

Best crime prevention starts in pre-K

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Meet Joy Lapp, Head Start teacher, crime fighter.

She doesn't wear a badge or pack heat. She teaches letters and numbers to 3- and 4-year-olds at Francine Bunch Center on Pershing Avenue.

Lapp gets kids from low-income homes ready for kindergarten, important work that, research shows, has a little-known benefit. The children she nurtures will be less likely to turn to crime years from now than if she had never touched their lives.

A study in Michigan found at-risk children who did not attend quality pre-kindergarten classes were, by age 27, five times more likely to be chronic lawbreakers than those who went to preschool.

Another study of 1,500 children in Chicago found that those who did not attend pre-K were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime before turning 18.

Research also shows that children who go to pre-K are less likely to use drugs later and are more likely to graduate.

Uniform support

An analysis by Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis suggests every dollar invested in quality preschool saves \$17 on special education, law enforcement and welfare.

The studies don't surprise Lapp, though she never thought of herself as a crime fighter.

"It doesn't take long to see what we're teaching young children about getting along with others is useful for the rest of their lives," Lapp said. "I believe it makes a huge difference."

Law-enforcement officials are increasingly convinced, too. They find the studies so intriguing they are telling law-and-order legislators to think out of the box and expand funding of early education.

Nationally, an organization called Fight Crime: Invest in Kids has been beating the drum for education-based crime prevention. It claims a membership of 3,000 police chiefs, sheriffs, prosecutors and violence survivors.

"It's not intuitive to see the connection" between early education and crime, said Bruce Clash of the Pennsylvania office of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, "but the research is so profound."

A 2003 survey asked Pennsylvania law-enforcement leaders what is the most effective strategy for reducing youth crime. Only 22 percent said hire more cops; 64 percent said improve access to quality pre-K.

Crime reduction "starts with our children," Warwick Township police Chief Richard Garipoli, a member of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, said. "If we can instill a proper foundation for them, we can save ourselves headaches in the future."

Educate, not incarcerate

Sheriff Terry Bergman, also a member of Fight Crime, as is every sheriff in the state, agrees.

"We want to address our crime problem at the root," Bergman told me. "We are committed to trying to help young children."

He met with state Sen. Gib Armstrong, Appropriations chair, and found him receptive to the cause but noncommittal about funding.

The Legislature has been slow to back early childhood education. Before Gov. Ed Rendell took office, Pennsylvania was one of only nine states that didn't supplement federal funding of Head Start.

Now Rendell is requesting \$75 million to provide pre-K for 11,000 youngsters.

It sounds expensive until it's compared to the \$1.15 billion Pennsylvania is spending on prisons — about \$31,000 per inmate. With the opening of a \$125 million prison in Fayette County, Pennsylvania now has 26 prisons. Filling them up does not seem to be a solution.

Sheriff Bergman agrees. "I'm determined to put dangerous criminals behind bars," he said, "but we can never arrest and imprison our way out of the crime problem."

The evidence points to prevention. If we hire more Head Start teachers today, we'll need fewer prison guards tomorrow.

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