

Increasing Public Safety with Evidence-Based Home Visiting

Pennsylvania's voluntary evidence-based home visiting programs can help prevent crime through fostering strong families and positive child outcomes





Home visiting programs have benefits that extend well beyond the family. These high-quality programs, especially for parents facing challenging circumstances, may improve public safety by preventing children's future involvement in crime, increasing academic achievement, and helping to reduce the use of substances such as opioids in the long run. They can also strengthen the economy by fostering families' economic independence and helping children become productive adults. When parents are connected to the resources available through voluntary home visiting, entire communities can benefit.

What is voluntary home visiting?

Home visiting is a term for programs in which mothers, fathers, or families opt to have trained professionals (e.g., nurses, social workers, or parent educators) visit their homes regularly.

Depending on the program, participation can begin as early as pregnancy or during

the first five years of a child's life. Home visiting programs aim to provide guidance and support by offering mentorship and educating parents about their child's early physical and emotional development. These programs also provide parents with tools to manage stress, address problem behaviors, and connect with community resources. Ultimately, these programs help put families on the path to self-sufficiency.

Pennsylvania utilizes multiple home visiting programs that are considered evidence-based by federal standards.¹ The eight home visiting programs that currently operate in Pennsylvania and receive state funding are as follows:²

- **Child First (CF)** – Protects young children and families from the effects of chronic stress and trauma by fostering strong, nurturing relationships and connecting families with needed services. Research shows this model reduces suspected child maltreatment while improving social-emotional development, behavior, and language skills that support school readiness. CF additionally strengthens family access to and use of community-based services, including health care and early education.^{3,4}

- **Early Head Start (EHS)** – Nurtures healthy attachments by providing comprehensive services to low-income families with infants, toddlers, and pregnant women. Research shows this model strengthens children’s cognitive, language, social, and emotional development as well as school readiness.^{5,6} EHS also reduces parenting distress and family conflict, leading to stronger, more positive parent-child relationships.⁷
- **Family Check-Up® (FCU)** – Supports strategies to better engage parents and parent-centered intervention for reducing problem behaviors in children from toddlers through adolescence. Research shows this improves self-regulation, social skills, and academic performance while reducing early signs of behavioral and emotional difficulties.^{8,9} FCU also promotes positive parenting practices, decreasing the likelihood of child maltreatment and risky behaviors later in life.^{10,11}
- **Family Connects (FC)** – Strengthens connections for families with newborns by linking them directly to supportive community care resources. Research shows this model improves families’ access to community services, supports positive parenting and caregiver well-being, and is associated with fewer emergency medical visits and CPS investigations.^{12,13,14}
- **Healthy Families America (HFA)** – Strengthens families by fostering positive parenting practices, supporting healthy growth and development, and identifying those affected by adverse childhood experiences. Research shows this model enhances the home environment by discouraging harsh disciplinary practices and preventing other forms of child maltreatment.^{15,16} Children in HFA are also more likely to receive early developmental screenings, annual well-child visits, and routine vaccinations.¹⁷
- **Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP)** – Pairs first-time, low-income pregnant women with registered nurses who provide support during pregnancy through the child’s second birthday. Research shows this model improves maternal and child health by reducing pregnancy complications, childhood injuries, and prenatal substance use.^{18,19} NFP also promotes family economic stability by improving the employment status and educational attainment of first-time mothers, reducing their reliance on public assistance.^{20,21}
- **Parents as Teachers (PAT)** – Builds the capacity of parents to understand and support their children’s healthy development and early learning. Research shows this model enhances literacy, academic readiness, and social-emotional skills while helping parents respond more effectively to their children’s needs.^{22,23} PAT also supports family well-being by reducing parenting stress, promoting safe home environments, and lowering the risk for child abuse and neglect.^{24,25}
- **SafeCare® Augmented (SCA)** – Uses motivational interviewing and other training to focus on three key outcomes that are universally important for families: creating positive relationships between caregivers and their children, ensuring homes are safe to reduce the risk of child injury, and keeping children as healthy as possible. Research shows this model strengthens parent-child interactions and



improves parents' ability to respond appropriately to their child's health and safety needs.^{26, 27} It also reduces reports of child maltreatment and enhances overall family well-being.²⁸

Pennsylvania's home visiting programs are funded in part by state and federal grants. Collectively, they served 20,640 children across all 67 counties in 2025. This number, however, represents only 7% of the 298,540 children aged 0-6 years living in low-income families throughout the commonwealth.²⁹

Pennsylvania can reduce child maltreatment and child welfare involvement

Nearly 4,800 Pennsylvania children were substantiated victims of abuse in 2024, a validation rate of 1.8 per 1,000 children, which has remained relatively stable since 2019. Allegations were validated for 39,561 children in reports to General Protective Services (GPS) regarding the need for intervention to prevent serious harm and neglect, a near return to pre-pandemic levels.³⁰ The rate of children assessed and found to need services was 21.6 per 1,000 children, consistent with the rate over the past five years. Involvement with child welfare, particularly if parental custody loss is a result, can have serious and long-lasting

implications for the health and well-being of children, including increasing risks for mental health issues, substance abuse, and future criminal activity.³¹

While most child maltreatment victims do not become involved in crime, one study revealed that having at least one indicated maltreatment report before turning 18 was significantly associated with all measures of juvenile delinquency, including self-reported and official incidence of arrest, as well as offending frequency. Maltreatment status was also associated with a higher frequency of adult convictions. Furthermore, a history of indicated maltreatment increased the odds of being convicted for a violent offense or drug offense as an adult.³²

Evidence-based home visiting programs provide a solution to help reduce both child maltreatment and child welfare involvement.³³ The longest-running home visiting study followed NFP participants and demonstrated that, by age 15, children in NFP had half as many verified incidents of maltreatment as children in the control group who didn't participate.³⁴ Another program, SafeCare[®] Augmented, resulted in improved use of nonviolent discipline techniques among at-risk mothers, albeit only in the short term.³⁵

Home visiting can help curb substance use

Substance use is inextricably tied to crime, and Pennsylvania is an exception to the negative impacts of substance abuse, particularly opioids. In 2024, there were 3,341 drug overdose deaths reported in the state, with opioids responsible for 76.4% of all deaths.³⁶ Parental substance abuse is a major risk factor for healthy child development, heightening the risk of



substance abuse problems in adolescence and adulthood.³⁷

Long-term follow-up studies have demonstrated the preventive impact of home visiting on substance use. For example, children of low-income mothers who participated in NFP were less likely to report using cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana at age 12; their mothers also had less impairment from alcohol and drug use.³⁸ Similarly, in an HFA study, mothers who received home visits were less likely to engage in substance use.³⁹

Home visiting can address mental health issues

Research finds that there is a strong link between the mental health of children and their parents. Children whose parents struggle with mental illness are at greater risk for juvenile delinquency and crime in adulthood. In fact, in Pennsylvania state prisons, 37.7% of inmates are on the Mental Health Roster, and 7.5% are considered seriously mentally ill.⁴⁰

Home visiting programs can play an important role in screening for mental

illness, providing resources and referrals, and teaching coping mechanisms.⁴¹ High-quality home visiting programs have proven effective in fostering social and emotional competence in young children and their parents. For example, in an FCU study, mothers who received home visits reported reductions in depressive symptoms.⁴²

Home visiting fosters future academic success

Early education is one of the most effective ways to prevent crime.⁴³ Children who miss early educational opportunities are less likely to do well in school, putting them at greater risk for crime later in life. For example, in Pennsylvania, 31.2% of incoming state prison inmates have less than a 12th-grade education.⁴⁴ Among current inmates, 24% have less than a 12th-grade education, as some pursue further education while in prison.⁴⁵ For all Pennsylvania prisoners, the average reading level is that of middle eighth grade.⁴⁶

Home visiting programs offer early intervention that can better prepare children for school. For example, PAT studies found

“ I believe strong families are the fundamental building block of our society and that children with involved families have a greater chance of being healthy, productive, and law-abiding citizens. Parents are, of course, their children’s foremost teachers and influence.”



David W. Sunday, Jr.,
Pennsylvania Attorney General

that children who participated in the program scored higher on standardized measures of reading, math, and language in kindergarten entry and later grades, and were less likely to need special education services.^{47, 48}

Additionally, HFA studies found that children who participated in the program showed improved cognitive development at 1 and 2 years and fewer problem behaviors. These early impacts led to improved school performance, with more children in gifted programs and fewer receiving special education services.⁴⁹

Home visiting programs save money

EHS home visiting program boosted their average annual earnings by \$3,600.⁵⁰ HFA shows a positive return on investment, yielding net economic benefits (benefits minus costs) of \$5,051.⁵¹

Meanwhile, an NFP study found that the average participating family reduced their use of welfare benefits by 10% each year compared to the control group, adding up to \$14,500 in the decade following the program.⁵²

Conclusion

Pennsylvania has a strong tradition of bipartisan support for evidence-based home visiting programs dating back to the Ridge Administration in the ‘90s. To continue the recent progress made in establishing and funding a competitive grant program for providers of these programs, the General Assembly should continue to increase funding for these grants, which is allocated within the Community-Based Family Centers line item in the Department of Human Services, as well as funding for the Nurse-Family Partnership line item within DHS. Increased resources would help more families build foundations for future success and help reduce the lifelong impact of early childhood adversity. Ultimately, home visiting programs create stronger families and strengthen the fabric of our communities, thereby increasing public safety and reducing burdens on taxpayers throughout Pennsylvania.

Endnotes

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