

Editorial | Island Voices

Convenience store robbery reminds us of need for afterschool programs

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Y-7 Store Liq
store in May

The recent furor over repeated robberies of a Kalihi convenience store, allegedly

perpetrated by several teenagers, has focused needed attention on juvenile crime.

Because the crimes were so gratuitously violent, and because some of the subsequent commentary has been racially tinged — which is deeply disappointing — it's been hard to move beyond the outrage to focus on the larger problem and its possible solutions.

We can't know what might have changed the paths of the young men we see on the videotapes of the robberies. But we know from years of research that, for many children and youth, after-school programs are a critical tool in the effort to prevent juvenile crime.

A variety of studies have found that afterschool programs can help keep kids from criminal behavior.

For one thing, afterschool programs keep them constructively engaged during the time of day when they're most likely to be involved in crime — the hours immediately after the end of the regular school day and before parents get home from work. More than that, afterschool programs can give children a sense of connection to the children and adults they encounter there, to activities that capture their imagination, to the community organizations and businesses that partner with afterschool providers to create a richer understanding of nature, science, technology, and the daily life of the community.

Programs that engage children when they are young can help keep them on the path to success in school and in life. But they're most effective when the programs provide consistent positive influence in their lives.

Unfortunately, for a lot of teens, afterschool opportunities dwindle just as they reach the age when they are likely to get into trouble of all kinds.

Hawaii has a good track record providing afterschool programs for students of elementary school age, but we're lagging when it comes to middle school and high school students. According to data from the Afterschool Alliance, about 40 percent of Hawaii elementary school students are in afterschool programs, compared to 16 percent of middle schoolers and just 10 percent of high school students.

Some people think that afterschool programs in middle school and high school aren't as vital because the children are old enough to take care of themselves. However, even the most responsible teenagers are likely to face all kinds of temptations and opportunities for inappropriate behavior — not just crime, but alcohol, drugs and sex, as well. And even teens who are able to safely navigate that minefield would still benefit from the opportunities afterschool programs offer. They'd be safe; they'd learn new skills; they'd practice working in teams; they'd build relationships; and they'd get to know their communities.

If nothing else, a little arithmetic should convince us to invest in afterschool programs. It would cost taxpayers about \$1,000 per year per student to provide afterschool programs. As it is, we spend \$240,000 per youth per year at the Hawaii Youth Correctional Facility. So if afterschool programs managed to keep one youth out of the correctional facility, the money saved (\$240,000) could fund afterschool program for up to 240 youths. And that doesn't even factor in all the other benefits of afterschool — economic, educational, and social.

I've been working with children in afterschool programs for the better part of 10 years, mostly at the elementary level. It broke my heart to see the video of the Kalihi robbery, not just because I was outraged at the violence, but because it was such a precise record of the moment the perpetrators wasted whatever opportunities they had in front of them.

We can do something to prevent tragedies like this one in the future by investing in afterschool programs for middle school and high school students today.