



# Invest in Early Education Now, Spend Less on Prison Later

Quality Early Learning Can Save \$80 Million a Year  
on Corrections Costs in New Mexico

## Summary

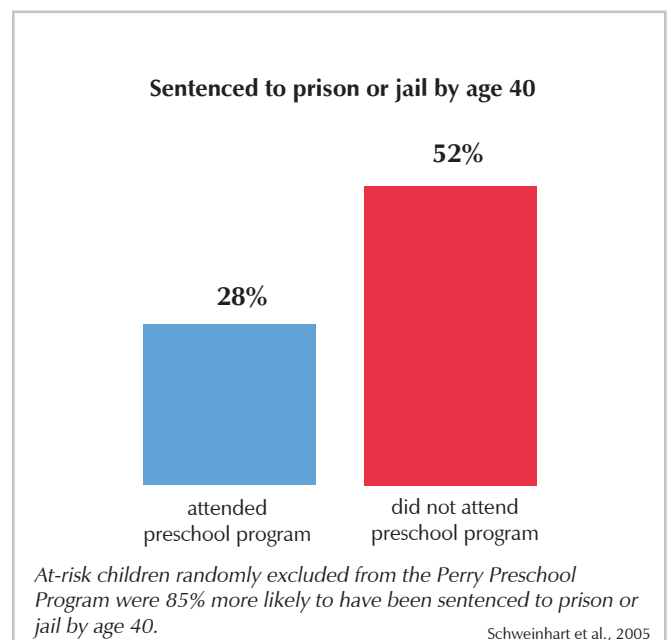
New Mexico is facing tough budget times. Incarcerating prisoners is costing the state’s taxpayers \$320 million every year. Law enforcement knows, and the research shows, that investing in high-quality early education will not only cut crime, it can save millions in taxpayer dollars by reducing prisoner incarceration by a quarter or more.

New Mexico has made progress for kids by funding its state pre-kindergarten program. Nevertheless, thousands of New Mexico’s children are denied access to early learning programs due to a lack of adequate state and federal funding. This compromises the future of young children, threatens public safety, and costs taxpayers millions of dollars every year. Continued commitments to protect state investments in early care and education programs in these hard times will help New Mexico keep improving the quality of these programs and make sure they are reaching as many at-risk children as possible. Law enforcement leaders urge support for these continued investments.

## Introduction

The law enforcement leaders of FIGHT CRIME: INVEST IN KIDS are determined to see that dangerous criminals are put behind bars. But those on the front lines know that America’s anti-crime arsenal contains no weapons more powerful than proven early learning programs that help kids get the right start in life—programs such as pre-kindergarten, Early Head Start, Head Start, and educational child care.

Yet today, inadequate funding for these critical investments leaves millions of children at needless risk of becoming violent or delinquent teens and adult criminals. Continuing existing state investments in early care and education now and expanding those programs when funding allows will help provide access to high-quality programs for at-risk families with young children - which will make us all safer.



## Invest Now or Pay More for Prisons Later

In the U.S. today, more than 2.3 million adults are in American jails or prisons. As the Pew Center on the States has reported, that amounts to more than one in every 100 adults in an American jail or prison nationwide. While dangerous criminals should be behind bars, high incarceration rates cost taxpayers \$50 billion per year.<sup>1</sup>

In New Mexico, over 16,000 adults are behind bars, meaning that one in every 90 New Mexico adults are in prison. Incarcerating one of these prisoners costs \$85 per day or over \$31,000 a year. State corrections costs alone in New Mexico exceed \$320 million annually.<sup>2</sup>

A year of state lock-up costs taxpayers \$31,000 a year in New Mexico.<sup>3</sup> This is more expensive than a year's tuition, room, and board at the University of New Mexico, which costs almost \$13,000 a year.<sup>4</sup> Wise investments in high-quality early learning can help many children get on a path toward college rather than toward prison, enabling New Mexico to avoid such high prison costs later.

## Quality Early Learning Boosts College Attendance and Cuts Crime

Quality early education programs help children learn to get along with others and begin school ready to succeed. Research shows that high-quality early education programs for at-risk kids later result in lower drug use, increased high school graduation and college attendance rates, fewer families receiving welfare, and lower crime.<sup>5</sup> For example:

- A landmark study of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program compared two groups of at-risk 3- and

4-year-olds. The study found that by age 40, those who participated were almost twice as likely to have earned an Associate's degree than those left out of the program. The study also found that at age 27, those at-risk kids who had not attended the program were five times more likely to grow up to be chronic law-breakers than those enrolled in the program.<sup>6</sup>

- At age 40, those left out of the Perry Preschool Program were twice as likely to be arrested for violent crimes, four times more likely to be arrested for drug felonies, seven times more likely to be arrested for possession of dangerous drugs, and 85 percent more likely to have been sentenced to prison or jail than those who attended the program.<sup>7</sup>
- Chicago's Child-Parent Centers have served over 100,000 3- and 4-year-olds since 1967. A study compared at-risk kids in the program with similar kids who were not in the program. Program participants were 47 percent more likely to attend a 4-year college than those left out of the program. Kids who were left out of the program were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. By the time they were 24, the high-risk individuals who had not participated in the program were 24 percent more likely to have been incarcerated than the participants. When the 100,000 participants have all turned 18, the Child-Parent Centers will have prevented an estimated 33,000 crimes in that city.<sup>8</sup>

## Early Learning Denied to New Mexico's Kids

Despite the evidence on the benefits of high-quality early education, inadequate funding denies thousands of New Mexico children access to quality early learning programs. Thirty-eight states, including New Mexico, provide publicly-funded voluntary pre-kindergarten. The federally-funded Head Start program for children in poverty serves only half of eligible children nationwide due to inadequate funding. And the youngest children, from birth to age 3, are even more dramatically underserved. For example, Early Head Start serves about three percent of eligible infants and toddlers nationally.<sup>9</sup>

In New Mexico, Head Start, the state-funded pre-kindergarten program, and a program for kids with special needs together served approximately 14,000 children

### New Mexico Corrections Data

Total Number of prisoners	Average Cost per state prisoner	Total annual corrections costs in New Mexico
16,534 <sup>a</sup>	\$31,000 per year <sup>b</sup>	\$320 million <sup>c</sup>

Sources: Pew Center on the States; Governor Richardson's Task Force on Prison Reform; New Mexico Department of Finance and Administration  
 a. This includes state prisoners (6,350), federal prisoners (1,839), and those in jail (8,345) the last day of 2007.  
 b. The state cost per year is based on \$45.02 per day, though individual prisoners often serve less than one year.  
 c. This 2009 budget is the actual budget and is not derived simply by multiplying the total number of state prisoners by the average cost per state prisoner.

during the 2007-08 school year. The data also demonstrate that in New Mexico only 12 percent of all three-year olds and 34 percent of all four-year-olds were served by these publicly-funded programs.<sup>10</sup> This level of service needs to be maintained, and eventually expanded.

### **High-quality Early Education is Essential**

Early learning programs can provide young children essential academic and social skills that are critical for later success. At-risk children who attend high-quality early education programs are less likely to be held back a grade, less likely to need special education, less likely to commit crimes, and more likely to graduate high school and go on to college.<sup>11</sup> But study after study show that early education programs must be of high quality to have a real impact on children, especially high-risk children.<sup>12</sup>

Researchers agree that high-quality early learning programs share several common characteristics, including:

- Highly-qualified teachers with appropriate compensation;<sup>13</sup>
- Comprehensive and age-appropriate curricula;<sup>14</sup>
- Strong parent involvement;<sup>15</sup>
- Ratios of no more than 10 children per staff member;<sup>16</sup>
- Class sizes of no more than 20 children;<sup>17</sup> and
- Screening and referral services for developmental, health, or behavior problems.<sup>18</sup>

Programs that incorporate these elements are more likely to have positive effects on children that increase school success and cut crime.

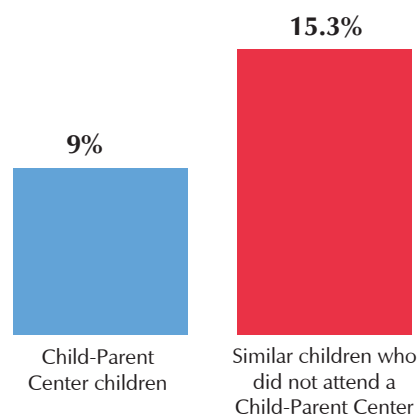
### **New Approaches to Enhance Early Learning for Troubled Kids**

Research evidence has documented the crime prevention benefits of high-quality early learning programs. There are additional approaches now available that can be incorporated into early learning to help the families of troubled children so that their children can learn to behave responsibly and avoid future delinquency, violence and crime. Such approaches can be supported through the Early Learning Challenge Fund initiative.

When children learn early in life how to interact with others

#### **AT-RISK CHILDREN WITHOUT QUALITY EARLY LEARNING WERE 70% MORE LIKELY TO COMMIT VIOLENT CRIMES**

**An arrest for violence by age 18**



Reynolds et al., 2001

without resorting to aggression or anti-social behaviors, the lesson can last a lifetime. Just as with teaching kids to read, parents are the most important teachers, but parents of troubled children often need help.

Various studies show seven to 20 percent of preschool and early school-age children have levels of disruptive, aggressive behaviors severe enough to qualify for a mental health diagnosis.<sup>19</sup> This is not about a child grabbing a toy from another child. These are children who are doing things like routinely throwing chairs and injuring others in the classroom. Data show that approximately 60 percent of these children will later manifest high levels of antisocial and delinquent behavior.<sup>20</sup>

*The Incredible Years* is an evidence-based program that provides training in problem solving and social issues for families of young children with overly aggressive behavior problems. The researchers studying this program report that it has been able to stop the cycle of aggression for approximately two-thirds of the families receiving help.<sup>21</sup> *The Incredible Years* has demonstrated success when provided through an early learning setting.

*Triple-P (Positive Parenting Practices)* is a well-tested and proven parent-coaching program. When provided to families with preschool-aged children who had already been identified as having problem behaviors, it significantly reduced problem behaviors in 80 percent of the children.<sup>22</sup> Further analysis

of the research on Triple-P concluded that Triple-P could cut one in four cases of conduct disorder (severe acting-out and aggressive behavior).<sup>23</sup> Conduct disorders are a strong predictor of adult criminal involvement.

The Incredible Years and Triple-P could be provided as proven components of high-quality early education programs that will be supported through the proposed Early Learning Challenge Fund. Enabling new or existing early learning programs to incorporate these approaches for effectively teaching children how to behave responsibly will increase the likelihood that the early education and care investments will reach their full potential to reduce future crime and incarceration.

### Investing in Kids Saves Lives and Money

When our country fails to invest in young children, all Americans pay far more later – not just in lost lives, but also in tax dollars. Federal and state government spending will actually be lower in the future if we invest today in programs to help kids get the right start in life. Research clearly demonstrates the cost-effectiveness of these programs:

- Researcher Mark Cohen found that the total costs involved when a troubled child grows up and drops out of school, uses drugs and becomes a career criminal averages at least two and a half million dollars per individual.<sup>24</sup>
- The Child-Parent Centers cut crime, special education and other costs so much that they saved more than \$10 for every \$1 invested.<sup>25</sup>
- An analysis by Arthur Rolnick of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis shows that the annual return on investment in the Perry Preschool program was 16 percent after adjusting for inflation.<sup>26</sup> The vast majority of the cost savings from the Perry Preschool program come from reductions in crime.<sup>27</sup>

### Cutting New Mexico's Corrections Budget by \$80 Million a Year

Based on all the research from the Perry Preschool and the Child-Parent Centers programs, and the opportunities with this new federal funding to help troubled young children even more with efforts such as The Incredible Years and Triple-P approaches, FIGHT CRIME: INVEST IN KIDS projects that high-quality early learning could cut a quarter or more off the costs of corrections in New Mexico. Cutting a quarter of the \$320 million a year spent on corrections in New Mexico would eventually save \$80 million a year.<sup>28</sup> That is a serious investment in crime prevention.

### Conclusion

Tough times require smart decisions. The over 5,000 members of FIGHT CRIME: INVEST IN KIDS nationwide and the 52 members of FIGHT CRIME: INVEST IN KIDS in New Mexico are calling on the state's policymakers to strongly support continued public investments in early care and education programs. These investments will help build a stronger, safer America.

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1212 New York Avenue, Suite 300  
Washington, DC 20001  
Tel 202.776.0027  
Fax 202.776.0110

[www.fightcrime.org](http://www.fightcrime.org)



## Endnotes

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**28** FIGHT CRIME: INVEST IN KIDS projects that providing high-quality early learning for at-risk kids, along with additional components to help kids with behavior problems, could eventually cut corrections costs by a quarter or more. This is a broad, back-of-the-envelope projection based on the crime prevention findings from high-quality early learning documented in long-term studies of the Perry Preschool and Child-Parent Centers programs, and also factoring in additional crime prevention impacts expected from interventions addressing children's behavior problems. The key findings used as a basis for this projection include:

- Participation in the Child-Parent Centers program reduced the percentage of individuals incarcerated as young adults by 20 percent compared with those not in the program.
- Data from the Perry Preschool program show that the number of individuals incarcerated grows over time. By age 40, participation in the Perry Preschool program reduced the percentage of individuals sentenced to prison or jail by 46 percent compared to those not in the program. In addition, the number of individuals from the Perry Preschool program who were incarcerated from ages 28-40 was 9 percent, versus 21 percent for those not in the program, or less than half as many.
- The Incredible Years parent-coaching program showed it could stop the cycle of aggression in approximately two-thirds of the families of young children receiving help.
- The Triple-P parent education program showed it could cut one in four cases of conduct disorder (out-of-control and delinquent behavior) among the children of families served during the preschool years.

If the most up-to-date, high-quality early learning programs include additional efforts to help families with troubled children as allowable under the proposed Early Learning Challenge Fund to expand state programs and/or improve existing programs, it is not unreasonable to assume that early learning could be able to cut future incarcerations by a quarter if not more. The best time to redirect children away from prison is when their early patterns of behavior are first being established. Research has shown this can be done.

For more comprehensive and detailed estimates of overall cost-benefit outcomes from high-quality early learning, see the work of the teams led by Steve Barnett of the National Institute for Early Education Research, Steve Aos with the Washington State Institute for Public Policy, and the Nobel-prize winning economist James Heckman, cited below.

Also note: In this brief, FIGHT CRIME: INVEST IN KIDS has expressed the incarceration effects from the Perry Preschool and Child-Parent Centers early education studies by describing the impact in terms of individuals *not in* the program as compared to those in the program (for those not in Perry Preschool, an 85 percent increase, and for those not in the Child-Parent Centers program, a 24 percent increase). However, the same comparison can be expressed in the inverse, as *decreased* incarceration for individuals *in* the program compared to those not in the program. Expressed as a decrease in the percentage of those incarcerated, participation in the Perry Preschool Program cut incarceration by 46 percent, and participation in the Child-Parent Centers cut incarceration by 20 percent. This latter form of the findings are provided here for ease of interpretation because they are directly comparable in format to the overall projection in this brief, a cut in incarceration.

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