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## Officials say Head Start reduces crime

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Local law enforcement leaders on Thursday touted a children's education program as a crime deterrent and urged the state's federal representatives to find more money for it.

Hundreds of youngsters in Oregon may avoid committing crimes later in life if they participate in Head Start, lawmakers said during a press conference at the Whiteaker Community Head Start Center in Eugene. The national program provides developmental services to low-income preschool children.

Officials are concerned about the lack of federal funding for the state's program, Oregon Head Start Prekindergarten.

The program served 19,000 students between 2003 and 2005. But at that level, two out of five vulnerable preschoolers don't get into classes in Oregon - about 6,500 children, officials said. A recent cut in the federal budget also could keep as many as 200 other Oregon kids out of Head Start, they added.

Every year in Oregon, more than 30,000 children are arrested, officials said.

The local news conference was prompted by release of a national survey of Head Start graduates that found that adults who attended the program as children were nearly 10 percent less likely to be arrested or charged with a crime than siblings who did not attend. Head Start services include education, socio-emotional development, physical and mental health and nutrition.

"Oregon Head Start gives children a smart start to succeed in school and in life," said Annie Soto, director of the center. "Oregon's members of Congress can ensure our children reach their fullest potential by ensuring that all eligible families can get Head Start."

Springfield police Chief Jerry Smith said Oregon needs to improve the training and education of teachers to reap the most anti-crime benefits from Head Start. Congress is considering renewal of Head Start funding that would require 50 percent of Head Start teachers to have a bachelor's degree or higher by 2011.

"Kids learning their ABC's first in Head Start will prevent them from committing their first assaults, burglaries and carjackings," Smith said. "It's just common sense to invest now in Head Start to cut crime and save Oregon lives later."

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