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Children and Incarceration

The United States is host to more inmates than all other industrialized nations. Even though studies have found that prevention is much more effective than harsher punishments are at reducing crime, we are still investing in prisons not prevention. The best way to remedy our nation’s problem with crime is to figure out its causes and who it is that is committing crime. Once we do this, we should use government resources to tackle this problem by way of prevention to reduce the amount of crime we endure and also to reduce the amount of money spent on prisons and housing prisoners. The most effective way to reduce the number of crimes is to target the nation’s youth. As a nation, if we concentrate on potential offenders while they are still young and before they begin making decisions that can affect their lives and steer them in the right direction, we could reduce our crime rate, alleviate our overcrowded prisons and reduce the amount that the government spends on housing of criminals.

The groups of children to focus on are the ones at high risk; children of incarcerated parents, children in single parent homes, children that are victims of child abuse, and those living in low income high crime neighborhoods. During an Academy for College Excellence (ACE) Social Justice Course I took this year, I along with other peers surveyed 96 people that had a history of incarceration. It was concluded that 49% of them had a parent that was incarcerated in their childhood. This tells us that children of inmates are very likely to follow in their parents footsteps. It is likely due to their high risk environment and lack of quality role models. 71% of those surveyed only had 0-1 male role models (ACE). Of the data collected, those with fewer male role models felt that they were pressured into doing the crime which landed them in jail. This makes perfect sense because children learn by example and kids at risk aren’t exposed to enough quality role models needed to help them learn how to make good choices as they grow into adulthood. The data also showed that of those brought up with their father absent and raised by only their mother, 67% were victims of child abuse and those arrested for a violent offense; all were abused as children (ACE). Author Joseph C. Sommer, a humanist and an Attorney at Law, wrote an article “Social Environment Contributes to Crime” that supports prevention and gives great insight on how much ones environment can impact a persons behavior and that “Much evidence points to a strong connection between child abuse and crime.” He wrote that Time Magazine reported that 90% of all boys that commit homicide were victims of child abuse: "Their lives start with abuse, neglect and emotional deprivation at home” (Sommer). He also quoted Dr. John Money of the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine claims that "The hard-core delinquent has almost always, if not invariably, an antecedent history of having been abusively neglected, assaultively brutalized, capriciously tyrannized, and sexually coerced, singly or severally" (Sommer). He claims that those raised in an abusive environment harbor rage and act out in the only way they know how. With intervention, high risk children don’t have to end up in jail.

High risk children don’t have to grow up to be criminals. The cost of prevention rather than the cost of punishment is much more cost effective. The article “Preventing Juvenile Crime” by Craig Donegan writes about how to fix the juvenile crime crisis plaguing this nation. “We don't have to raise [children](http://0-library.cqpress.com.alice.dvc.edu/cqresearcher/document.php?id=cqresrre1996031500&type=hitlist&num=17%20\%20hit4) [to be violent or criminal because this is a preventable problem,](http://0-library.cqpress.com.alice.dvc.edu/cqresearcher/document.php?id=cqresrre1996031500&type=hitlist&num=17%20\%20hit6)” says Deborah Prothrow-Stith, assistant dean of government and community programs at the Harvard University School of Public Health. “If we admit this as a society, then we will become very creative about preventive strategies” (Donegan). Focus should be on teaching kids right from wrong, teaching parenting skills to young mothers in high risk areas, and after school programs that teach good social skills and help kids resolve conflicts without violence. A large percent of juvenile crime is committed by youths that are dealing with conflicts the only way they know how, aggressively. Another tactic used to teach children a better way to conduct themselves was implemented in 1992, with a character class. In the article “Teaching Values” by Sarah Glazer, she talks about character education and vice Principal Vera White of Washington D.C.’s public Jefferson Junior High School which has implemented character classes to their students that teach children respect, character value, and how one should conduct themselves. “Since White beefed up the school's character education program in 1992, pregnancies have plummeted from 12-15 a year to one this year; thefts and fighting have dropped, too” (Glazier). Impressive considering this school sits in the inner-city and is home to at risk children whose environment could without intervention lead them to a life of crime.

. We need to change youngsters perception that violence is heroic as rap music depicts it to be and encourage them to look up to those worthy of their admiration, like for example firemen, teachers, servicemen, clergymen, doctors, and others who obey the law and work hard to support their families. A good male role model can simply be a responsible man who respects others and conduct himself in a law abiding way but to many youngsters these men aren’t the type they have around them, instead their role models might be drug dealers, thieves, hustlers, or gang members.

As a community, we need to make quality male role models assessable to at risk kids while giving them something to keep them busy. “Boston University's Delattre endorses the need for communitywide cooperation. He notes that Abilene, Texas, reduced the city's gang population from 650 to 75 between 1988 and 1993, essentially by tackling youth crime as a communitywide responsibility. The city built boys and girls clubs next to elementary schools in high-crime areas, then let the schools use them as gyms during the day and the community use them after school and at night for recreation and midnight basketball. Reported crimes in those areas soon dropped 46 percent” (Donegan). Midnight Basketball is a great hook to get at risk kids off the street at night while being a great opportunity to expose them to good male role models and to teach them life skills that they normally wouldn’t receive at home.

Studies show that intervention with high risk families has very positive results. Visits to parents that have a history of abusive behavior by a social worker or a trained volunteer to teach non violent parenting skills to those that would otherwise inflict physical punishment are just the beginning. Social workers can also alleviate the stress in the household with their access to the help the family needs such as housing, food programs, childcare, health care and other programs that can alleviate the stress on the parent. After school programs that have music, sports and theater in a safe environment can help teach high risk children that there are better choices they can make. Programs with good role models also help children grow up to be responsible adults as well. It is easy to take for granted living in a safe home with parents that nurture and guide their children but many young adults don’t have the luxury of male role models or a life free from abuse and without intervention they can easily make wrong decisions that can affect their lives and hurt those in their path.

Focusing on prevention rather than punishment could reduce the number of incarcerations that burden our courts, overcrowd our jails, and cost tax payers millions of dollars each year. But more importantly, we can save at risk children from ever committing crime by teaching them right from wrong. With male role models, activities like midnight basketball help from social workers, programs that teach children how to deal with conflicts non-violently, and maybe even some character classes we can make our society a better and safer place to live in.