



OPENING STATEMENT
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by
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Youth Violence and Gang Interventions that Work
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Statement

Good morning Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today and to be a part of this panel.

As part of my testimony, I provided the subcommittee with a Chapin Hall Issue Brief that I wrote three months ago with my friend and colleague, Dr. Howard Snyder of the National Center for Juvenile Justice.

In that report, titled "Too Soon to Tell: Deciphering Recent Trends in Youth Violence," we reviewed the past 30 years of data about youth crime, including national arrest estimates based on the FBI's juvenile arrest data for 2005, which is still the most recent year for which national data are available.

When we looked at trends through 2005, we found that it is too soon to predict a national increase in violent crime.

Overall, violent crime remains at a 30-year low.

According to the crime victimization surveys conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice, an American's chances of being the victim of a violent crime are still lower than at any point since the 1970s.

Violent youth crime has increased at the national level, but only slightly.

Between 2004 and 2005, the violent crime arrest rate for youth under age 18 grew by just one percent.

The total increase amounted to 12 new violent arrests for every 100,000 juveniles in the population.

This is about one-twentieth of what it would take for violent crime to return to the level of 1994, the most recent peak in violent crime.

In other words, we would have to see the same increase for 19 more years before we would return the scale of violence seen just a little more than 10 years ago.

Obviously, we shouldn't wait 19 years to respond to rising crime rates, but it is too soon to characterize the recent data as a national trend.

What the data do suggest is that we have a number of cities, and neighborhoods within cities that are starting to experience rising violence.

The question for policymakers is, "how should we respond to these increases?"

At some point in every conversation about violent youth crime, someone makes the observation that to truly ensure public safety we have to intervene earlier with youthful offenders.

We cannot wait until a young person is already involved in serious and violent crime and then try to stop it.

Waiting is not only ineffective; it is expensive.

I have heard this throughout my 25-year career in juvenile justice. I am sure everyone here has heard it. Many of you have probably said it at one time or another.

Why don't we ever seem to make good on this promise?

Why are we still unable to intervene effectively with young people as soon they become involved in crime?

I don't believe it is a matter of resources — that we can't afford to do it.

We have decades of research showing us that high-quality, early intervention actually saves money.

I think we fail to intervene early and effectively with youthful offenders because we continue to base our policies and programs on the wrong theories.

For some reason, we seem to believe the best way to change the behavior of a 14-year-old is to use fear and domination.

We use the threat of punishment to instill fear and then a series of increasing restrictions to establish dominance over youth.

Certainly, there are some young offenders for whom this is the only feasible approach, but fortunately that number is very small. For the vast majority of young people involved in crime, this is simply the wrong approach.

We also apparently believe that young people who commit crimes are defective, and that they need to be fixed by professional therapists, social workers, and psychiatrists.

Much of what passes for intervention in the juvenile justice system today is based on a deficit model of adolescent behavior.

Whether it is family therapy, drug treatment, or anger management training, our first response to young offenders seems to involve fixing their pathologies.

Again, for some youth, therapy may be exactly what they need, but for many juveniles (I would argue most), this is just bad theory.

Criminologists will tell you that all people are capable of committing crime, given the right circumstances.

The impulse to take advantage of other people, even to hurt other people, is nearly universal.

The critical question is not,
"why are some young people criminals?"

The critical question is,
"why are most young people not criminals?"

Researchers have started to answer this question by identifying the "protective factors" and "social assets" that reduce a young person's chances of getting caught up in crime.

We are learning that youth with positive and supportive relationships are less likely to engage in crime, violence, and substance abuse.

We are also finding that being rewarded for learning and for trying out new skills helps to keep young people attached to conventional social institutions, such as family, school, and work.

And, we are discovering that, just like anyone else, young people value their communities when their communities value them.

In other words, youth are less likely to get involved in crime when they participate in community affairs, and when they have a voice in public dialogue.

All of these lessons are now known as "positive youth development" or the "youth development approach."

Using the youth development approach with young offenders makes obvious, common sense. It is essentially an effort to import the benefits of a middle-class upbringing into high-risk and distressed neighborhoods.

The youth development approach suggests that even poor and disadvantaged youth should experience the social bonding that comes from having an adult mentor, from knowing success in school, and from being involved in civic activity, sports, and music.

If we had a juvenile justice system that brought these assets into the lives of more young people, we might be able to head off the next wave of rising youth violence and make our communities safer.

Certainly, we will always need a justice system that deals aggressively with truly dangerous youth, but we should also want a system that responds effectively to young offenders even before they are violent.

Developing this sort of juvenile justice system is hard work, but thankfully, research shows that it is also cost-effective. Early intervention pays.

One strategy that we know does not pay off - in fact, the most expensive form of juvenile justice - is "delay and punish" — where we put off doing anything serious and meaningful with a young offender until he or she does something truly horrible.

Yet, that is still the most common form of juvenile justice system today.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to our discussion.

The views expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the employees, administrators, or board members of the University of Chicago or Chapin Hall Center for Children.