheriff

The first three years are critical for brain development

Nebraska has a relatively strong early education system for four- and five-year-olds, but by then, it's often too late: gaps have already emerged in the first three years of life that are hard to reverse.⁹ That's because the first three years of life are a period of rapid brain development in which hundreds of new neural connections form every second.¹⁰ This “wiring” becomes the foundation on which all later learning is built.

For example, by the age of six months, babies start to understand the link between

\$18,800

The cost per year to house an inmate in Lincoln's Community Corrections Center

words and their meanings. This sets the stage for language development and later reading. Yet children from different backgrounds have vastly different early experiences. Research shows that children in low-income families hear 70 percent fewer words than children from higher-income families, and as a result, they have 50 percent smaller vocabularies by age three.¹¹

Poor neural development during the early years also affects executive functioning skills such as impulse control and emotional self-regulation that are important for success in school, and related to engagement in risky or socially inappropriate behaviors.¹²

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 0-to-3 programs focus on improving parents' skills as caregivers and educators,** better preparing them to guide their children's development from day one.

In Nebraska, less than eight percent of at-risk children ages 0-to-3 are enrolled in a high-quality early learning program.¹³ Many of the families who do have access are enrolled through Nebraska's Sixpence Early Learning Fund, which funds parent engagement and child care programs that reach roughly 1,000 infants and toddlers at-risk.¹⁴

Home-based parent engagement programs support families and prevent crime

The majority (70 percent) of Sixpence funding goes to voluntary, home-based parent engagement programs.¹⁵ In these programs, a trained professional from the



Nebraska's Sixpence program decreases the risk of developmental delays

Sixpence-funded programs can offset the effects of serious developmental risks. Participating children met widely held expectations for age-appropriate development in:

95%
Social emotional
skills

92%
Cognition

87%
Language

Nearly every child served by Sixpence met major health and safety indicators. Sixpence families exceeded program goals measuring their ability to promote strong relationships between parents and children.

Source: Sixpence Early Learning Fund 2015-2016 Evaluation Report



Research on home-based parent engagement programs show they improve children's health, well-being, and development.

school district works with expectant or new parents to teach them crucial parenting skills that support their infant's health, safety, and development.

Research on home-based parent engagement programs shows they improve children's health, well-being, and development.¹⁶ For example, a study of one program found a 60 percent reduction in infant mortality rates, and research on another program found that participating children were 30 percent less likely to need special education in elementary school.¹⁷

Home-based parent engagement programs can also impact later involvement in crime. A long-term study of another parent engagement program found that, **by age 19, children who participated in the program had half as many arrests and convictions** compared to those left out. The results were concentrated among the girls in the program.¹⁸

Conclusion

Many Nebraska children start school far behind and never catch up, which often leads to high school dropout and involvement in the criminal justice system. Greater investments in high-quality early learning from the ages of 0 to 3—a crucial time of brain development—will benefit Nebraska children and families, as well as improve public safety in the years to come.

Endnotes

- 1** At-risk of failing in school defined by one or more of the following risk factors (using the Nebraska Department of Education's definition): eligible for free and reduced lunch (185% of the federal poverty level); baby born at low birth weight; households who speak English as a second language; and having a teen parent who has not completed high school. First Five Nebraska (2015). Children Served by Quality Early Childhood Programs and Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Needed. [Infographic] Retrieved from FirstFiveNebraska.org.
- 2** According to studies of Healthy Families America, Every Child Succeeds, and the Nurse-Family Partnership. In order: Caldera, D., et al. 2007; Donovan et al. 2007; Eckenrode et al. 2010.
- 3** First Five Nebraska (2015). Children Served by Quality Early Childhood Programs and Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Needed. [Infographic] Retrieved from FirstFiveNebraska.org.
- 4** Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2016). Crime in the United States 2015. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice.
- 5** Nebraska Department of Correctional Services (2014, June 30). Inmate population. Retrieved from: <http://www.corrections.state.ne.us/pdf/datasheets/datasheetJun14.pdf>; (2015, August). State of Nebraska FY2015-16 / FY2016-17 Biennial Budget As Enacted in the 104th Legislature-First Session. Nebraska Legislature. Retrieved from <http://www.nebraskalegislature.gov/pdf/reports/fiscal/2015budget.pdf>
- 6** Harlow, C. W. (2003, January). Education and correctional populations. NCJ 195670. Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved from: <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ecp.pdf> . The figure, 68%, represents those without high school diplomas at time of incarceration. Some inmates participate in educational programs in prison and earn their diplomas.
- 7** U.S. Department of Education. Nation's Report Card: State Profiles: Nebraska: 2015. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/>; U.S. Department of Education. Table 1. Public high school 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR), by race/ethnicity and selected demographics for the United States, the 50 states, and the District of Columbia: School year 2014–15. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR_RE_and_characteristics_2014-15.asp
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- 9** National Institute for Early Education Research (2016). The State of Preschool 2015: State Profiles: Nebraska. Retrieved from http://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Nebraska_2015_rev1.pdf
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- 13** First Five Nebraska (2015). Children Served by Quality Early Childhood Programs and Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Needed. [Infographic] Retrieved from FirstFiveNebraska.org.
- 14** Sixpence (2016, September). Sixpence Early Learning Fund: 2015-2016 Evaluation Report. University of Nebraska Medical Center. Retrieved from <http://www.singasongofsixpence.org/about/index.html>
- 15** Ibid
- 16** According to studies of the Early Head Start, Healthy Families America, Every Child Succeeds, and the Nurse-Family Partnership. In order: Jones Harden, B., et al. 2012; Caldera, D., et al. 2007; Donovan et al. 2007; Eckenrode et al. 2010.
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