



The biggest benefit of pre-K might not be education

By Libby Nelson | @libbynelson | Jul 30, 2014, 5:50pm EDT

f t SHARE



Teacher Jane Pan, science coach Jack Ruolo, NYC Mayor Bill de Blasio and Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver sit in a pre-K classroom during a visit at P.S.1 on Henry St. on April 3, 2014 in New York City. | Getty Images

Libby Nelson is Vox's policy editor, leading coverage of how government action and inaction shape American life. Libby has more than a decade of policy journalism experience, including at Inside Higher Ed and Politico. She joined Vox in 2014.

One of the most common arguments in favor of universal pre-K is the argument that it will actually save money: \$7 for every \$1 invested, according to President Obama's proposal for expanding pre-K access. Some studies have found an even higher return — as high as \$16 to \$1 — on investment from sending 4-year-olds to school.

This isn't because of the educational benefits of pre-K. Some studies have found that gains in test scores gradually fade out as children continue through public school.

Instead, the cost-savings reflect an unexpected side-benefit of early education: children who participated in pre-K in some studies were less likely to commit crimes, or to be arrested, later in life.

That's why police chiefs are one of the most unlikely backers of proposals for universal pre-kindergarten. Still, most of the studies that show pre-K reduces crime are also studies that pre-K skeptics criticize the most, saying those programs are hard to replicate at a state or national level.

Some studies have found children who went to pre-K were

Quantive

Leaders' choice for strategy alignment with OKRs

Learn more

G2 ★★★★★
Rated 4.7 stars

High Performer 2024
Leader 2024
Momentum Leader 2024

Most Read

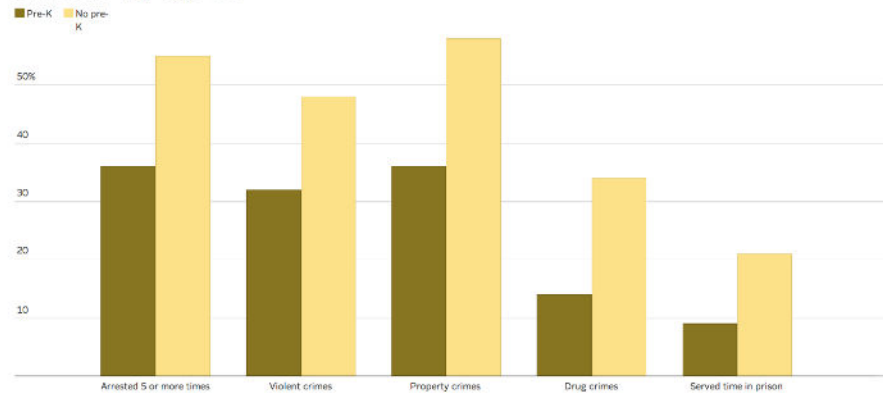
- 1 The Supreme Court will decide whether to let civilians own automatic weapons
- 2 Justice Alito is mad that George W. Bush was too woke
- 3 How Israel's war went wrong
- 4 An attempt to reckon with True Detective: Night Country's bonkers season finale
- 5 Jon Stewart is as funny as ever. But the world has changed around him.

Some studies have found children who went to pre-K were less likely to be arrested later in life

The statistics on crimes committed by children who attended pre-K as four-year-olds come from three long-term studies of children living in poverty: the Perry Preschool project in Michigan, the Abecedarian Project in North Carolina and Chicago Longitudinal Study.

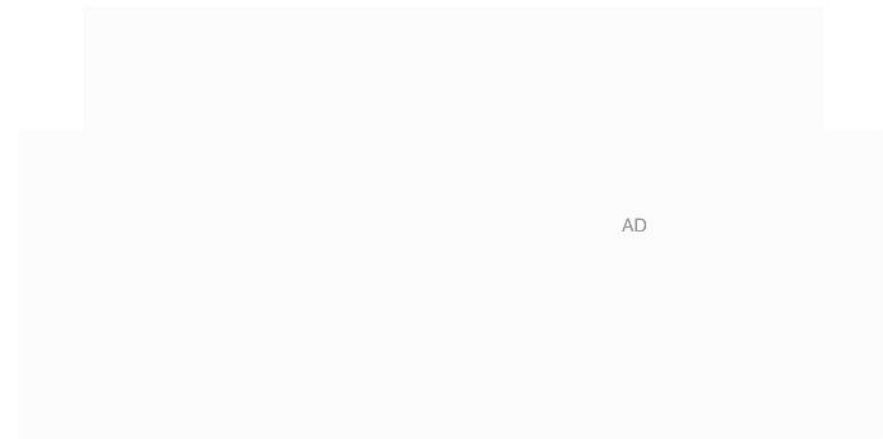
The Perry Preschool project, which sent 65 poor children living in poverty in Ypsilanti, Michigan, to pre-K between 1962 and 1967, found that children who attended pre-K were much less likely to be arrested for any type of crime by age 40:

Arrests by age 40



Source: HighScope/Perry Preschool project

The Chicago Longitudinal Study studied 900 low-income children in Chicago that were assigned to "child and parent centers" that provided parenting assistance, early childhood education and other services. University of Minnesota researchers **found** that participants were less likely to be arrested or incarcerated 25 years after they had participated in the program, when compared to nonparticipants:



Pre-K and arrests 25 years later



In both cases, the lower likelihood of interacting with the criminal justice systems is what makes public spending on pre-K look like such a good deal. James Heckman, an economist who has studied the Perry preschool project, **estimated it saved society \$7 to \$12 for every \$1 invested**. Most of those savings came from reduced crime.

The Chicago Longitudinal Study **saved** about \$11 for every \$1 invested for preschool-aged children, and researchers estimated that two-thirds of those savings were due to lower crime costs.

Today, Explained

Understand the world with a daily explainer plus the most compelling stories of the day.

Email (required)

By submitting your email, you agree to our Terms and Privacy Notice. You can opt out at any time. This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google Privacy Policy and Terms of Service apply. For more newsletters, check out our newsletters page.

SUBSCRIBE

AD



Living in an abortion ban state is bad for mental health

Participation in Head Start, the federal early childhood program, also reduced crime among black participants relative to siblings who did not participate, but a 2009 **analysis** of more recent participants found no effect on criminal activity.

But other studies have found little to no effect on crime



black participants relative to siblings who did not participate, but a 2009 **analysis** of more recent participants found no effect on criminal activity.

But other studies have found little to no effect on crime



President Obama in a pre-K classroom in Washington DC. (Saul Loeb/AFP)



The third long-term longitudinal study of pre-K participants, the Abecedarian Project, found that while pre-K programs helped in other areas of participants' lives, it had **no effect** on criminal activity. (That's in part because the control group had low crime participation rates too, so it would be harder for any difference to show up.) As a result, while cost-benefit analyses of Abecedarian have still found it was a good investment, the rate of return was much lower — about \$2.50 for every \$1 invested — because there was little effect on crime.

The dramatic effects of the Perry Preschool project are indisputable. But it's also unclear if the Ypsilanti preschool experience, which featured small class sizes and a specialized curriculum, can be scaled up to a full city or state. Providing high-quality pre-K is much more difficult than enrolling children in any kind of early childhood education. The Chicago program was for children ages 3 to 9, a much longer intervention than most publicly provided pre-K.

You've read 1 article in the last 30 days.

Will you help keep Vox free for all?

At Vox, we believe that clarity is power, and that power shouldn't only be available to those who can afford to pay. That's why we keep our work free. Millions rely on Vox's clear, high-quality journalism to understand the forces shaping today's world.

Support our mission and help keep Vox free for all by making a financial contribution to Vox today.

| | | |
|----------|----------------|--------|
| One-Time | Monthly | Annual |
|----------|----------------|--------|

- \$5/month**
- \$10/month
- \$25/month
- \$50/month
- Other

Yes, I'll give \$5/month

We accept credit card, Apple Pay, and Google Pay. You can also contribute via



NEXT UP IN **THE LATEST**

How Israel's war went wrong

An attempt to reckon with True Detective: Night Country's bonkers season finale

Dakota Johnson's aloof appeal, explained

Those evangelical Christian Super Bowl ads — and the backlash to them — explained

What does the EGOT even mean, anyway?

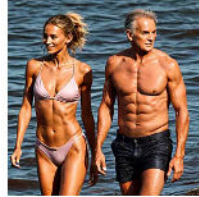
Scott Peterson's guilt, explained

Sponsored Content



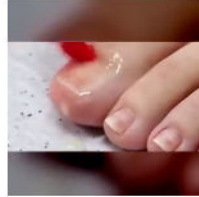
[Gallery] If You Own Any of These 29 Items, You Are Rich

HistoryA2Z



MD Begs 50+ Americans To Build Muscle With This Tip (Every Morning)

alphahealthfindings.com



Top Podiatrist: If You Have Toenail Fungus Try This Tonight (It's Genius!)

WellnessGuide101.com



Game shows what the world without US military interventions would look like

History Strategy Game



The Actual Cost of a New Walk-In Shower May Surprise You

KohlerSafeShowers.com



Prime is Now \$179, But Few Know this Free Savings Hack

Online Shopping Tools

Recommended by Outbrain

THE LATEST



Wisconsin's new legislative maps are a win for democracy

By Li Zhou



The US is ready to call for a ceasefire in Gaza. Does it matter?

By Nicole Narea



The Alabama Supreme Court opinion holding that embryos are children, explained

By Ian Millhiser



Where does the fight for a free Russia go now?

By Ellen Ioanes



Justice Alito is mad that George W. Bush was too woke

By Ian Millhiser



Living in an abortion ban state is bad for mental health

By Keren Landman, MD

Today, Explained

Understand the world with a daily explainer plus the most compelling stories of the day.

Email (required)

SUBSCRIBE

By submitting your email, you agree to our [Terms and Privacy Notice](#). You can opt out at any time. This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the [Google Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#) apply. For more newsletters, check out our [newsletters page](#).



[About us](#)

[Our staff](#)

[Privacy policy](#)

[Ethics & Guidelines](#)

[How we make money](#)

[Contact us](#)

[How to pitch Vox](#)

VOXMEDIA

[Terms of Use](#) • [Privacy Notice](#) • [Cookie Policy](#) •

[Do Not Sell or Share My Personal Info](#) • [Licensing FAQ](#) • [Accessibility](#) •

[Platform Status](#) • [Advertise with us](#) • [Jobs @ Vox Media](#)

[Author Login](#)

© 2024 Vox Media, LLC. All Rights Reserved

© 2024 Vox Media, LLC. All Rights Reserved