



## Fight the roots of crime

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An innovative *Star* series has proven what society has intuitively always known: investing in programs to tackle the social problems at the root of crime is far more cost-effective than jailing people later.

But the facts a *Star* team pulled from federal and provincial data obtained through freedom of information requests are still startling in their bleakness:

More than 70 per cent of those who enter federal prisons are high-school dropouts; 70 per cent have unstable job histories; four out of every five have substance-abuse problems when they are convicted; and two out of three youth in the criminal justice system have been diagnosed with two or more mental health problems.

In Toronto, the data analysis shows the 10 neighbourhoods with the highest incarceration rates are the same ones that have the lowest incomes, highest unemployment, most single-parent families and lowest levels of education.

Yet rather than putting money into addressing these social ills, the federal government's approach is to lock up more people for longer under its new "tough on crime" measures.

Crime costs us an estimated \$70 billion a year. For a fraction of that amount, we could fund early childhood development and lower school dropout rates – thereby saving us billions in the long run.

As Dr. David Butler-Jones, Canada's chief public health officer, reported last month, every dollar invested in the early years saves \$9 in future spending on the health, welfare and justice systems.

Canada spends just one-quarter of 1 per cent of its GDP on early childhood development and care, half of what the United States spends and dead last of 14 industrialized countries, according to a 2006 study. And with 872,00 children, or 13 per cent, living below the poverty line, Canada ranks 19th out of 26 industrialized nations.

Some good programs exist. Pathways to Education in Regent Park has reduced the dropout rate there from 56 per cent to 10 per cent. But such examples are few and far between. Toronto has an action plan for its 13 "priority" neighbourhoods, but local agencies are left scrambling to keep the programs going when the funding runs out after only a year.

Furthermore, rehabilitation programs for prisoners account for only 2 per cent of Correction Canada's \$37 billion budget. Many are homeless when they leave jail, and at least 40 per cent commit a new crime within two years.

Clearly, as the *Star* series showed, there is much work to be done by all levels of government and social agencies to solve the social problems at the roots of crime.