

encountered similar objections to the use of randomized trials. Fortunately, those who promoted trials won. Eventually, nearly all children with the disease were enrolled in trials in which new treatments were compared with best practices based on the results of earlier trials. In 1950, children with acute lymphoblastic leukemia always died. Today, 80% to 90% survive.²¹ Poor children and families deserve a corresponding investment in well-funded and coordinated randomized trials of preschool and other early interventions aimed at improving their health and development.

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Why Prison Instead of Preschool?

ALMOST 10 YEARS AGO, I HELPED START an alternative school in Washington, DC, called the Maya Angelou Public Charter School (<http://www.seeforever.org>). We have had great success with students who had academic difficulty in previous schools, including many who had dropped out or been incarcerated. Many Maya graduates themselves have young children, and like most parents, they want a better life for

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their kids. For many, this means finding good early-childhood education programs. Tragically, however, in DC and around the country, there is a chronic shortage of quality options. All too often, our graduates are told, "We have no space for your child."

Which raises the question: when is the last time you remember a president or governor or mayor saying, "I wish we could lock this young man up, but we do not have any more prison beds. We have to put his name on a waiting list?" If you have never heard those words uttered, you are like me. In our country, when we run out of prison space, we simply build more. The result is that we have the highest incarceration rate in the world despite being the nation's wealthiest country.

Early-childhood education, on the other hand, is woefully underfunded. Although there is some government funding for programs for 3- and 4-year-olds, it is limited and highly variable from state to state. In some states, the majority of 4-year-olds attend preschool while in others, very few do. Some states fund their programs decently while others spend almost nothing. In addition to access, quality—especially teacher quality, the single most important variable—varies dramatically. Moving beyond 3- and 4-year-olds, the disparities are even greater.

As a nation, we simply do not have a childcare policy for children younger than 3 years old.

The report by Reynolds et al¹ in this issue of the *Archives* indicates that we should rethink our national priorities. The Chicago Longitudinal Study examined a cohort of low-income students who attended preschool beginning at ages 3 and 4 years at Child-Parent Centers in Chicago. Many of the children and families received additional remedial services during the early elementary school grades. Reynolds et al tracked the students, now 24 years old, to measure the impact of the intervention on educational attainment, crime, economic status, and physical and mental health status.

The results are striking: students who received the services were more likely than a comparison group to graduate high school and attend 4-year college, more likely to be employed full-time, less likely to be involved with serious criminal behavior or to be incarcerated, and less likely to suffer depression. These results matter, they are consistent with other research on the long-term impact of quality early-childhood education, and they deserve wide attention.

There are 2 important caveats here: first, in some respects there were no differences between the treatment and comparison group (for example, there was no difference for substance use, smoking, teen parenthood, and some economic and crime indicators). Second, even in the areas where the treatment group did better, the overall success rates for both groups were lower than our society should be willing to accept. At age 24 years, the low-income students who attended the Child-Parent Centers were doing better than their neighbors who did not, but they were still struggling.

The findings from the Child-Parent Centers should not surprise us. They prove that a well-designed and well-executed early-childhood education program can make a significant difference in the life outcomes of children from low-income households. They also show that no single intervention is enough: good early-childhood education needs to be accompanied by (among other things) adequate health care and needs to be followed by quality K-through-12 education. Social scientists can, and should, debate the relative efficacy of different interventions in combating poverty and its associated ills. But anybody who claims that reforming 1 aspect of our broken social services infrastructure will, all by itself, make a profound difference is selling snake oil.

Even though better early-childhood education is not a panacea, the report by Reynolds et al nonetheless comes at an important time for education and crime policy. In education, school-reform advocates have been remarkably successful at focusing our attention on

achievement disparities between wealthy and poor, white and black. But despite these efforts, we have paid insufficient attention to the quality of early-childhood education. As a result, our nation increasingly demands (as it should) that schools educate all children at high levels. But we do this without ensuring that every child arrives at school with the background she needs to be successful.

Reforming our approach to incarceration has received less attention, but there is some reason for optimism here too. Crime rates remain close to historic lows, which may give brave politicians the room to search for alternatives to our recent incarceration binge. In seeking other approaches, we must recognize that America's incarceration rates are a relatively recent phenomenon. For almost 100 years, this nation locked up slightly more than 1 in 1000 of its citizens. Things remained fairly stable from 1880 to 1970, at which point the rate began to increase. The incarceration explosion has not abated since. Today, nearly 7 of 1000 Americans are locked up, which is almost 5 times the historic average. But these numbers show there is nothing inevitable about our current approach. Not only does the rest of the world not lock up its citizens as frequently as we do, but just 40 years ago, we did not do it either.²

Here's where the report by Reynolds et al can play a role in driving public policy. One of the reasons our society accepts the incarceration rates we have is that we have lost the ability to imagine that the world could be otherwise. But Reynolds et al provide the vision we need. Giving every child the opportunity to attend a program like the Chicago Child-Parent Centers would, among other benefits, reduce the number of prisons and prisoners in this country. These findings suggest that we should never again tell the Maya graduates, or any young parents, that "we have no space" in quality early-childhood education programs.

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