Breaking the Cycle

HOW HOME VISITING CAN REDUCE CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT AND PREVENT CRIME IN NEVADA
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A Report by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids

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Abuse and neglect increases crime. Nothing can fully prepare a law enforcement officer to walk into a home where child abuse has taken place. The terrible experience of removing children from their homes is one reason why the law enforcement leaders of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids are so committed to preventing abuse or neglect before children are hurt. Over 4,600 Nevada children were victims of abuse or neglect in 2010, almost 90 children every week, and at least 15 Nevada children died from that abuse or neglect. The true numbers are likely much higher because many cases of abuse and neglect are not reported. In addition, law enforcement leaders want to prevent abuse and neglect because maltreatment contributes to future crime. While most survivors of childhood abuse and neglect never become violent criminals, research shows that an estimated over 185 victims of abuse and neglect in Nevada in 2010 will later become violent criminals who otherwise would have avoided such crimes if not for the abuse and neglect they endured as children.

Home visiting for families with infants and young children can cut abuse and neglect and reduce future crime. One evidence-based program, the Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP), cut abuse and neglect and arrests in half. These large reductions in abuse and neglect and crime mean that home visiting can save far more than it costs. However, only proven, evidence-based programs can realize substantial outcomes for children and families and resulting fiscal savings for states and communities. We need to ensure that public investments are directed to those services proven to work. Promising programs that lack a strong evidence base should be rigorously evaluated to confirm they deliver results.

Stopping child abuse is a critical crime prevention strategy. As law enforcement leaders, we urge state lawmakers to direct federal and state funding to maintain, improve and expand existing home visiting programs even in these tough financial times. In order to leverage federal funding for home visiting, Nevada must preserve existing state efforts to fund evidence-based home visiting. In addition, we urge the Nevada congressional delegation to protect federal funding of voluntary, evidence-based home visitation services as a proven child abuse and neglect prevention strategy that will reduce future crime and save taxpayer money.
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The Toll of Abuse and Neglect - More Violence, Suicides and Abuse in the Future

Most Nevadans hear about severe cases of abuse on the evening news. Few, however, know how widespread the problem is. According to figures reported to the United States Department of Health and Human Services, over 4,600 Nevada children were confirmed victims of abuse or neglect in 2010; almost 90 children every week. Fifteen children died as a result of abuse and neglect. The true numbers are almost certainly much higher due primarily to underreporting. Research indicates that the actual number of children exposed to abuse or neglect is well over three times as high, meaning there may be more than 13,000 victims per year. The youngest children are the most vulnerable. Nationally, one third of all abuse victims are younger than 4 years of age and almost half of maltreatment fatalities are among children under the age of 1.

The long-term consequences of this abuse and neglect include more costly incidences of violence, suicide and other poor life outcomes. Physical abuse can cause post-traumatic stress disorders leaving children quicker to switch into a "fight or flight" mode. The impact of severe neglect can be equally harmful. Dr. Bruce Perry, a neurobiologist and authority on brain development and children in crisis has written, "The systems in the human brain that allow us to form and maintain emotional relationships develop during infancy and the first years of life ... With severe emotional neglect in early childhood, the impact can be devastating." Perry explains that severely neglected children frequently respond to mild provocation with aggression and cruelty that "is often accompanied by a detached, cold lack of empathy." Perry further warns: "The most dangerous children [and adults] are created by a malignant combination of experiences. Developmental neglect and traumatic stress during childhood create violent, remorseless children." Although surveys report varying numbers, one review of the literature on prior abuse and neglect concluded that approximately half of the youths arrested for delinquency had been abused and/or neglected earlier in their lives. Research by Dr. Cathy Spatz Widom found that even after isolating other risk factors for crime, like growing up in poverty or with high-crime peers, child abuse and neglect is a significant driver of crime rates. Compared to youth from similar
Further, abuse victims are more likely than non-victims to become abusers themselves, continuing the cycle of family violence. Study results vary, but one study comparing extreme cases found that poor mothers who had been severely physically abused as children were 13 times more likely to abuse their own children than mothers who had emotionally supportive parents. More generally, evidence suggests that an estimated one third of adults with a history of abuse may maltreat their own children.

Many abused or neglected children grow up to lead productive lives, and these children can often be helped with proper care and services. Unfortunately, however, some injuries cannot be undone. New research emerging from neurobiology, endocrinology, immunology and genetics reveals serious lifelong physical and mental health consequences that have never before been connected to early abuse and neglect. These include increased risk of heart disease, diabetes, obesity, depression and addiction. For states like Nevada, the best and most cost effective way to reduce the short- and long-term costs, both financial and emotional, of abuse and neglect is to invest in services with a proven record of preventing maltreatment and improving child and family wellbeing. One such program is quality, voluntary home visiting for families with infants and young children.

**What is Home Visiting?**

High-quality, voluntary home visiting teams parents with trained professionals who provide information and support during pregnancy and throughout the child’s first years of life. Quality home visiting is proven to improve short- and long-term outcomes for participating children and families.

By reaching expectant mothers early, home visitation helps them adopt healthier behaviors at a critical time that can impact child development. After the baby’s birth, home visitors help parents understand and support healthy infant development; provide responsive, nurturing care; and ensure a safe, stimulating environment. In addition, home visitors promote the parent’s own personal growth and development by working with them to improve their own education, find employment and build stronger, more stable relationships with the people in their lives. All of these changes can lead to less maltreatment and better outcomes for children.

**Quality Home Visiting Cuts Abuse and Neglect, Prevents Crime**

Research has shown that home visiting can prevent child abuse and neglect, give kids the right start in life and reduce crime. Of the main models used in Nevada, two have been shown to reduce abuse and neglect and one has shown a decrease criminal behavior among the children served.
• **The Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP)** serves approximately 280 Nevada families in Clark County within the city of Las Vegas. NFP pairs nurses with young, poor women who are experiencing their first pregnancy. The visits, which are voluntary for families, start before the birth of a child and last until the child is two. Researchers conducted a long-term study of their Elmira, New York program, tracking abuse and neglect and crime results. The randomized controlled trial showed that children of participating mothers had 48 percent fewer substantiated reports of abuse or neglect than the children of mothers in the control group, indicating that home visiting can cut abuse and neglect nearly in half among at-risk children. The children left out of the program also had more than twice as many arrests by age 15, and they were twice as likely to be convicted by age 19.

• **Parents as Teachers (PAT)** has four Nevada programs. A randomized controlled trial found that teen mothers who participated in PAT, combined with case management to help families find any needed psychological, health, educational, or vocational services, were less likely to be investigated for child abuse and neglect than teen mothers who did not participate.

• **Early Head Start** has almost 20 Nevada programs. A randomized control trial study found notable positive effects on language and cognitive development and reduced aggressive behavior at ages 3 and 5, but those outcomes were not sustained. Improvements in Early Head Start are already underway as part of the 2007 reauthorization of the program to ensure the positive early outcomes are strengthened and sustained.

• **Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY)** has one Nevada site. HIPPY serves 4- and 5-year-olds, helping parents with limited formal education prepare their children for school. A randomized control trial of HIPPY in New York found that cognitive skills were significantly higher at the end of the program for participants compared to those not receiving HIPPY. When the children were tested again a year later, the reading and adaptation to the classroom scores were also significantly higher for children in HIPPY compared to children not receiving the program.

• Nevada has additional state- and locally created home visiting models. These models should be rigorously evaluated to ensure they produce the desired results or programs should transition to evidence-based models.

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**Federal Funding**

Thanks to the solid research on evidence-based home visiting, the federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program provides $1.5 billion over five years to fund the expansion of such programs nationally. Nevada was awarded $1.1 million in formula funding from MIECHV in Fiscal Year 2011. After a needs assessment process, Nevada is using the federal funding in Clark County (Las Vegas) to expand Early Head Start and Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) programs and in Washoe County (Reno) to expand Early Head Start. With future funding, the state hopes to support program creation and expansion in Mineral, Nye and Douglas Counties, which have the next highest levels of risk for young children.

The federal legislation requires that federal dollars supplement existing state home visiting spending, not replace it. Nevada
must maintain the same level of state spending to remain eligible for federal funding. This requirement makes it even more crucial that Nevada, at a minimum, maintain existing funding for its state programs.

Cost Savings

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently concluded that, “the total lifetime economic burden resulting from new cases of fatal and nonfatal child maltreatment in the United States in 2008 is approximately $124 billion.”29 In Nevada alone, total FY 2006, federal, state, and local child welfare spending on services like foster care totaled over $100 million.30 When the Washington State Institute for Public Policy applied a cost-benefit analysis to the findings from a range of rigorous studies of NFP programs in the U.S., they found that the program produced a net savings of over $13,000 for each family served.31

Conclusion

The 25 law enforcement and crime survivor programs of Fight Crime: INVEST in Kids in Nevada and the over 5,000 members nationally know that the most powerful weapons we have against crime, violence and abuse are the proven programs that help kids get a good start in life. High-quality home visiting for families with infants and young children can deliver strong crime-fighting results, in part by cutting abuse and neglect, so it is essential that Nevada continue to support and expand home visiting funding and fully utilize new federal funding for home visiting. If Nevada invests wisely in what works, fewer of our officers and deputies will find themselves carrying children away from abusive or neglectful homes, and fewer Nevada residents will become victims of violence in the future.

Maintaining state funding, while expanding services using new federal and private-sector resources, will require a firm commitment on the part of the governor and legislature in these tough fiscal times. It will also require the Nevada congressional delegation to protect federal funding for voluntary, evidence-based home visitation services. Supporting home visiting will prevent suffering from abuse and neglect now, reduce future crime and save taxpayers millions of dollars.32 Breaking the cycle of child abuse and neglect is one of the wisest investments Nevada and our nation can make for our children and our future.

Endnotes
