



## Gangbuster

### Preventing gang membership beats building jails

November 27, 2007

The nation's quest to get a handle on gangs is going down two divergent paths. One involves expanding the traditional law-and-order, zero-tolerance, slap-'em-in-jail approach that's at the heart of a congressional bill introduced by California Sen. Dianne Feinstein. The other, a community-wide approach that concentrates on prevention and early intervention, is being pushed by Rep. Bobby Scott. The Newport News congressman offers an alternative to Feinstein's bill, his called the Youth PROMISE Act, a short version of a long official name of Youth Prison Reduction through Opportunities, Mentoring, Intervention, Support and Education Act.

The two approaches don't have to be mutually exclusive. Scott's PROMISE, calling for a collaborative effort between law enforcement, mental health providers and community organizations, would serve as an adjunct to existing law enforcement measures targeting gangs. The bill aims to reduce the social and financial costs of putting young people in jail. It would separate the wheat from the chaff by focusing not on the small number of hard-core gang members, but on the large number of gang members who are on the fringes, and provide support for positive alternatives to gang membership.

In taking a more comprehensive tack, Scott's bill offers a more effective strategy for achieving results. It distinguishes between the criminal and the needy, and it attempts to divert troubled youth from criminal activity. This approach supplements law enforcement by involving a wide community — educators, youth specialists, community organizations, families, employers and faith-based organizations — in steering would-be thugs in more constructive directions.

That's an expensive proposition, and even granting that prevention makes far better economic sense than dealing with the consequences of increased crime, expensive propositions require rigorous accountability. As proposed by Scott, PROMISE's price tag would be \$2.9 billion annually for the localities most beset by gang activity and for a new, nationwide database of proven strategies.

With that kind of money involved — as much as \$10 million to any one community — scrupulous programs to impose accountability and measure success will be essential. Such a hefty upfront investment in prevention demands close scrutiny of where the money goes and the results it brings.

Scott's bill has the endorsement of the National Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention

Coalition, a group of 80 national youth advocacy groups. It's consistent with the recommendation coming out of this summer's report of the Justice Policy Institute, urging support for anti-gang programs operated by health and human services agencies. New York City's success in emphasizing job training, mentoring and recreational programs as a way to beat gangs offers a model of prevention and intervention.

Scott's Youth PROMISE Act takes an optimistic view of the prospects for reducing youth involvement in gangs. Though stringent law enforcement must remain a priority in tackling hard-core gang activity, his bill offers a way out for troubled youth through ratcheted-up community support. It's a better idea — and cheaper — than just accepting more crime and paying to build and operate more jails.

Copyright © 2007, [Newport News, Va., Daily Press](#)