

Keep funding prevention programs that reduce crime

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Leaders in Augusta are mulling over tough fiscal choices to ensure Mainers get a budget written in black ink.

As veteran sheriffs and jail administrators, we have a request to help prevent future crime: Do not make deep cuts to Head Start and home visiting programs.

These programs offer us an excellent opportunity to cut crime and save public money because crime itself is so expensive.

Make no mistake: Corrections spending is necessary for ensuring that our communities are safe. But funding an inmate's time in lock-up is not the most positive investment in the future.

Corrections costs statewide exceeded \$150 million in 2010. We can save millions in policing, corrections and judicial costs by steering more kids toward success, away

from lives of "crime and punishment."

Maine should prioritize funding for programs such as, Head Start and voluntary home visitation, that help put kids on the right path and lead them to become law-abiding adults. For instance, high-quality early learning programs for at-risk kids gives them the best chance at success in school and in life, improves graduation rates, lowers special education needs, and reduces later crime.

New research findings published in the June issue of *Science* strengthen the argument that high-quality early education can be a proven crime-prevention strategy.

A 25-year study of Chicago's Child-Parent Centers found children left out of the high-quality preschool were 27 percent more likely to have been arrested for a felony by age 28 and were 39 percent more likely to have spent time in jail and/or prison than similar kids who did attend the quality early learning program. The Child-Parent Centers produced more than \$10 in benefits for every

\$1 spent.

A national survey found that adults who attended Head Start as children were 8 percent less likely to be arrested or charged with a crime than their siblings who did not attend Head Start.

Though other research shows Head Start is not yet reaching its full potential, important reforms that should help it do so are under way. Maine needs to help it realize that potential and not abandon at-risk kids who need a good start in life. The earlier the boosting of academic achievement and social development starts with a young child, the higher the returns to our society. For all of these reasons, we believe the proposal to cut all General Fund support for Head Start in the current supplemental budget is ill advised.

Maine's investment in voluntary home visiting is also at risk. These programs offer counseling and resources to young parents and pregnant mothers to help them overcome a lack of knowledge, experience and family support they need

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to understand the developmental needs of their infants and young children. This lack of understanding too often leads to inappropriate discipline, neglect and even child abuse.

More than 3,200 Maine's children were substantiated victims of child abuse and neglect in 2010, and the actual number is likely much higher since many cases go unreported.

By providing voluntary, intensive home-visiting services to young families very early in their children's lives, we can reduce child abuse. Home visiting programs can keep children from ever needing child protective services — a valuable outcome for public safety and for our pocketbooks.

A study of one quality home visitation program found that children in participating families were half as likely to be abused or neglected. Children who did not participate in the program had more than twice as many criminal convictions by age 19

as those in families who received the visits.

It's clearly worth the effort to focus on preventing child abuse and neglect in the first place. In fact, analysis of the same home visiting program found that it saved taxpayers almost \$21,000 for each family served.

Last June, legislators rightly chose to keep Maine's home visiting program intact, and we hope they will do so again in the pending supplemental budget. We also strongly urge legislators to protect support for Head Start in the same supplemental budget.

Forming consensus to balance the state budget is obviously easier said than done. However, law enforcement leaders across Maine agree that we must preserve our investment in young children to avoid higher criminal justice and corrections costs in the future.

In the interests of saving taxpayer dollars and ensuring public safety, Maine legislators should put proven crime prevention programs for children first in this year's budget.