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Cost effectiveness of early intervention

Early intervention aims to reduce risk factors and enhance protective factors that impact on the likelihood that a young person will engage in offending behaviour. As a crime prevention strategy, it is based on the premise that intervening early in a young person's development can produce significant long term personal, social and economic benefits.

A growing body of evidence demonstrates that early intervention can be effective in achieving significant reductions in crime involvement, child maltreatment and substance abuse, and improvements in educational performance, employment, child and youth behaviour, and income (Homel 2005). Importantly, these outcomes also produce significant financial savings, for both the individual participant and the wider community. There is mounting evidence that early intervention is a more cost effective strategy than more conventional approaches to reducing crime.

A long term follow up evaluation of the 1960s Perry Preschool Project in the US found that the program had produced a saving to the community of \$13 for every dollar invested (Schweinhart 2004). There is equally impressive evidence of the long term financial return from other US projects before the 1980s, such as the Elmira Prenatal/Early Infancy Project and the Seattle Social Development Project (Homel 2005).

The demonstrated savings produced by these programs are numerous and include:

- reductions in welfare assistance
- decreased need for special education
- increases in income tax revenue from the higher wages of participants (due to improved educational attainment)
- reduced operational costs to the criminal justice system
- reduced costs to victims (Homel et al. 2006).

These results should not be interpreted as meaning that early intervention projects are guaranteed success. At least one study has demonstrated long term negative outcomes for participants (cited in Homel 2005). Also, despite the increased popularity of early intervention as a crime prevention strategy with promising results, evidence of long term cost effectiveness is limited to a small number of overseas studies. One of the problems of trying to evaluate early intervention is that many of the anticipated benefits will not become evident until later in participants' lives (Homel et al. 2006). New methods of measuring the long term benefits of early intervention projects are required. A future AI Crime reduction matters will provide an overview of the methods and findings of recent Australian research that does just this: the Pathways to Prevention Project.

References

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