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COSTS AND BENEFITS OF PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAMS FOR AT-RISK YOUTH: INTERIM REPORT

The 2003 Washington State Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy to undertake a cost-benefit analysis of prevention and early intervention programs for at-risk youth. The Institute's final report is due March 1, 2004.¹

This interim report describes the scope of the project in general terms. Since the analytical work is currently underway, there are no findings to report at this time.

The "bottom line" goal of this study is to provide the legislature with "research-based" estimates of the costs and benefits of prevention and early intervention programs. In recent years, the Institute has conducted similar reviews of criminal justice programs and policies.² In these previous studies, we found that some criminal justice programs produce positive returns to taxpayers, while others fail to generate more benefits than costs. In the last few sessions, the legislature and Governor have used this cost-benefit information to reduce funding for criminal justice programs with poor returns on the dollar, and to direct some of these funds to programs with positive returns to the taxpayer.

The goal of the present study is to produce similar cost-benefit information that the legislature and Governor may wish to consider in resource allocation decisions. In this study, the focus is on prevention and early intervention programs for at-risk youth rather than criminal justice programs.

The Legislature assigned four specific research tasks for this project.

¹ ESSB 5404 Sec. 608(2), Chapter 25, Laws of 2003.

² See, S. Aos, P. Phipps, R. Barnoski, and R. Lieb, *The Comparative Costs and Benefits of Programs to Reduce Crime* (2001); S. Aos, R. Barnoski, *The Juvenile Justice System in Washington State: Recommendations to Improve Cost-Effectiveness* (2002); and S. Aos, *The Criminal Justice System in Washington State: Incarceration Rates, Taxpayer Costs, Crime Rates, and Prison Economics* (2003). The three documents are published by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy and available at: < www.wsipp.wa.gov/pubs>.

Task 1: Review the Research Literature.

The first task is to conduct a scientific review of the research literature related to prevention and early intervention for at-risk youth with the goal of determining what works and, just as importantly, what does not. Specifically, the legislative language directs the Institute to...

...review research assessing the effectiveness of prevention and early intervention programs...to reduce the at-risk behaviors for children and youth....

At present, we are identifying, collecting, and interpreting the research results of a large set of prevention and early intervention studies. These studies were conducted in the United States and other English-speaking countries over the last several decades. When people refer to "research-based" or "evidence-based" programs, this set of studies is referenced. Unfortunately, many of these studies employed weak research designs where the effectiveness of the treatment remains ambiguous. For our review of research-based programs, we focus only on the better-designed prevention and intervention studies.

For each study, we determined whether it was successful in achieving an outcome. The language authorizing this study directed the Institute to seven specific outcomes of legislative interest.³ These outcomes for at-risk youth are:

- (1) *Violent delinquent acts and other crime-related outcomes;*
- (2) *Teen substance abuse;*
- (3) *Teen pregnancy and male parentage;*
- (4) *Teen suicide attempts;*
- (5) *Dropping out of school and other education-related outcomes;*
- (6) *Child abuse or neglect; and*
- (7) *Domestic violence.*

³ The seven outcomes are referenced in this study's legislative direction and are contained in RCW 70.190.010(4).

During the first months of this study, our primary efforts have focused on identifying and collecting the relevant prevention and intervention research on programs that address these seven outcomes. We are also in the process of using statistical techniques to summarize the results of these studies.⁴ This statistical process will allow us to draw conclusions about which research-based programs work and which do not work in achieving improvements in the seven outcomes.

Our estimates will focus on specific categories of prevention and intervention programs; we are refining this list of categories as we undertake the study. The list includes the following programs:

- *Early childhood education (preschool) for low income children*
- *Mentoring*
- *Smoking prevention*
- *Alcohol prevention and treatment*
- *Drug abuse prevention and treatment*
- *School violence*
- *Home visitation*
- *Parenting*
- *Compensatory child care*
- *Juvenile justice*
- *Child abuse and neglect*
- *Truancy*

Task 2: Estimate the Costs and Benefits.

In addition to identifying what works and what does not work, the Legislature established a second goal for this study: determine the costs and benefits of different prevention and early intervention strategies. The specific legislative direction is to...

...identify specific research-proven programs that produce a positive return on the dollar compared to the costs of the program.

As part of this project, we are developing the techniques to measure the costs and benefits of these programs. In addition to identifying the programs with a positive return, we will also estimate the costs and benefits of programs that do not break even. For resource allocation questions, it is just as important to know which programs do not produce a positive return for the taxpayer's dollar as it is for those programs with proven positive returns.

⁴ Specifically, we analyze the results of studies using meta-analytic methods as described in M. W. Lipsey and D. B. Wilson, *Practical Meta-Analysis* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2000).

Task 3: Develop Implementation Criteria.

There is growing evidence that unless close attention is paid to quality control, prevention and intervention programs developed under tightly controlled conditions can fail or have a reduced effect when they are attempted in "real world" settings. Therefore, the Legislature included the following direction for this study...

...develop criteria designed to ensure quality implementation and program fidelity of research-proven programs in the state.

An emerging literature is addressing this topic; additionally, Washington's experience with juvenile justice programs⁵ provides guidance that will be covered in the final report.

Task 4: Recommend State-Local Funding Mechanisms.

The final study direction is to...

...develop recommendations for potential state legislation that encourages local government investment in research-proven prevention and early intervention programs by reimbursing local governments for a portion of the savings that accrue to the state as the result of local investments in such programs.

To complete this last task, the Institute intends to suggest general approaches and mechanisms. The 2003 Legislature gave the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) an assignment to "evaluate, recommend, and report where appropriate, options for...incentives designed to encourage local government investment" in research-based programs, including those identified in the Institute's study.⁶ JLARC's report is due September 2005. The Institute's study, when coupled with JLARC's, should provide the state with useful information on this topic.

For additional information on this project, contact Steve Aos at (360) 586-2740 or saos@wsipp.wa.gov.

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⁵ R. Barnoski, *Washington State's Implementation of Functional Family Therapy for Juvenile Offenders: Preliminary Findings* (Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2002).

⁶ SHB 1028, 2003 Legislative Session.