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## Diverting Children From a Life of Crime: What Are the Costs and Benefits?

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**T**he rate of violent crime in the United States is several times higher than in other industrialized democracies. One violent crime is committed in the U.S. for every 130 citizens.

We devote most of the money and energy intended to solve our crime problem to just one approach—putting people who commit crimes in prison and keeping them there. We pay much less attention to preventing crime in the first place.

This lopsided allocation of resources makes some sense—a criminal who is in prison cannot commit more crimes. It is not as easy to measure the effectiveness of programs that aim to prevent young people from becoming criminals. We can't predict with certainty which children will wind up in trouble with the law. We can't guarantee that participating in a program will prevent someone from eventually committing a crime. And we know that early positive effects of prevention programs can wear off over time. Yet, we think there should be some benefits from prevention programs. How much? And at what cost?

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### Measuring costs and benefits

Analysts at RAND considered four approaches to intervening early in the lives of children at some risk of eventually getting into trouble with the law. We can't predict this kind of risk with certainty, but the research shows that the children of young, single, poor mothers are more likely than others to become criminals. Some intervention programs could target these families. Others could focus on the child's behavior. The analysts examined the following approaches:

- Home visits by child-care professionals, beginning before birth and continuing through the first two years of childhood. These visits were followed by four years of day care.
- Parent training and family therapy for families with young children who behave aggressively in school.
- Four years of cash and other incentives to encourage disadvantaged high school students to graduate.
- Monitoring and supervising high school-aged youths who have already shown delinquent behavior.

Each of these approaches has been attempted and the results are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1: Program Effectiveness and Cost Parameters**

Parameter	Visits and day care	Parent training	Graduation incentives	Delinquent supervision
Pilot prevention rate (%)	50	60	70	10
Effective prevention rate for juvenile crime (%)	24	29	56	8
Effective prevention rate for adult crime (%)	9	11	50	8
Targeting ratio	2:1	2:1	3:1	4.5:1
Cost per participant (thousands of dollars)	29.4	3.0	12.5	10.0

The top line of the table shows how effective each program has been in reducing rates of arrest or re-arrest. There are two cautions about these results. The reductions shown in the pilot programs are likely to be greater than we could expect after the programs are scaled up. And the effects of the programs are likely to decay over time.

The analysts have taken these “scale up” and “decay” factors into account, and lines two and three of the table show hypothesized *effective* prevention rates. They predicted larger “decay” for the home visits and parent training programs because they occur earlier and are more likely to decay before children reach an age when they might get into trouble with the law.

The targeting ratio, line four, shows how the expected lifetime crime rate for program participants compares with the population as a whole. The timing of the programs affects these ratios because programs for older youth focus on those who are greatest risk of criminal activity.

Finally, the table gives an estimate of the cost of each program.

We can use the data in Table 1, combined with other information, to estimate how many serious crimes might be prevented over the lifetimes of the participants. We can express this in terms of the number of serious crimes prevented for each million dollars spent. In Figure 1, we present these estimates and a similar estimate for California’s “three strikes” law. This well-publicized California law gives longer sentences to repeat offenders. Three of the four early-intervention approaches compare favorably with incarceration in their cost-effectiveness. But we should be careful about taking these results at face value for two reasons:

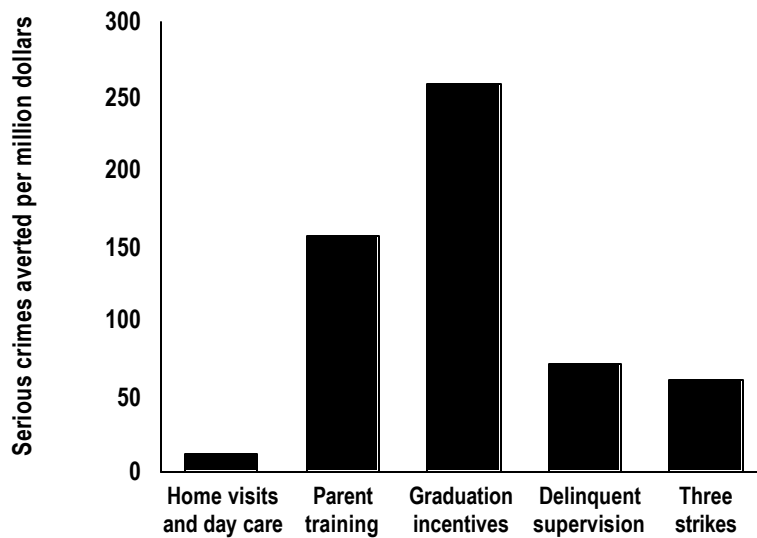
- First, the costs shown for the four early intervention programs are only the costs of the programs themselves. They do not take into account the money saved by not imprisoning youths who were diverted from criminal

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behavior. It is estimated that graduation incentives, for example, would save enough money to pay most of the costs of the program.

- Second, the estimates come from limited demonstrations and educated guesses. Actual values could be quite different from those shown. However, researchers found that even big variations in these estimated values do not reverse the cost-effectiveness outcomes as compared with the three-strikes law.

**Figure 1: Estimates of the Number of Serious Crimes Prevented for Each Million Dollars Spent**



These findings do not mean that incarceration is the “wrong” approach. Even if they were implemented at full scale, the total effect of all four early interventions would still be smaller than that of the three-strikes law. It has been estimated that the three-strikes law might reduce serious crime by 21 percent. Graduation incentives might bring about a reduction of 15 percent. The other interventions probably would have less effect.

A 21-percent reduction in crime is substantial. But Americans will want to know what else can be done about the other 79 percent. This study indicates that parent training, graduation incentives, and supervision of delinquents would prevent additional crimes. California voters supported the three-strikes law, so it appears the public believes that a 21-percent reduction in crime is worth the program’s cost of \$5.5 billion a year. Adding graduation incentives and parent training—at a cost of less than 1 billion dollars a year—could double that crime reduction. Testing this prediction will require broader demonstrations, costing millions of dollars. The RAND researchers conclude that such demonstrations would be an investment worth the cost.

RAND research briefs summarize research that has been more fully documented elsewhere. This research brief describes work done in RAND's Criminal Justice Program with funding from the University of California, the James Irvine Foundation, and RAND's own funds. The work is documented in *Diverting children from a life of crime: Measuring costs and benefits*, by Peter W. Greenwood, Karyn E. Model, C. Peter Rydell, and James Chiesa, MR-699-UCB/RC/IF, 1996, 88 pp., \$15.00, ISBN: 0-8330-2383-7, available from National Book Network (Telephone: 800-462-6420; FAX: 301-459-2118) or from RAND on the Internet (order@rand.org). Abstracts of all RAND documents may be viewed on the World Wide Web (<http://www.rand.org>). RAND is a nonprofit institution that helps improve public policy through research and analysis; its publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of its research sponsors.

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