

WAVE TRO

Invest cautiously in kids

Preventing juvenile crime will cost fistfuls of money; with care, Oregon can toss funds at efforts likely to work

“Crime,” someone says. “Punishment” is the fast-draw reply. This word-association comeback no longer satisfies after the horrific shootings in Springfield two weeks ago.

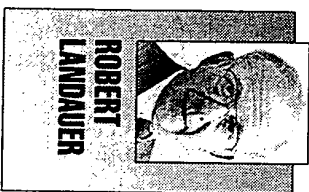
Penalties offer little solace and relieve no fears as Oregonians face the atrocity of two parents and two students killed and 22 students wounded.

So whenever someone said “crime” at a Child Policy Summit this week in Portland, the quick-reflex retort was “prevention.”

This is a first step toward balancing a devilishly difficult human equation: Serious crimes deserve stern consequences. Better, though, to prevent breakage than to pick up its pieces.

To this end, Gov. John Kitzhaber will ask the 1999 Legislature for at least \$15 million a year so that counties can intervene before troubled youths get into serious problems instead of “after they commit the crimes we know they are probably going to commit.”

Kitzhaber battled this issue around with the 1997 Legislature. Without new money to put into juvenile justice, though, the governor and lawmakers stalemated over priorities. They



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might be more motivated this time to reach agreement.

The governor wants counties to choose programs that have reduced juvenile crime and that best suit their circumstances. Before going much farther with that constructive idea, Oregonians could mine some precious ore from a recent Rand Corp. report, “Investing in Our Children: What We Know and Don’t Know About the Costs and Benefits of Early Childhood Interventions.”

Overall, the researchers found that early interventions can provide big benefits to targeted children and their families, and that taxpayers’ savings can be far greater than their costs for programs for high-risk children. The report shouts for attention here before 36 counties and the state march in different directions.

Few prevention programs in the United States have been set up to allow controlled comparison, says Rand. The result: “One of the big unknowns is why successful programs work and others don’t.” Too little is known to support focusing on parents vs. children (or both); intervening in infancy vs. the preschool years; and tailoring to individual needs vs. treating children the same but treating more of them.

It also is not known which eligibility standards would yield the best results and, therefore, how to target limited funds.

Oregon needs to decide what the vital questions are. Then it needs experts such as those at Portland State University’s Regional Research Institute for Human Services to help design and evaluate the programs so that they give us answers that we can validly compare.

This early preoccupation with evaluation is not just technical mumbo-jumbo. It goes to the core issues of long-term success and failure, efficiency and waste — even program survival. If you intervene with the very young, final crime-prevention effects are evident only years later. Yet programs must produce evidence of behavioral changes early on or they soon will suffer starvation rations.

That’s because many of the politicians who fund the programs want instant gratification. Information to make mid-course corrections in existing local programs and, later, to build better new ones is the prevention programs’ best life insurance.

Careful spending at the beginning could ensure “that maximum benefits are achieved from a much larger expenditure over the long term,” Rand advised.

The better our evaluations, the better our future decisions can be. Better to put intense forethought into this now than to regret our negligence later.

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REPORT IS ON-LINE

“Investing in Our Children,” the 1998 Rand Corp. report, can be found on-line at www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR898 or can be ordered by phoning 301-451-7002.