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**CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

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The early-intervention approaches described earlier in this report offer an alternative means of reducing serious crime. The rough estimates of benefits and costs offered here suggest that three of the four compare favorably with a high-profile incarceration alternative (California's three-strikes law) in terms of serious crime averted per dollar expended. If implemented on a large scale, at least one of the alternatives might have a total impact on crime that could add substantially to the anticipated effect of mandatory repeat-offender sanctions in the penal code.

Of the early interventions examined, graduation incentives for high-risk youths (as used in the Quantum Opportunity Program) appear to hold the most promise. Our preliminary analysis suggests that the cost of preventing serious crimes with this program is somewhere around \$4,000 per crime (or around 250 serious crimes prevented per million program dollars). This takes into account the graduation incentives' discounting advantage: In contrast to parent training, results from a well-designed graduation incentive program will begin to be felt within just a few years after the program is implemented, because the targeted youth are very close to their most crime-prone years.

The parent-training intervention could be relatively cost-effective over the long run at a cost of some \$6,500 per serious felony prevented (160 serious crimes averted per million dollars spent). For this intervention, there is no significant crime prevention effect during the first five years after initial implementation because youths are usually in the seven-to-ten-year age range when this intervention is

administered and require another five years or so before their disruptive behavior might result in serious crimes. Of course, these calculations assume that a large number of parents would be willing to participate in parent-training programs, an assumption that cannot be validated without some careful testing. A number of experimental programs have encountered difficulties enrolling parents of high-risk youth (Kumfer and Turner, 1990–1991).

The cost per serious crime prevented for both of these first two interventions is much lower than that for the three-strikes law. In fact, even if the crime-prevention rates of these programs are only a third of what we have assumed, they will still be much more effective than three strikes. We also estimate that the two programs, if implemented at full scale, could add substantially to the total reduction in crime predicted to occur as a result of the three-strikes law.

Another cost-effective intervention is delinquent supervision at a cost of around \$14,000 per serious crime prevented (about 70 serious crimes prevented per million dollars). This cost assumes that the short-term reductions in recidivism observed for such programs hold up over time. It appears to be slightly lower than the analogous cost for the three-strikes law because it is directed at the start, rather than the end, of the criminal career for a very high-risk group. We assume society attaches a higher value to preventing a crime in the near future than to preventing one later. Here, the impacts are felt almost immediately, because the intervention comes shortly before the peak ages of criminal behavior—16 to 20 years of age.

The early home-visit and day-care intervention works with high-risk youths and their families during the first five years of childhood. This intervention requires very large expenditures to affect large numbers of youths. Since youths do not begin to commit serious crimes until their early teenage years, there is almost a 15-year delay between when the intervention is applied and when it begins affecting serious street crimes. The high costs per crime prevented for early home visits and day care result from the intervention's expense (\$29,400 per child over the course of 5 years), and the crime-reduction benefits are not reaped until many years after the intervention. However, it affects one form of crime immediately—child abuse by the parents in the targeted families. Recent surveys have indicated that about one in ten children suffers serious parental abuse or neglect (Car-

negie Corporation, 1994). The rate is considerably higher among lower socioeconomic groups. The kind of early-childhood intervention considered here has been shown to reduce rates of child abuse by about 50 percent. Early home visits and day care would also produce considerable benefits by way of savings in the medical and social-service costs associated with foster care and should improve student performance in school.<sup>1</sup> Our estimates do not account for these benefits or for the savings to the criminal-justice system accruing from averted child abuse.

Once again, our estimates are only crude approximations of what the real costs and benefits are likely to be when we take into account start-up costs, economies of scale, and degradations in effectiveness when we shift from small pilot projects to large-scale public programs. They do not account for changes in criminal-justice-system costs and needs for services associated with lower rates of criminal activity on the parts of program participants.

In addition, the cost-effectiveness analysis presented here for the various early interventions is based on a static framework. For the current study, we have made the simplifying assumption that the population, age-specific crime rates, and all other factors affecting the overall crime rate do not change.<sup>2</sup> This assumption should not bias the results strongly in one direction or another. It must be understood, however, that such results from static analyses represent the per-capita effects of early intervention *on a single cohort*. Thus, we have answered the question, Which approaches are most cost-effective in reducing crime over the life of a cohort that is now young? We have not answered the question, Which approach will be most cost-effective at reducing crime across all cohorts over the next 20 years? All adult criminals are beyond the point of early intervention but are subject to the sanctions of the three-strikes law, so that law's benefits will be felt more broadly and quickly—but so will its costs. Thus, the form of the question may not sway the cost-effectiveness comparisons much.

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<sup>1</sup>Barnett and Escobar (1990) estimate that crime reduction accounted for just 10 percent of the Perry Preschool enrichment and home-visit program's benefits. Other benefits included increased earnings, welfare reduction, and school cost savings.

<sup>2</sup>While the three-strikes analysis accounted for population growth, it also assumed that all other factors affecting the overall crime rate did not change.

Thus, within their scope of application, the policy implications of these findings are fairly clear. Based on current best estimates of program costs and benefits, investments in some interventions for high-risk youth may be several times more cost-effective in reducing serious crime than long mandatory sentences for repeat offenders. Furthermore, investments in these interventions may have additional payoffs that we do not account for in our cost-effectiveness estimates. For example, if such programs prove cost-effective, they could take some of the burden off our prisons and make the three-strikes law more affordable by diverting youth from a life of crime. In fact, our preliminary calculations suggest that a large share of the cost of some early-intervention alternatives may be offset by long-term reductions in prison costs (even after discounting).

Clearly, more information is needed on these promising alternatives. It would help considerably to have several pilot programs under way, with rigorous impact evaluations included. The sample sizes required for confident inference of results entail nontrivial commitments of public resources—more than is likely to be available from governmental or foundation sources for program development and testing purposes. Of course, considering the potential cost-effectiveness of such programs, failure to find the funds for demonstration could be a case of penny-wise pound-foolishness.

Any effort designed to test parent training or delinquent supervision will also face concerns about the ethics of randomly assigning some youths to services and others to none. Regardless of existing evidence, many practitioners hold strong views regarding the benefits of particular interventions and prefer determining who is assigned to the limited slots on the basis of need or potential benefits, rather than random draw. Without much stronger public support, sounder knowledge may be prevented from developing because of these serious funding and research design issues.

Furthermore, convincing individuals to participate in social-assistance programs can be difficult, particularly if they perceive program involvement as stigmatizing. Since the interventions described here are targeted toward disadvantaged or underachieving youth, participation probably carries some negative connotations. Care must be taken to emphasize the positive side of the benefits arising from the interventions considered here, e.g., their potential to increase youth

development, achievement, and self-confidence. However, the effects of stigmatization and program focus on outcomes certainly deserve further investigation.

One final impediment to formulating and testing early interventions for crime reduction is the lack of an obvious governmental authority with an interest in such approaches. California state agencies are divided into those charged with enforcing the law and implementing sanctions on the one hand and those charged with human-resource development and sustainment—education, public health, and welfare—on the other. Few people in the executive branch below the governor's office are likely to have a strong interest in applying tools familiar to the second set of agencies to achieve the goals of the first set. Of course, the tools are financed by all Californians and the goals are those of all Californians. But it may take an interagency consortium to effect the testing of the prevention approaches suggested here. Such a consortium might either have its own demonstration funds or be able to effect the transfer of funds from criminal-justice programs to carefully selected social programs, such as those described in this report, that serve criminal-justice purposes. Considering the multibillion-dollar annual budget of California's criminal-justice programs, an adequate diversion need entail only a tiny fraction of resources available. Activists interested primarily in social services and those interested primarily in crime prevention might find common cause in establishing an interagency consortium devoted to early intervention and assisting with its program.