

Opinion by Marty Kelly
April 30, 2022 10:30 AM



**POST
BULLETIN**
POSTBULLETIN.COM ►►

This year, Minnesota state legislators are focused on making public safety improvements. All sizes and types of Minnesota communities are facing serious public safety challenges, so we need to be effectively collaborating with our state and local policymakers to prevent and stop serious crimes.

While doing that work, legislators from both political parties need to recognize something really important. The public safety problems that sheriffs like me are facing in Minnesota communities of all sizes do not begin the day crimes are committed. They have root causes that begin much earlier in life.

What are the root causes of crime? One is that too many criminals don't have a decent job to keep them away from a life of crime. That's a big one. A root cause of that root cause is that too many dropped out of school, and therefore aren't qualified for good jobs.

But the roots go deeper still. Too many dropped out of school because they started kindergarten without the foundational skills they need to keep up in K-12 classrooms, skills like phonics, vocabulary, self-control, social skills, and early math knowledge.

And they didn't have those skills because they didn't have access to the early learning programs that many families take for granted. They didn't have access to those programs because there just isn't enough state funding for programs that open those doors for them.

So, yes, Minnesota needs to invest in a stronger judicial and law enforcement infrastructure. When it comes to police officers, we need better resources, recruitment, compensation, training, and management practices. Those things are all important.

But perhaps most important of all, we need public safety solutions that are also focused on building those foundational early learning skills during the first five years of life.

On this front, Minnesota must much do better. Every year, there are 31,000 low-income Minnesota children under age 5 who can't access quality early learning programs that should be giving them the tools they need to succeed in school and life.

A program called Early Learning Scholarships helps those disadvantaged children get into quality early learning programs, where research shows they can make significant gains on those foundational kindergarten-readiness skills -- phonics, vocabulary, self-control, social skills, and early math knowledge.

Scholarships were designed to reach the most vulnerable young children that many programs miss, such as kids under age 5 experiencing homelessness, foster care, or child protection. Through no fault of their own, those children were born into situations that put them at a high risk of being unprepared for school, and ultimately getting in trouble with the law.

If Minnesota leaders want fewer crimes in the future, they need to fund Early Learning Scholarships now. Doing so will prevent billions in future taxpayer expenses related to property damage, victim supports, health care, police, prosecutors, public defenders, courts, jails, prisons, probation officers, chemical dependency treatment, and post-incarceration rehabilitation programs.

So, let's pass public safety legislation in the Minnesota Legislature this year. But let's use that legislative vehicle to get at the root cause of our public safety problems. Let us invest heavily in more pre-school educational opportunities for at-risk youth.

Marty Kelly is the Goodhue County sheriff.