

More education a better crime-fighter than tougher sentences: UBC study

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UBC Economics Professor Giovanni Gallipoli co-authored the study, Education and Crime over the Life Cycle, with Professor Giulio Fella of the University of London.

Photograph by: UBC, Handout

VANCOUVER -- Increasing funding to make sure more students graduate from high school would be a more effective way of reducing property crime than increasing sentences, according to a new University of B.C. study.

Improving high school graduation rates would boost income potential, consumer spending and taxes paid over the lifetime of the graduates, said UBC economics professor Giovanni Gallipoli, who co-authored the study, Education and Crime over the Life Cycle, with Giulio Fella, a professor at the University of London.

"Educational policies are extremely effective in reducing property crime," Gallipoli said in an interview Tuesday. "It increases their earning potential and employability."

Such a policy would also pay for itself, he pointed out.

"Our findings suggest that keeping kids in school, making them employable and improving their value in the labour market is nearly twice as cost-effective at reducing crime as simple incarceration," he

said. "People commit property crime for economic reasons, so providing more economic opportunities through education and employment can reduce the incentives for people to engage in criminal behaviour."

The study comes at a time when the federal Conservative government has introduced a new tough-on-crime bill, which is expected to increase prison sentences and force the government to build more prisons.

Gallipoli suggested the money would be better spent tackling the roots causes of crime, such as the lack of education and employability.

"Canada has very expensive correctional facilities," he said, noting the average annual cost of keeping a prisoner incarcerated in 2009 was \$109,699 a year, the highest of any Western country.

The study focused on property crime, including burglary, robbery and fraud, and found that such crimes are more likely to be driven by economic considerations than violent crime.

According to the researchers, high school dropouts aged 16 to 23 are most likely to commit property crime.

The researchers found that increasing prison sentences by 10 per cent reduced the crime rate by five per cent, but at an additional cost of between \$20,000 and \$30,000 annually for each prisoner.

The researchers found only small additional reductions in crime when prison sentences were increased beyond 10 per cent.

Diverting comparable tax revenues to programs that increase high school graduation would reduce crime rates by roughly nine per cent, especially when targeting children from poor families, the study found.

The benefits would be more pronounced over the long term, Gallipoli said.

The study suggested providing a subsidy of \$3,000 a year for Canadian teens to complete high school, similar to a successful U.S. program, the Quantum Opportunity Program, which provides extra support and high school graduation incentives aimed at children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Gallipoli said Canadian students from disadvantaged families could be offered cash incentives to complete school, including putting money in their bank accounts when they graduate.

"The problem these kids have is they often come from dysfunctional families," he explained. "There is no monitoring [of the student] by parents."

He said one study showed that children of parents who both dropped out of school are 16 times more likely to drop out than a child from a family where both parents completed high school.

That kind of "intergenerational persistence" increases the likelihood that the young person will get involved in property crime, he said.

nhall@vancouver.sun.com

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