

Low taxes, low quality of life [Edmonton Journal editorial, 2/22/07]
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American children in districts with the lowest taxes tend to be sicker, more often sexually abused, and more likely to run afoul of the law, according to a major study conducted by the U.S.-based Every Child Matters Education Fund. Such children are also likely to be less employable as adults, the researchers found.

Conducted by Michael Petit, author of *Homeland Insecurity: American Children at Risk* and a former commissioner of human services in Maine, the study shows that low taxes and corresponding low spending by governments on prenatal and postnatal care, and on pre-school and public education, correlate directly with poorer health, education and delinquency rates.

It would be easy for Canadians to dismiss the study, since a major component of the poor outcomes can be traced to the lack of public health care. The number of people living in the U.S. without health insurance has risen dramatically since 2000, from 39.8 million to 46.6 million. That leads to poor pre- and postnatal care for uninsured mothers and children. Births to unwed teen mothers also occur at a rate nearly three times that of Canada, 4.9 per cent to 1.9 per cent. And, not surprisingly, it is within this population that the worst developmental problems are concentrated.

But Petit said it's not just a question of health insurance. Other forms of social spending also tend to get cut when governments buy into the "gospel of wealth" and begin slashing taxes, the very kinds of programs that were targeted in Alberta budgets during the Klein era. Petit said child care, foster care, social workers, preschool programs and physical activity for young children are also critical in creating healthy, productive children. And where these programs have been cut by government, private and not-for-profit sectors have not been able to fill the gap.

"(The study) dispels ideologically driven myths that government-supported programs are ineffectual and that taxes are evil," Petit said. "It shows that some states do much better for children than others."

Petit's book is aimed at injecting children's issues into the 2008 U.S. presidential debate. But there are important lessons for Canadians to learn as well.

First, despite steady conservative assertions that our single-payer public health system is inefficient and in some ways deficient to that of our neighbour, the benefits to our youngest and most vulnerable are undeniable.

And second, jurisdictions that offer the lowest taxes, even if those cuts are directed to lower-income families, have a correspondingly higher incidence of health and behavioural problems, and significantly lower lifetime employment prospects.