

High-Quality Early Care & Learning is Crime Prevention

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



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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27%
of MN children
were not ready
for kindergarten

More than one-quarter of Minnesota children did not meet the overall school readiness benchmark at kindergarten entry. Children from families with higher incomes were twice as likely to meet the benchmark than children from families with lower incomes. Children who enter school unready to learn 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 learning (ECL) programs can help reduce these risks by working with parents to give children a good start in life. Research shows that high-quality ECL can increase the likelihood that children succeed in school and steer clear of crime.

Minnesota’s 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 or attending school. However, CCAP does not serve all eligible children, and reimbursement rates for providers remain inadequate. Minnesota’s publicly funded preschool programs currently reach only 24 percent of 4-year-olds and 12 percent of 3-year-olds, and funding for Early Learning Scholarships falls short of need.

With a more than \$9 billion budget surplus this year, we are in a unique position to invest in young children and strengthen Minnesota’s future. When we invest in early learning programs, we put children—and the state—on a path toward greater safety and prosperity.

“ The next generation of Minnesotans will see the value of early childhood investments through less crime, safer communities, and more productive community members.”



Anoka County Sheriff
James Stuart

President of the Minnesota
Sheriffs' Association

Educational shortcomings contribute to crime in Minnesota

There were more than 13,000 violent crimes and 117,000 property crimes committed in Minnesota in 2019.¹ The number of murders in Minnesota increased by 58 percent in 2020, compared to 2019.² There are about 7,500 adults incarcerated in Minnesota prisons,³ and the incarceration and pre-release services budget is \$461.5 million per year.⁴

Law enforcement leaders in Minnesota 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.⁵

Too many young people in Minnesota are not doing well in school. For example, more than half (56 percent) of Minnesota eighth-graders are not proficient in math, nearly two-thirds are not proficient in reading,⁶ and 16 percent of students are not graduating high school on time, in four years.⁷

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.⁸ Data from a Minnesota study showed that about 27 percent of children failed to meet the overall benchmark for school readiness at kindergarten entry.⁹ Further, results varied by income: children from families with higher incomes were twice as likely to meet the benchmark than children from families with lower incomes. 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.

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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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.

Minnesota's 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 or attending school.¹² CCAP serves nearly 37,000 children statewide.¹³ However, there were nearly 700 children on CCAP's basic sliding fee waiting list as of January 2022, with some counties (e.g., Becker, Olmsted) being particularly impacted.¹⁴ Further, while reimbursement rates for providers increased last year (to the 30th percentile of the most recent market rate for preschool/school aged children and the 40th percentile for infants/toddlers), the new rates still fall far short of the recommended rate (75th percentile).¹⁵

With regard to preschool, just 24 percent of Minnesota 4-year-olds and 12 percent of 3-year-olds have access to publicly funded ECL (preschool or Head Start).¹⁶ Minnesota Early Learning Scholarships offer funding for parents to pay for high-quality ECL that will help their children get ready for school.¹⁷ Parents must select ECL programs that have been rated for quality and scholarships are larger for more highly-rated programs.



However, although the program serves about 10,000 children each year,¹⁸ available funding doesn't cover all children eligible for scholarships.¹⁹

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.²⁰

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.²¹ High-quality ECL supports the development of these essential skills. A study, for example, found that children who were randomly selected to attend a high-quality ECL program from ages 2 to 3 had fewer behavior problems (as rated by parents) than children who were left out.²² 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.²³

High-quality preschool programs can reduce future crime

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 who didn't participate in the Chicago Parent-Child program were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime by age 18.²⁶ By age 24, participants 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 reduction. An independent cost-benefit analysis of universal preschool programs showed that they can return, on average, a “profit” (economic benefits minus costs) to society of more than \$15,000 for every child served (or approximately \$3 for every dollar spent). The benefits accrue due to increased test scores, which are associated with higher earnings in adulthood, as well as decreases in costs to society, such as children being held back in school or needing special education.²⁸

A previous cost-benefit analysis by the same researchers found that the “profit” increased to more than \$22,000 per child served when preschool programs targeted children from families with low incomes and the calculation included the programs’ benefits due to crime reduction.²⁹

Conclusion

Many Minnesota children, particularly those from families with low incomes, start school behind their peers and may never catch up, which can lead to high school dropout and involvement in the criminal justice system. Unfortunately, many parents struggle to find affordable, accessible, and high-quality early care and learning programs for their kids. Minnesota is at a crossroads. With a more than \$9 billion budget surplus this year, we are in a unique position to invest in young children and strengthen the state’s future. Greater investments in high-quality early learning from the ages of birth to 5 years—a crucial time of brain development—will benefit Minnesota children and families, as well as improve public safety in the years to come.

Endnotes

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