

**Testimony of Mr. Steve Aos
to the Healthy Families and Communities Subcommittee
of the Committee on Education and Labor,
United State House of Representatives
Tuesday, September 18, 2007**

Evidence-Based Public Policy Options that Reduce Crime and Criminal Justice Costs

Thank you Madam Chair and Members of the Committee. I am Steve Aos, Assistant Director of the Washington State Institute for Public Policy. The Institute I work for was created by the Washington State Legislature in 1983 to carry out non-partisan research on projects as directed by the Legislature.

I have been asked to discuss recent work we have done for the Washington State Legislature on juvenile justice issues. Since our Legislature has taken a broad view of crime and ways to reduce it, I will also broaden my remarks on the juvenile justice system to encompass our analysis of prevention programs for youth before they become involved in the juvenile justice system, and, at the other end of the age spectrum, cost-effective public policy options for adult offenders. As I discuss, we have found that all three efforts are needed if a state is to implement a long-term crime reduction strategy that uses taxpayer money efficiently.

Legislators in Washington State asked my Institute to examine a straightforward question: What works to reduce crime—and what doesn't?

They wanted us to apply rigorous standards to identify the specific “evidence-based” public policy options they could exercise. They also wanted to know whether the options could pass an economic test. That is, if an option can reduce crime, then does the program also save taxpayers more money than the option costs? Thus, the two hallmarks of our work are its explicit focus on evidence-based options and on sound economics. Washington legislators wanted to identify public policies that pass both tests.

We have published a number of reports on our work. Our October 2006 study—“Evidence-Based Public Policy Options to Reduce Future Prison Construction, Criminal Justice Costs, and Crime Rates”—contains the full set of options we have identified to date. I will briefly summarize our findings today; the full document is available on our website: www.wsipp.wa.gov.

In short, this is what we did and what we found. We conducted a systematic review of all research evidence we could locate to identify what works, if anything, to reduce crime. We found and analyzed 571 rigorous comparison-group evaluations of adult corrections, juvenile justice, and prevention programs, most of which were conducted in the United States during the last 30 years. We then estimated the benefits and costs of many of these evidence-based options from the perspective of Washington State. That is, if

Washington were to implement any of these options, would they be beneficial to the state? Finally, we projected the degree to which alternative “portfolios” of these programs could affect future prison construction needs, criminal justice costs, and crime rates in Washington.

We found that some evidence-based programs can reduce crime, but others cannot. Per dollar of spending, a number of the successful programs produce favorable returns on investment. Public policies incorporating these options can yield positive outcomes for Washington. We then projected the long-run effects of three example portfolios of evidence-based options: a “current level” option as well as “moderate” and “aggressive” implementation portfolios.

We found that if Washington successfully implements a moderate-to-aggressive portfolio of evidence-based options, a significant level of future prison construction can be avoided, Washington taxpayers can save about two billion dollars, and crime rates can be reduced. Perhaps most significant for your hearing today, we found that several of the most cost-effective options are in the juvenile justice and prevention areas.

Before discussing our findings in a bit more detail, I want to report to you that the 2007 Washington Legislature used the Institute’s findings to alter substantially the State’s approach toward some criminal justice policies. The Legislature has shifted funding away from some previous efforts that have not proven successful and moved those funds toward evidence-based cost-beneficial programs. In addition to shifting funding, the 2007 Legislature also increased funding levels for some of the most economically attractive options on our list. The Legislature expects a payoff for its action: as a result of these new investments, the Legislature now expects future crime rates and criminal justice costs to be lower than they otherwise would be. In effect, Washington has placed a fiscal bet on these options and now must deliver the results for the taxpayers who pay for the programs.

As we did our research, the first thing we learned is that a coherent set of crime reduction policies must be broad in scope and be targeted at the long run. We found that it is necessary to think about a “portfolio” of public policy options if the long-term goal is to reduce crime and save taxpayers money. Thus, the strategies that we identified are in three broad public policy areas: prevention, juvenile justice, and adult corrections. We found that some well-researched prevention programs for children and their families can reduce crime down the road. We also found that several juvenile justice programs designed for youth already in the juvenile justice system are critical elements of an overall crime reduction strategy. Finally, we identified a number of effective and cost-beneficial options in the adult corrections system.

The important point from our work is this: a coherent long-term strategy involves all three elements—prevention, juvenile justice, and adult corrections. Our overall conclusion is one of good news: In the last two decades, research on what works and what doesn’t has developed and, after considering the comparative economics of these options, this information can now be used to improve public resource allocation.

For the topic of this hearing in particular, we found that cost-effective prevention and juvenile justice programs are a very significant part—perhaps over half—of the solution for Washington to achieve long-term reductions in crime rates as well as net reductions in criminal justice costs. A significant way to avoid having to build adult prisons down the road is to implement evidence-based cost-beneficial prevention programs for youth and for youth in the juvenile justice system.

Some Specific Findings

The findings from our study center on three questions: what works to reduce crime; what are the economics of each option; and how would alternative portfolios of these options affect Washington's prison construction needs, state and local criminal justice costs, and crime rates?

I have attached an Exhibit from our October 2006 study that summarizes some of the key findings from our current systematic review of the evaluation research literature. As the Exhibit reveals, we found a number of programs that have demonstrated statistically significant reductions in crime outcomes. We also found other approaches that do not achieve a statistically significant reduction in recidivism. Thus, the first lesson from our evidence-based review is that some programs work and some do not. A direct implication from these mixed findings is that public policies that reduce crime will be ones that focus resources on effective evidence-based programming while avoiding ineffective approaches.

An example of the information provided on the attached Exhibit is the juvenile justice program called "Functional Family Therapy" (FFT). This program follows a specific training manual and approach. The FFT program, which has been implemented in Washington, involves an FFT-trained therapist working for about three months with a youth in the juvenile justice system and his or her family. The goal is to increase the likelihood that the youth will stay out of future trouble. We located and meta-analyzed seven rigorous evaluations of this program—one conducted in Washington—and find that the average FFT program with quality control can be expected to reduce a juvenile's recidivism rates by 15.9 percent.

We also wanted to know what the economics looked like for FFT. To do this we estimated benefits from two perspectives: taxpayers' and crime victims'. For example, if a program is able to achieve statistically significant reductions in recidivism rates, then taxpayers will spend less money on the criminal justice system. Similarly, if a program produces less crime, then there will be fewer crime victims. For the FFT program, we find that the program costs, on average, \$2,325 per juvenile participant. The 15.9 percent reduction in recidivism rates that we expect FFT to achieve generates about \$34,146 in life-cycle benefits, measured in terms of the taxpayer and crime victim costs that are avoided because of the reduced long-run level of criminal activity of the youth. Thus, the net present value of this juvenile justice program is expected to be \$31,821 per youth.

Bottom Line

The purpose of our legislatively directed study was to test whether evidence-based public policy options could: (a) lower the anticipated need to build new prisons, (b) reduce state and local fiscal costs of the criminal justice system, and (c) contribute to reduced crime rates.

We found that there are economically attractive evidence-based options in three areas: adult corrections programs, juvenile justice programs, and prevention. Per dollar of spending, several of the successful programs produce favorable returns on investment. Public policies incorporating these options can yield positive outcomes for Washington.

We also found that if Washington can successfully implement a moderate-to-aggressive portfolio of some of these evidence-based options, then a significant level of future prison construction can be avoided, state and local taxpayers can save about two billion dollars, and net crime rates can be lowered slightly. In particular, we found that cost-beneficial prevention and juvenile justice programs play a critical role in a long-term crime control strategy for Washington State.

Finally, as I mentioned earlier, the 2007 Washington Legislature used this information to make significant changes to the way it funds the state's prevention, juvenile justice, and adult corrections systems.

Madam Chair, this concludes my testimony.

Reducing Crime With Evidence-Based Options: What Works, and Benefits & Costs

Washington State Institute for Public Policy Estimates as of October, 2006 Notes: "n/e" means not estimated at this time. Prevention program costs are partial program costs, pro-rated to match crime outcomes.	Effect on Crime Outcomes Percent change in crime outcomes, & the number of evidence-based studies on which the estimate is based (in parentheses) (1)	Benefits and Costs (Per Participant, Net Present Value, 2006 Dollars)			
		Benefits to Crime Victims (of the reduction in crime) (2)	Benefits to Taxpayers (of the reduction in crime) (3)	Costs (marginal program cost, compared to the cost of alternative) (4)	Benefits (total) Minus Costs (per participant) (5)
		Programs for People in the Adult Offender System			
Vocational education in prison	-9.0% (4)	\$8,114	\$6,806	\$1,182	\$13,738
Intensive supervision: treatment-oriented programs	-16.7% (11)	\$9,318	\$9,369	\$7,124	\$11,563
General education in prison (basic education or post-secondary)	-7.0% (17)	\$6,325	\$5,306	\$962	\$10,669
Cognitive-behavioral therapy in prison or community	-6.3% (25)	\$5,658	\$4,746	\$105	\$10,299
Drug treatment in community	-9.3% (6)	\$5,133	\$5,495	\$574	\$10,054
Correctional industries in prison	-5.9% (4)	\$5,360	\$4,496	\$417	\$9,439
Drug treatment in prison (therapeutic communities or outpatient)	-5.7% (20)	\$5,133	\$4,306	\$1,604	\$7,835
Adult drug courts	-8.0% (57)	\$4,395	\$4,705	\$4,333	\$4,767
Employment and job training in the community	-4.3% (16)	\$2,373	\$2,386	\$400	\$4,359
Electronic monitoring to offset jail time	0% (9)	\$0	\$0	-\$870	\$870
Sex offender treatment in prison with aftercare	-7.0% (6)	\$6,442	\$2,885	\$12,585	-\$3,258
Intensive supervision: surveillance-oriented programs	0% (23)	\$0	\$0	\$3,747	-\$3,747
Washington's Dangerously Mentally Ill Offender program	-20.0% (1)	\$18,020	\$15,116	n/e	n/e
Drug treatment in jail	-4.5% (9)	\$2,481	\$2,656	n/e	n/e
Adult boot camps	0% (22)	\$0	\$0	n/e	n/e
Domestic violence education/cognitive-behavioral treatment	0% (9)	\$0	\$0	n/e	n/e
Jail diversion for mentally ill offenders	0% (11)	\$0	\$0	n/e	n/e
Life Skills education programs for adults	0% (4)	\$0	\$0	n/e	n/e
Programs for Youth in the Juvenile Offender System					
Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (v. regular group care)	-22.0% (3)	\$51,828	\$32,915	\$6,945	\$77,798
Adolescent Diversion Project (for lower risk offenders)	-19.9% (6)	\$24,328	\$18,208	\$1,913	\$40,623
Family Integrated Transitions	-13.0% (1)	\$30,708	\$19,502	\$9,665	\$40,545
Functional Family Therapy on probation	-15.9% (7)	\$19,529	\$14,617	\$2,325	\$31,821
Multisystemic Therapy	-10.5% (10)	\$12,855	\$9,622	\$4,264	\$18,213
Aggression Replacement Training	-7.3% (4)	\$8,897	\$6,659	\$897	\$14,660
Teen courts	-11.1% (5)	\$5,907	\$4,238	\$936	\$9,208
Juvenile boot camp to offset institution time	0% (14)	\$0	\$0	-\$8,077	\$8,077
Juvenile sex offender treatment	-10.2% (5)	\$32,515	\$8,377	\$33,064	\$7,829
Restorative justice for low-risk offenders	-8.7% (21)	\$4,628	\$3,320	\$880	\$7,067
Interagency coordination programs	-2.5% (15)	\$3,084	\$2,308	\$205	\$5,186
Juvenile drug courts	-3.5% (15)	\$4,232	\$3,167	\$2,777	\$4,622
Regular surveillance-oriented parole (v. no parole supervision)	0% (2)	\$0	\$0	\$1,201	-\$1,201
Juvenile intensive probation supervision programs	0% (3)	\$0	\$0	\$1,598	-\$1,598
Juvenile wilderness challenge	0% (9)	\$0	\$0	\$3,085	-\$3,085
Juvenile intensive parole supervision	0% (10)	\$0	\$0	\$6,460	-\$6,460
Scared Straight	+6.8% (10)	-\$8,355	-\$6,253	\$58	-\$14,667
Counseling/psychotherapy for juvenile offenders	-18.9% (6)	\$23,126	\$17,309	n/e	n/e
Juvenile education programs	-17.5% (3)	\$41,181	\$26,153	n/e	n/e
Other family-based therapy programs	-12.2% (12)	\$15,006	\$11,231	n/e	n/e
Team Child	-10.9% (2)	\$5,759	\$4,131	n/e	n/e
Juvenile behavior modification	-8.2% (4)	\$19,271	\$12,238	n/e	n/e
Life skills education programs for juvenile offenders	-2.7% (3)	\$6,441	\$4,091	n/e	n/e
Diversion progs. with services (v. regular juvenile court)	-2.7% (20)	\$1,441	\$1,034	n/e	n/e
Juvenile cognitive-behavioral treatment	-2.5% (8)	\$3,123	\$2,337	n/e	n/e
Court supervision vs. simple release without services	0% (8)	\$0	\$0	n/e	n/e
Diversion programs with services (v. simple release)	0% (7)	\$0	\$0	n/e	n/e
Juvenile intensive probation (as alternative to incarceration)	0% (5)	\$0	\$0	n/e	n/e
Guided Group Interaction	0% (4)	\$0	\$0	n/e	n/e
Prevention Programs (crime reduction effects only)					
Nurse Family Partnership-Mothers	-56.2% (1)	\$11,531	\$8,161	\$5,409	\$14,283
Nurse Family Partnership-Children	-16.4% (1)	\$8,632	\$4,922	\$733	\$12,822
Pre-K education for low income 3 & 4 year olds	-14.2% (8)	\$8,145	\$4,644	\$593	\$12,196
Seattle Social Development Project	-18.6% (1)	\$1,605	\$4,341	n/e	n/e
High school graduation	-10.4% (1)	\$1,738	\$2,851	n/e	n/e
Guiding Good Choices	-9.1% (1)	\$570	\$2,092	n/e	n/e
Parent-Child Interaction Therapy	-3.7% (1)	\$268	\$784	n/e	n/e
Program types in need of additional research & development before we can conclude they do or do not reduce crime outcomes:					
Programs needing more research for people in the adult offender system					
Case management in the community for drug offenders	0% (13)	Findings are mixed for this broad grouping of programs.			
COSA (Faith-based supervision of sex offenders)	-22.3% (1)	Too few evaluations to date.			
Day fines (compared to standard probation)	0% (1)	Too few evaluations to date.			
Domestic violence courts	0% (2)	Too few evaluations to date.			
Faith-based programs	0% (5)	Too few evaluations to date.			
Intensive supervision of sex offenders in the community	0% (4)	Findings are mixed for this broad grouping of programs.			
Medical treatment of sex offenders	-21.4% (1)	Too few evaluations to date.			
Mixed treatment of sex offenders in the community	0% (2)	Too few evaluations to date.			
Regular parole supervision vs. no parole supervision	0% (1)	Too few evaluations to date.			
Restorative justice programs for lower risk adult offenders	0% (6)	Findings are mixed for this broad grouping of programs.			
Therapeutic community programs for mentally ill offenders	-20.8% (2)	Too few evaluations to date.			
Work release programs (from prison)	-4.3% (4)	Too few recent evaluations.			
Programs needing more research for youth in the juvenile offender system					
Dialectical Behavior Therapy	0% (1)	Too few evaluations to date.			
Increased drug testing (on parole) vs. minimal drug testing	0% (1)	Too few evaluations to date.			
Juvenile curfews	0% (1)	Too few evaluations to date.			
Juvenile day reporting	0% (2)	Too few evaluations to date.			
Juvenile jobs programs	0% (3)	Too few recent evaluations.			
Juvenile therapeutic communities	0% (1)	Too few evaluations to date.			
Mentoring in juvenile justice	0% (1)	Too few evaluations to date.			