

Youth Violence Summit

Empowering Communities to Combat Gang Crime

The Youth PROMISE Act

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Congressman Scott, thank you for the opportunity to participate in this Summit and share my thoughts about the most effective strategies to reduce juvenile crime and gang violence in this country. I bring to this Summit 16 years of experience as a local prosecutor, 7 years as the Administrator of the Federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in the U.S. Department of Justice, and an equal amount of time as the President of the Child Welfare League of America.

In my current position at Georgetown University's Public Policy Institute I have brought the lessons learned from my past experience to a program designed to help public agency officials institute reforms in their state and local juvenile justice systems. Those lessons can be succinctly stated: that it is never too early and almost never too late to intervene to prevent juvenile delinquency.

As a prosecutor in Miami, Florida, from 1977 until 1993 I worked in a jurisdiction that provided me the opportunity to both work on cases that involved allegations of child abuse and neglect and ones alleging juvenile delinquency. The records I reviewed in preparing for court revealed a pathway that many young people followed into juvenile crime and gang activity that often started with allegations of maltreatment, or status offenses such as truancy, ungovernability, and running away.

My experience as a practitioner in Miami was reflected in subsequent years through a growing body of research about the

pathway that young people follow into crime; specifically the federally supported research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency conducted by David Huizinga, Rolf Loeber and Terry Thornberry.

This research informed practitioners and policy makers that prior to entering the juvenile justice system our young people put off warning signs, for an average period of time of seven years. Seven years of opportunities to address the young persons needs and prevent them from committing a crime.

Too often, however, we ignore these warning signs (truancy, running away, misbehavior in school, being the victim of child maltreatment....), and instead focus most of our efforts to addressing crime after it has occurred. As a former prosecutor I surely understand the need for this approach to public safety and attacking gang related crime, but it must be one used in balance with a strong effort inclusive of prevention programs.

This is what the Youth PROMISE Act provides: a balance to our crime fighting efforts; one that creates a more comprehensive and coherent strategy to reducing juvenile crime; one that also achieves better outcomes for our young people.

It provides positive youth development opportunities, supports efforts to keep kids engaged in their schools, addresses family dysfunction, and provides services and treatment for our young people at the first signs of trouble. This is the remedy that we need and the one the Youth PROMISE Act helps to provide.

This is also what the research tells us is effective. When we talk about evidence based programs or practices, we are talking about efforts such as Functional Family Therapy, Multi Systemic Therapy, Mentoring Programs such as those sponsored by BBBS, and after school programs like those run by BGCA – the types of programs that the Youth PROMISE Act would support.

As a former prosecutor and a tax payer, I can tell you that for every dollar we put into law enforcement and juvenile correctional programs, we should match it with two dollars supporting programs such the Nurse Family Partnership that not only prevents child abuse and neglect, but also reduces serious juvenile offending by 50%. We should also make equal matching investments in enhanced preschool programs that help our children succeed in school, stay connected to pro-social activities, and develop the life skills they need to grow into law abiding citizens within our communities.

It came as no surprise to me that David Olds, the researcher behind the Nurse Family Partnership program, also known as Nurse Home Visiting, was chosen as the recipient of the Stockholm Award this past year – the International Criminology Award, for his achievement in fighting crime. So my clarion call is for others to see the wisdom of these early investments and for them to then call

for a more balanced approach to fighting crime and gang violence in this country; for others to share in the vision and wisdom that is contained in this legislation.

I will close with two quick observations. The wisdom of the approach taken by the Youth Promise Act mirrors the recent child welfare legislation passed by Congress and recently signed into law by the President. The law, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act looks to prevention and working with children and families in the community, rather than institutional placements. So Congress has already seen the wisdom of “going upstream” in attacking these social issues. It needs to act in a similar vein in regard to the YPA.

And finally, none of this federal juvenile justice related legislation should be considered without also ensuring a strong federal leadership office within the DOJ. The OJJDP is due to be reauthorized this year and I hope that this reauthorization will be

accomplished with the intent not just to reauthorize the Act, but to strengthen it and the Office that the juvenile justice field looks to for guidance.

The Youth PROMISE Act, in tandem with a reauthorized and reinvigorated JJDP and Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, will provide us with some very powerful tools to better serve our most challenged and challenging youth.

Thank you, Mr. Scott. I look forward to the opportunity to answer any questions and to working with you on these important matters.