



Investing in Our Nation's Youth to Help Disrupt the 'Cradle to Prison Pipeline'

By Rep. Robert C. "Bobby" Scott

Our nation is currently at a critical crossroads with regard to crime policy. When it comes to crime policy, we have a choice – we can reduce crime or we can play politics.

For far too long, Congress has chosen to play politics by enacting "tough on crime" slogans such as "three strikes and you're out" or "you do the adult crime, you do the adult time." Although these policies sound appealing, their impact ranges from a negligible reduction in crime to *increased* crime.

These slogan-based policies have created what experts at the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) call the "Cradle to Prison Pipeline." In a recent report, CDF identified various contributing factors, including poverty, a struggling education system, and an unresponsive, punitive juvenile justice system. The results are staggering. The report found that for boys born in 2001, black boys have a 1 in 3 chance of spending time in prison, while white boys have a 1 in 17 chance.

National prison statistics also reflect the pipeline's construction. Since 1970, the number of individuals incarcerated in the U.S. has risen from about 300,000 to more than 2 million. This makes the United States the world's leading incarcerator by far with an average rate seven times the international average rate and up to 40 times the international average in some inner-city communities.

Yet Congress is currently considering anti-gang legislation that continues this failed policy in addressing gang activity. These bills contain several particularly troubling components such as creating new gang crimes and increasing the number of crimes that make juveniles eligible for life without parole. They also would target minorities and

increase already high minority incarceration rates.

At the same time, the evidence is clear that to reduce crime, we must invest in research-based prevention and intervention programs aimed at at-risk youth. Programs such as teen pregnancy prevention, prenatal care, new parent training, nurse home visits, Head Start and other early childhood education programs, quality education, after-school programs, summer recreation and jobs, guaranteed college scholar-

In order to effectively reduce crime and dismantle the Cradle to Prison Pipeline, I introduced the Youth PROMISE Act, which puts evidence-based approaches to crime reduction into legislative practice. This Act would mobilize community leaders ranging from law enforcement officials to educators to health and mental health agencies.

ships, and job-training programs work cost-effectively to reduce crime.

In order to effectively reduce crime and dismantle the Cradle to Prison

Pipeline, I introduced the Youth PROMISE Act, which puts evidence-based approaches to crime reduction into legislative practice.

This Act would mobilize community leaders ranging from law enforcement officials to educators to health and mental health agencies.

These leaders would come together to form a PROMISE Coordinating Council that would identify the community's needs with regard to youth and gang violence and develop a plan to address these needs. The community would then be eligible for a grant to implement evidence-based strategies based on a comprehensive, locally tailored plan to dismantle the Cradle to Prison Pipeline. The result of the Youth PROMISE Act will be to help communities get children out of the Cradle to Prison Pipeline and into a Cradle to College Pipeline.

It is important to note that the Youth PROMISE Act would not stop or impede the current enforcement of laws; the criminal justice system will continue to arrest, convict and incarcerate those who commit crimes.

The Youth PROMISE Act would, however, equip communities with tools to effectively prevent and reduce crime before it occurs.

I am hopeful that Congress will move forward with the Youth PROMISE Act this year so students in our next generation will be more likely to receive a college degree than serve time in jail. ■

Rep. Robert C. "Bobby" Scott represents the 3rd Congressional District of Virginia. He is chairman of the House Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security.