

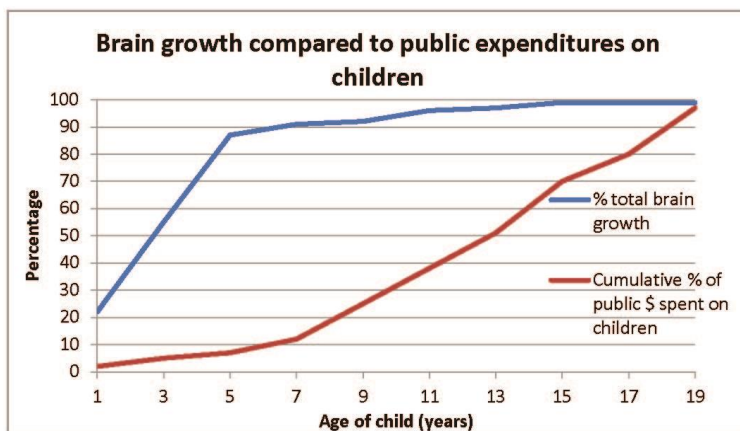
# Invest in Children: Fight Crime, Save Money, And Make our Cities, State and Nation Stronger

*Prepared by Neil Skene  
Written January 2014, Edited May 2023*

A dollar invested in the youngest children today will pay huge dividends down the road. If we want to improve economic opportunities for people, improve our global competitiveness, strengthen our national defense, and make our communities safer, there is no better place to start than by improving the development children under the age of 5.

More and more evidence proves that actions to bolster a child's development as early as infancy are the critical foundation for the child's future success. Kindergarten scores are the highest predictor of later success as measured by college attendance, home

ownership, income, and retirement savings. It's not kindergarten itself that makes the difference, though; it's all that happens with a child BEFORE age 5.<sup>1</sup> Dollars spent on a child before age 5 produce a higher economic benefit and occur at a more optimal time of brain development, than if the same amount were spent when the child is older.<sup>2</sup>



Source: Heckman, J. J. (2007, August). The economics, technology, and neuroscience of human capability formation. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 104(3), 13250–13255.

Support for high quality early childhood services comes from our military leaders and from business groups, such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, as well as from educators and health professionals and scientists.

“The windows of learning are open the widest in the first years of life,” says David Lawrence, chairman of the Children’s Movement of Florida, formerly publisher of the *Miami Herald*, and a strong advocate for children in our state.

Scientists tell us that 85 per cent of brain development happens before a child is 3 years old, and a child’s relationships and experiences are a big part of that development. Evidence clearly shows that the earlier a child receives help the better his chances of going on to lead a productive life. Waiting until a child starts pre-kindergarten or kindergarten is simply too late. **Yet, as the chart indicates, most of our public expenditures on children lag well behind children’s brain development.**

Many children, especially poor children, are left behind by kindergarten. Children living in poverty average 15 IQ points below their higher income peers. It is not because

they were born that way, but because of the lack of enriching experiences – books and conversations, for example. The amount of reading and language at age three predicts academic success at age 10.

In one study, researchers went into homes and counted the words spoken between parents and children and found an astounding “30-million-word gap” by age 4 between parents and children in high-income homes vs. homes of families on welfare.<sup>3</sup> This helps explain the lag in IQ at kindergarten. The gap widens in elementary school.

Although most adults who experienced neglect as children do not engage in delinquent, criminal, or violent behavior,<sup>4</sup> the odds are significantly greater that they will be arrested for violent crimes and have diagnoses of antisocial personality disorder compared with adults who were not maltreated as children.<sup>5</sup>

Researchers have found an important linkage between what they termed “adverse childhood experiences” and social problems like domestic violence, mental illness, academic failure, divorce, substance abuse, delinquency, crime, unintended pregnancies, teenage paternity, sexually transmitted diseases, and lifelong health problems.<sup>6</sup>

Children with four or more of those adverse factors in their lives are 18 times more likely to attempt suicide, 8 times more likely to consider themselves alcoholics, more than 4 times more likely to use illicit drugs, almost 3 times more likely to smoke, and roughly twice as likely to be obese, become a teenage parent, and or have heart disease.

In 2013, the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) studied the presence of these “adverse circumstances” in the backgrounds of a sample of 64,329 youth in DJJ. More than 97% reported at least one of such circumstance in childhood. More than two-thirds reported a combination of three: household dysfunction, parental separation/divorce, and household member incarceration.

The cost to society from these early experiences is staggering. To take just one example, career criminals who are high school dropouts cost society more than \$2.5 million apiece, on average. Governments spend about \$2,383 to fund a pre-kindergarten spot, but about \$51,000 to incarcerate a juvenile, not including associated medical and mental health costs. **For the cost of keeping one juvenile in detention, we could provide pre-kindergarten to 20 children. If we save just one of those children from delinquency, the state has saved money.**

In 2011 Miami-Dade Police Director James Loftus and North Miami Beach Police Chief Rafael Hernandez visited the Center for Excellence in Early Education at the United Way of Miami-Dade to read to young children and talk about the importance of investing in early education. They were featured in a national campaign that includes many law-enforcement leaders urging, “Fight Crime: Invest in Kids.”<sup>7</sup>

The movie “Healing Neen” told the story of Tonier “Neen” Cain, who lived on the streets for 19 years and had 66 criminal convictions before treatment for her abuse and drug addiction turned into a nationally known speaker and educator as well as a wonderful mom. **That’s 66 criminal acts that might have been prevented by intervening early with a single person.** With treatment, she has turned the tragedy

of her early life into a lesson for our society and our policymakers. Tonier Cain is terrific example of someone who was arrested 80 times and finally got trauma treatment and totally turned around. **Intervention later in life works too.**

Improving the education and wellbeing of children under 5 is a critical issue to our economy, to public safety, and to America's competitiveness in the world.

## **National security**

A report signed by dozens of present and former military leaders, from generals and admirals to the sergeant major of the Army and the Marine Corps, reveals that fully three-fourths of young adults ages 17 to 24 who seek to join the military – that's 26 million young adults, 1.4 million of them in Florida alone – are unable to meet the standards for enlistment.<sup>8</sup> The most common reasons are the failure to graduate from high school, a criminal record, and failure to meet fitness standards because of obesity. Think about it: **Three-fourths of those who want to serve in our military do not qualify.**

These military leaders say that the best investment our society can make to fix that problem is to invest in high-quality early education:

One of the signers of the report, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Hugh Shelton, noted that the men and women of the American military “are the best in the world,” but will need to be even better qualified as the military and its technology become increasingly sophisticated.

## **Business and Economic Growth**

Early childhood development is also needed to secure America's economic competitiveness in the world.

As chairman of the Federal Reserve System, Ben Bernanke focused on this issue in a speech in March 2011.<sup>9</sup> Some of his comments:

*“No economy can succeed without a high-quality workforce, particularly in an age of globalization and technical change. . . .*

*“For instance, preschool programs for disadvantaged children have been shown to increase high school graduation rates. Because high school graduates have higher earnings, pay more taxes, and are less likely to use public health programs, investing in such programs can pay off even from the narrow perspective of state budgets.”*

***“Of course, the returns to the overall economy and to the individuals themselves are much greater.”***

We all benefit when children become successful, productive adults:

- Our communities are safer, because educated, productive people are less likely to commit crimes of theft or violence.

- Our economy is stronger, because they qualify for better jobs with better incomes and are less likely to need government benefits.
- Our taxes are lower, because we do not spend as much money on law enforcements and courts and prisons.
- And perhaps most important of all, our entire social fabric is stronger when people feel successful and have hope rather than feeling beaten down by despair about overcoming their poor start in life.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce in 2010 called early childhood education a “critical issue for many Chamber members.”<sup>10</sup> Every dollar invested in early childhood programs saves from \$2.50 to \$17 in the years ahead, the Chamber said. “High-quality early childhood education programs should promote the whole child, paying equal attention to his or her cognitive (academic), social, and emotional development.”

### **Quality of Early Intervention Has Substantial Rewards**

The good news is that Floridians have shown their belief in early childhood education. In 2002, Florida’s voters approved a constitutional amendment that required the Legislature to give every 4-year-old child access to a “high quality pre-kindergarten” program. The bad news is that Florida’s Pre-K meets only two of the seven benchmarks of quality established by the National Institute of Early Education Research, and Florida spends \$1,000 less per child than 25 years ago. Many children still do not attend at all.

Waiting to intervene in children’s lives until the children start kindergarten is far too late. The neural networks of the brain and cognitive abilities are largely in place by the time a person reaches the age of 3. Children less than three years old who have been neglected are at significantly higher risk of later experiencing developmental problems.

Studies show that as early as 16 to 18 months, a child’s word learning is significantly affected by his economic background. The gaps widen over the early years of elementary school. Before they even start school, 30% of children are way behind their peers. Research shows that if 100 children leave first grade unable to read, at the end of fourth grade, 88 of them remain poor readers. Children’s academic success at ages 9 and 10 can be attributed to the language and conversation they hear from birth to age three.

Our failure to invest adequately in early education programs imposes substantial costs on our taxpayers and our society, including higher rates of high school dropouts and higher rates of public assistance and crime. High school dropouts make up over 50% of the state prison inmate population.<sup>11</sup>

**Once children have fallen behind in infancy and toddlerhood, it is increasingly difficult for them to ever catch up.**

We need to get tough on the causes of crime. By the time someone is in the Juvenile Justice system or the prison system, it is much more difficult and expensive to change their patterns of behavior and rehabilitate them before they have served their sentences and return to society. Long sentences also put a huge burden on taxpayers. We MUST interrupt the cycles of mistreatment of children, mental illness, and substance abuse.

**By investing in children – starting in the earliest years of a child’s life and continuing into early adulthood – we can make our communities safer, make our economy more vibrant, make our nation safer, and give greater success and happier lives to more of our citizens.**

**Kids can’t wait. They grow older by the day.**

*[Note: This document was written in 2014 and has been lightly edited. Data and research have not been updated. Professor Mimi Graham of Florida State University contributed research findings but the author is solely responsible for the conclusions.]*

---

<sup>1</sup> Tennessee’s STAR experiment by Harvard researchers examined linked school scores to income tax records. (Chetty, Friedman, Hilger, Saez, Schanzenback & Yagan, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Heckman, J. J. (2007, August). The economics, technology, and neuroscience of human capability formation. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 104(3), 13250–13255.

<sup>3</sup> Betty Hart & Todd R. Risley. An account of this study at the Rice University website is part of a compilation of studies of the effects of literacy and cultural experiences on children. <http://centerforeducation.rice.edu/slc/LS/30MillionWordGap.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Widom, C. S. (1989). The cycle of violence. *Science*, 244(4901), 160-166.

<sup>5</sup> Luntz, B. K., & Widom, C. (1994). Antisocial personality disorder in abused and neglected children grown up. *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 151(5), 670-674. Maxfield, M. G., & Widom, C. S. (1996). The cycle of violence: Revisited six years later. *Archives of Pediatrics Adolescent Medicine*, 150(4), 390–395.

<sup>6</sup> Anda, R.F., Dong, M., Brown, D.W., Felitti, V.J., Giles, W.H., Perry, G.S., Valerie, E.J., & Dube, S.R. (2009). The relationship of adverse childhood experiences to a history of premature death of family members. *BioMed Central Public Health*, 106(9). See also "The Health and Social Impact of Growing Up With Alcohol Abuse and Related Adverse Childhood Experiences: The Human and Economic Costs of the Status Quo," Anda, Robert.

<sup>7</sup> "Miami News Conference on Preventing Crimes Through Early Education," June 29, 2011. <http://www.fightcrime.org/state/florida/miami-video>.

<sup>8</sup> "Ready, Willing, and Unable to Serve: A Report by Mission Readiness: Military Leaders for Kids." [http://www.missionreadiness.org/2009/ready\\_willing/](http://www.missionreadiness.org/2009/ready_willing/)

<sup>9</sup> Ben A. Bernanke, "Challenges for State and Local Governments," Remarks to Annual Awards Dinner of the Citizens Budget Commission, New York City, March 2, 2011. <http://www.federalreserve.gov/newsevents/speech/bernanke20110302a.htm>. See excerpt, "Chairman of the Fed Weighs in on Early Childhood Education" at <http://www.wlearning.com/articles/chairman-of-the-fed-weighs-in-on-early-childhood-education/>. See also remarks to the Children’s Defense Fund annual conference, July 24, 2012, <http://www.federalreserve.gov/newsevents/speech/bernanke20120724a.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> Institute for a Competitive Workforce, Why Business Should Support Early Childhood Education, [http://education.uschamber.com/sites/default/files/ICW\\_EarlyChildhoodReport\\_2010.pdf](http://education.uschamber.com/sites/default/files/ICW_EarlyChildhoodReport_2010.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Education and the Economy: Boosting the Nation’s Economy by Improving High School Graduation Rates," Alliance for Excellent Education, Washington, D.C. 2011.