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EDITORIAL

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The Wrong Approach to Gangs

No city has failed to control its street gangs more spectacularly than Los Angeles. The region has six times as many gangs and double the number of gang members as a quarter-century ago, even after spending countless billions on the problem. But unless Congress changes course quickly, the policies that seem to have made the gang problem worse in Los Angeles could become enshrined as national doctrine in a so-called gang control bill making its way through both the House and Senate.

This issue is underscored in a study released this week by the Justice Policy Institute in Washington. It shows that police dragnets that criminalize whole communities and land large numbers of nonviolent children in jail don't reduce gang involvement or gang violence. Law enforcement tools need to be used in a targeted way — and directed at the 10 percent or so of gang members who commit violent crimes. The main emphasis needs to be on proven prevention programs that change children's behavior by getting them involved in community and school-based programs that essentially keep them out of gangs.

Prevention programs have worked extraordinarily well in New York, where street gangs ceased to be a big problem decades ago. But these prevention programs are difficult to sell in Congress, where lawmakers like to show the folks back home how tough they are on crime, even if it means embracing failed policies. By some analyses, the gang control bill circulating in Congress commits nearly 70 percent of the government's resources to policing and only about a third to prevention.

Proponents of the bill are assuring the rest of us that the statute will be modified to provide more money in support of research-based prevention

programs and less for the failed policies of the past. But this bill is shaping up to be a disaster — a policy that would do little about the gang problem where it in fact exists, while filling the jails to bursting with children who would have left the gangs on their own in a year or two. Once jailed, these children will inevitably become hardened criminals and spend the rest of their lives in and out of prison.