



National Prevention Science Coalition

to improve lives

Preventing Poverty's Impact and Persistence

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Children raised in poverty have—on average—higher rates of a multitude of problems, including school failure, antisocial behavior and delinquency, early pregnancy, drug addiction, and depression. Recent evidence further shows that a child raised in poverty has a 30 to 60% higher likelihood of heart disease as an adult—even when they transcend poverty by adulthood. The enormity of the economic burden on society for such problems including the cost of the most common problems for all youth, such as violence, drug abuse, high-risk sexual behavior, poor academic achievement, high school dropouts and suicide attempts, totals nearly \$500 billion annually. And these estimates do not include the compounding costs of later problems in adulthood, from unemployment and incarceration to serious physical health problems and mental illness.

The Potential of Prevention Science

Prevention science has reached a point at which all U.S. communities can ensure that young people reach adulthood with the skills, values, and health habits needed to lead productive lives in caring relationships with others. The 2009 Institute of Medicine (IOM) report identified numerous tested and effective programs, policies, and practices that can prevent the most common and costly problems of youth. Some interventions can directly affect the economic well-being of those in poverty or who are vulnerable to falling into poverty. Others do not directly or immediately affect economic standing, but ameliorate the negative effects of poverty, such as academic failure, delinquency, depression, and unwanted pregnancy. Of course, alleviating some of these effects can very well improve later economic well-being; e.g., decreasing school drop-out rates. Many of these interventions can also help to prevent inter-generational poverty. If a national initiative ensues that implements these effective interventions, virtually every citizen and entire communities will benefit.

The value of an evidence-based prevention science approach is that it invests only in proven programs; precious resources are not wasted and problems are prevented before they develop. Along these lines, Rep. Ryan and Senator Murray have introduced bipartisan legislation for a Commission on Evidence-Based Policy Making. Relevant to poverty reduction, a bipartisan,

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evidence-based approach that that avoids more divisive straight economic measures is more likely to bring legislative success. Over time, proven interventions save government money; e.g., there is no longer a need to institute programs to counteract problems that no longer exist. In addition, those no longer in poverty are more productive actively contributing to society leading to more money in government coffers. This scenario is certainly preferable for all involved, from those directly impacted by poverty to those affected by the exorbitant costs of poverty, such as threats to public safety and the need for more specialized educational and mental health services.

Building a Comprehensive National Prevention System

The U.S. can exert a measurable impact on poverty and improve the chance for success among our youth by implementing tested and effective programs, policies, and practices. It is a significant undertaking that requires several years of concerted effort, but if we unite everyone around a common understanding of what is needed, we can build a system to support child and adolescent development and prevent problems to a degree never before seen.

A comprehensive and effective prevention system would have four facets: (a) An effective system of family supports; (b) Effective positive behavioral supports in all schools; (c) Ongoing public education about the importance of nurturing environments for child and adolescent development; and (d) A system for monitoring the wellbeing of children and adolescents. A realistic plan for this system can be created if all the agencies and organizations working on health and wellbeing coordinate their efforts.

There is a solid body of evidence showing that community, family and school-based interventions can prevent the development of most of the problems cited above and thereby minimize the harm of poverty and assist many children in eventually escaping from it. From the prenatal period through adolescence, there are programs that can help families nurture their children's cognitive, social, and physical development. They teach parents how to reduce conflict in the home and how to help their children develop key skills for social and academic success. Such programs can prevent impoverished children from failing in school and from developing aggressive behavior that leads to delinquency, substance abuse, early pregnancy, and continued poverty.

An analysis by Sawhill and Karpilow at the Brookings Institution analyzed the potential impact of four evidence-based interventions that are available from infancy through adolescence. Their report concluded that if these interventions were systematically implemented and scaled, they could close the gap by 70% between more and less advantaged children in their ability to enter the middle class by mid-life. And in doing so, this approach would result in substantial savings to the taxpayer.

The programs analyzed by Sawhill and Karpilow were found by previous research to be effective. They include the Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters, Success for All, Social Emotional Learning (particularly PATHS, Incredible Years, and High Scope Pre-School), and the Talent Development (TD) initiative (particularly Career Academies). Programs and policies need to cultivate soft skills as well. Initiatives like the Nurse Family Partnership, Parent Management Training, the Family Check-up, Treatment Foster Care Oregon, Strong African American Families Project, and Multisystemic Therapy (MST) are all valuable in this

regard. Each of these programs can reduce family conflict, improve parents' skill and patience, and prevent the development of myriad problems including academic failure, aggression, delinquency, and depression. A nine year follow-up of the Parent Management Training Oregon showed that it improved mothers' standard of living as measured by income, occupation, education, and financial stress as well as frequency of police arrests. If these programs can be successfully "scaled up," there is potential for transformative effects on poverty.

In addition to interventions aimed at improving parenting skills, school connection and other pro-social behaviors there are also quite a few policies with the promise of reducing poverty and addressing its effects on children, families and communities. One possible bipartisan means of large-scale implementation is via "social impact"/"pay-for success" bonds, which draw in private money to help implement programs. This mechanism is growing in popularity across the aisle in various states, and now in bills introduced into Congress.

Workplan

There is a need for States to identify government efforts relevant to treatment and prevention without restricting the focus to any one domain (e.g., substance abuse) since all aspects of mental and physical health are amenable to prevention through programs and policies that make young people's environment more more nurturing ([Biglan, 2015](#)). A set of activities that can move the nation forward is delineated below:

- 1. Increase the availability of evidence-based supports for family wellbeing.** States need to be encouraged to assess how well they are reaching families who will benefit. For example, the Nurse Family Partnership, which provides supports to poor women during their first pregnancy and the first two years of the child's life, can prevent child abuse and the development of delinquency at the same time that it improves families' economic wellbeing. States should be encouraged to gradually increase the proportion of families that are being reached with such programs.
- 2. Strengthen the system for supporting prosocial behavior in schools.** This effort is already underway in many states thanks to the Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support movement and the growing adoption of the Good Behavior Game. We need to encourage states to develop systems to monitor how well schools are supporting prosocial behavior through evidence-based interventions.
- 3. An effective system of data gathering/survey system.** We cannot assume that these programs will work. Sound public policy requires that we set up systems to monitor their impact, regardless of their pedigree. Communities need to know what proportion of children and adolescents are developing successfully. This is why more resources are needed for the collection, analysis, and feedback of the data to the public.
- 4. Public Education.** We need to educate citizens and state and local policymakers about all of the programs and policies that are available to prevent the most common and costly problems of youth. We need to engage the media to be responsible reporters about the long-term consequences of our actions for children's development and outcomes. These efforts will not only generate support for the policies sand programs that are needed, they will enhance support for policymakers to implement these policies.

The National Prevention Science Coalition to Improve Lives (NPSC) stands by a scientifically

sound strategy to advance a national mentality and governmental policies that prioritize the prevention of problems before they occur. The goal is to reduce government expenditures, while supporting conditions under which children, adolescents, families and communities can thrive.

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