

# Think prevention first

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The proliferation of gangs in American cities has led to calls for new federal laws and tougher penalties to stem gang violence. Locking up more gang members may deplete their ranks, but only until the next teenager becomes the newest recruit. It's the wrong approach to the real solution, which is keeping youngsters from joining a gang in the first place.

We question the need for new laws because there are few crimes unique to gangs. Their members - no matter their colors - murder, steal, sell drugs, extort money, beat up rivals and intimidate witnesses. Prosecutors in Maryland and elsewhere have successfully used federal laws to convict and imprison notorious gang members, but what's lacking is a sustained public effort to protect kids from the lure of gangs.

Federal legislation pending in Congress would commit \$1.1 billion for law enforcement and prevention efforts to attack gang problems that are consuming manpower and money in cities as diverse as Baltimore and Boise. The Senate bill, sponsored by Dianne Feinstein of California, would criminalize gang activity that is already a crime and outlaw recruitment for the purposes of committing a crime for the gang.

While the Feinstein bill provides \$447 million for prevention, its thrust is enforcement. But keeping kids out of gangs in the first place would save millions of dollars now spent to arrest, convict and imprison them as lawbreakers.

Experts say that kids who join gangs are looking for the family support or stable home they lack. What's needed are comprehensive programs in and out of school that nurture kinship and camaraderie among youths and, more obviously, stronger families. Baltimore, like other cities, must rely on a patchwork of programs to serve kids at risk for gang membership. The Feinstein bill would increase funding for prevention programs, but the effort should be robust enough to underwrite an extensive campaign to counter gang life.

The legislation rightly recognizes the increasing problem of witness intimidation and dedicates \$270 million to combat it. Rep. Elijah E. Cummings of Maryland has been a forceful advocate for this aid because of Baltimore's experience with witnesses who have been victimized.

When House members take up the Feinstein bill and other anti-gang measures, they should remember that tougher enforcement alone leads to only one place - prison.