

Statement of the Honorable John Conyers, Jr.
for the Hearing on H.R. 1064, the "Youth Prison Reduction Through Opportunities, Mentoring,
Intervention, Support and Education Act" or the "Youth PROMISE Act"
Before the Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security
Wednesday, July 15, 2009, at 3:00 p.m.
2141 Rayburn House Office Building

Today's hearing will focus on the Youth Prison Reduction Through Opportunities, Mentoring, Intervention, Support and Education Act, also known as the "Youth PROMISE Act". This Act, which was introduced by Crime Subcommittee Chair, Bobby Scott and Congressman Mike Castle, is designed to address the problems of gang crime and violence by preventing the problems *before* they start.

This bill is based upon extensive evidence and research that demonstrate the effectiveness of promising and evidence-based prevention and intervention resources in preventing and reducing youth gang crime and violence. The research underlying the Youth PROMISE Act reveals that prioritizing prevention and intervention makes sense from a public safety, economic and criminal justice perspective, which is why I am one of the 225 co-sponsors of the Youth PROMISE Act.

Let me highlight these three reasons why I believe prevention and intervention resources play a critical role in addressing the serious problem of youth gang crime and violence in this country. First, the Youth PROMISE Act makes sense from a pro-active public safety perspective. Extensive scientific research on youth violence, juvenile and criminal justice reveals that intervention programs for youth who are involved in, or at risk of becoming involved in gangs, crime and delinquency can significantly prevent and reduce crime. By redirecting youth away from gang involvement and on to paths of productive membership and participation in society, effective prevention and intervention programs reduce violence and help make communities safer. Experts agree that such programs as teen pregnancy prevention, pre-natal care, new parent training, nurse home visits, Head Start, quality education, after-school programs, job training, summer jobs and recreation, and college scholarships help to prevent and reduce crime, in a cost-effective manner.

That brings me to my second point. Investment in proven prevention makes sense from an economic perspective. It's clear that an investment in prevention yields significant cost-savings through reduced law enforcement, criminal justice, and incarceration costs as well as social welfare expenditures. Research also reveals that these programs are most effective when provided in the context of a coordinated, collaborative local strategy involving law enforcement, social services and other local public and private entities working with children identified as at risk of involvement in the criminal justice system. The Youth PROMISE Act will achieve precisely that kind of collaboration.

Third, by infusing resources into the most challenged communities in this country, the Youth PROMISE Act promotes important juvenile and criminal justice reform, which will move us in the right direction, and away from the flawed approach we have adopted for too long toward youth gang violence in this country. For more than a decade, this flawed approach focused on incarcerating too many vulnerable children and youth who are living in our most challenged communities, which, in turn, has contributed to widening racial and ethnic disparities in our juvenile and criminal justice systems. In an effort to appear "tough on crime," we have minimized the importance of prevention and intervention, and instead prioritized crackdowns and policies that translate into expanded police and prosecutorial power.

While more arrests, more trials and more incarceration may have seemed logical or at least politically expedient at the time, research now shows that we cannot "arrest our way out of the problem" of gang crime and violence. Prioritizing enforcement and incarceration over prevention and intervention can inflict tremendous harm upon the very communities elected leaders are trying to protect. Far too many of our poorer, urban communities throughout this country produce staggeringly low high school graduation rates, especially for male students of color. Meanwhile, our nation has the highest incarceration rates in the world, with more than 2.3 million people behind bars, many of whom are poor and minorities.

Indeed, 1 in 9 African American men between the ages of 20 to 34 in this country are in jail or prison at this very moment. Earlier this year, there was a film screening of the film, *Crips and Bloods: Made in America*, for Members of Congress that I watched. The film offered a powerful depiction of the gang problem in this country, and the toll gang violence takes on our most challenged and vulnerable communities. These communities are crying out for effective prevention and intervention resources to build hope, provide positive alternatives to gangs, and revitalize neighborhoods. The Youth PROMISE Act will provide these resources so that ultimately crime will be reduced, vulnerable communities are made safer and healthier, all at reduced expenditure of taxpayer dollars.

I thank Chairman Bobby Scott for his leadership on this important bill and for holding this timely hearing. I look forward to hearing more from today's witnesses about the Youth PROMISE Act, the issues underlying the bill, and what Congress can do to provide solutions to the problem of youth gang crime and violence.