

Tuesday, May 26, 2009

Se:



L O U D O U N
I N D E P E N D E N T

[NEWS](#) [SPORTS](#) [EDUCATION](#) [PEOPLE](#) [BUSINESS](#) [TRAFFIC](#)

[BREAKING NEWS](#) [EDITORIAL](#) [THE DARTBOARD](#) [CRIME REPORT](#)

Is Suppression Enough?

Congress Takes a Fresh Approach to the Gang Issue—the Truth.

By [AMY BURNS](#) Thursday, 21 May 2009

[Home](#) / [News](#)

Rate This

Average: 3 (2 votes)

Bookmark this post

[Delicious](#)

[Digg](#)

[Facebook](#)

[Google](#)

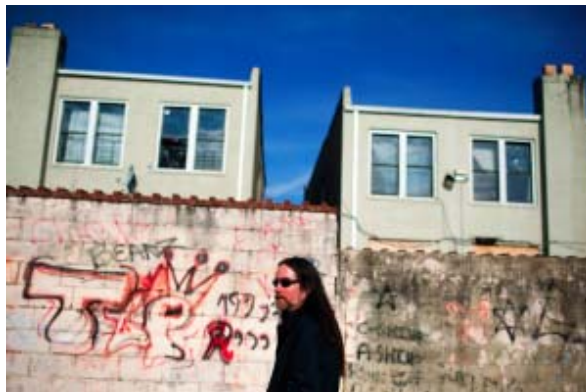
[Technorati](#)

Author

Amy Burns



[Facebook](#)



There is a general consensus among law enforcement when it comes to naming names—don't. The theory behind it is simple—naming the gangs and giving them credit for their crimes glorifies the gangs. The problem with this simple theory is clear—it strips the community of the one weapon it has to fight with—knowledge.

Perhaps the most comprehensive and creative legislation pending in Congress is the “Youth Promise Act,” sponsored by U.S. Rep. Robert “Bobby” Scott, a Democrat from Virginia’s third district.

The Act aims to reduce the number of juveniles facing stiff jail time—with big price tags for taxpayers—by intervening with high-risk youth before the gangs do. The bill establishes a National Research Center for Proven Juvenile Justice Practices that would provide local Promise Coordinating Councils (PCC) and the public with up-to-date research about “evidence-based practices” related to both intervention and prevention of gang participation. Institutions of higher education would serve as regional research partners with PCCs, community organizations and at-risk youth. A Center for Youth-Oriented Policing would empower youth by encouraging



[Subscribe to RSS](#)

positive interaction between law enforcement and troubled juveniles, and those on the bubble.

The bill avoids the suppression tactics that have failed in gang-ridden communities like Los Angeles. The Youth Promise Act is not based on conjecture or hypotheses—this legislation gathers the recommendations of researchers, analysts, practitioners, social workers, and law enforcement officials. Resources provide communities dealing with growing gang activity with funding to form local PCCs with representatives from the courts, schools, healthcare community, and faith-based organizations.

In an interview with the Loudoun Independent, Scott discussed the fundamentals of the Youth Promise Act, “This is a holistic approach to gangs. There is significant evidence showing suppression increases gang membership—it does not reduce it. If kids aren’t already in gangs when you send them to prison they’ll be in before they get out.” Scott continues, dismissing credit for the idea. “The evidence is clear, it is not complicated. All point to this model as the model to reduce crime. Some things score better in political polls. This isn’t it. Either you’re playing politics or you’re reducing crime.” Richmond went from 17 murders the year before to two the year after the program began. Boston chose the approach after 12 children were killed in one year. After the plan was implemented, Boston went three years without a child killed.

“When you talk about a crime policy, anything designed to lock up more people, cannot make sense. You have to prevent crime before it happens. It is what all the research shows.”

Scott is quick to defend the program’s \$500 million price tag. Addressing the financial side of the issue he notes, “If you don’t care about the humanity of it, care about the financial arithmetic. When Pennsylvania used this approach, they spent \$60 million and saved \$300 million. There is no question you would save more money than you spend. The first number you want to put on the table is how much money you are already spending. Los Angeles is spending \$5 billion. Imagine if you used that money to give 10,000 children a summer job for starters?

“Third and fifth grade reading scores,” Scott shares, “are used to ascertain how many prison beds a community will need in the next ten years. This programs funding can go to much needed literacy programs instead of funding incarceration.”

Scott urges each community to take a custom approach and to identify their areas specific needs.

A Rebel with a Cause

“The Youth Promise Act” mirrors a program implemented in High Point, North Carolina featured in the February 9, 2009 edition of Newsweek. David Kennedy is the atypical brainchild to a new approach in combating gang activity—taking to the streets. In an excerpt from the Newsweek piece, author Suzanne Smalley describes the essence of David Kennedy and his approach to gang warfare:

“Kennedy is a rail-thin white man with weary eyes, a goatee and hair down his back; he resembles country singer Willie Nelson. He has never been a cop and, as one friend says, he “looks more like a biker than a professor.” He has no Ph.D. or masters in criminology; he studied philosophy as a Swarthmore College undergrad, but his



Follow us on Twitter

Get e-mail updates

See also

[Belmont Plantation is Steeped in History](#)

[Representatives Fight Transfer of Guantanamo Bay Prisoners to VA](#)

[Oei and Stone Speak Out on Legal Vindication](#)

[New Oncology Unit at Inova Loudoun](#)

[Counting Every Penny](#)

[Park View Teacher On Leave](#)

[The Famous Stone Bridge on Broad Run](#)

[Part IX: Brief Lifetime of the Village of Willard](#)

[Daysville—Gone But Not Forgotten](#)

[Leesburg Police Offer Safety Tips for Walkers and Joggers](#)

proposal has drawn the attention of police and U.S. Justice Department officials. But in the hotel ballroom packed with police and U.S. Justice Department officials, everyone was listening—because Kennedy is the only person who has ever come up with a consistently viable (and cost-effective) strategy for helping the inner city with its chronic blight and shame, the dope dealer on the corner.”

In 2007, Kennedy testified before the U.S. House of Representatives Judiciary Subcommittee citing, “...Getting it right means a new way of thinking and acting.”

Kennedy's approach came from his research background as a professor for Harvard's Kennedy School of Government when he spent years, according to Newsweek, on the streets of Houston, Los Angeles, and Boston. What Kennedy discovered was a division between community and law enforcement made worse as police invaded neighborhoods instead of connecting with them. Authorities punished many for the sins of the few—and all felt violated. In 2004, Smalley writes, Kennedy convinced law enforcement to fight the war strategically.

“They rounded up some young dealers; showed a videotape of them dealing drugs; and readied cases, set for indictment, that would have meant hard time in prison. They then let the kids go,” she wrote.

The police worked directly with offenders and their families. Role models became visible—and accessible—to those willing to learn. If the second chance was wasted by youth in the program—they returned for the same hard time they initially avoided. According to reports, police won back the trust and respect from the same residents who lived in fear of them. Renewed trust meant open communications lines and increased cooperation.

The program had its detractors. Initially criticized as a “hug-a-thug” by police, the program gained respect as its success became more apparent. In four years, High Point, North Carolina had successfully eliminated street corner drug dealers. Hard statistics proved the approach worked, according to Newsweek—comparing numbers to the previous four years, they found a 57 percent drop in violent crime in the specified area. Kennedy is now a professor at New York's John Jay College of Criminal Justice and has continued his extensive research.

The Youth Promise Act remains in the first step of the legislative process, according to www.govtrack.us, and is now under review by the following committees: House Judiciary, House Education and Labor and the Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities, House Energy and Commerce, and the House Financial Services. Although most bills fail to ever reach general debate, the bill stands at 109 co-sponsors, only two of which are Republicans.

“Gang Abatement and Prevention Act of 2009”

Another piece of national gang legislation pending in Congress, sponsored by Senator Diane Feinstein (D-CA), is the “Gang Abatement and Prevention Act of 2009.” The bill aims to “increase and enhance law enforcement resources committed to investigation and prosecution of violent gangs, to deter and punish violent gang crime, to protect law-abiding citizens and communities from violent criminals, to revise and enhance criminal penalties for violent crimes, and to expand and improve gang prevention programs.” This bill, also in the first step of the legislative process, has been referred to the Senate Judiciary.

The bills stiff penalties produce cries of “vague,” “overbroad” and “unconstitutional” from heritage.org. The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, notes “federalizing yet another set of state and local crimes is...almost certain to accelerate the ongoing erosion of state and local law enforcement’s primary role in combating common street crime.” It also convicts the bill of “covering too much conduct and too many persons,” noting the bill does not distinguish between “Los Angeles’s notorious Crips and any group of five people involved in a legitimate business in downtown L.A...”

The language renders the bill impractical and difficult to apply without major pushback.

Wolf’s Response

U.S. Rep. Frank Wolf (R-10) has disclosed to the Loudoun Independent that he is looking at the Youth Promise Act, but is concerned about the price tag. Wolf has been in the forefront of gang initiatives, creating the Northern Virginia Regional Gang Task Force in 2003. Funded by Congress, the Task Force is multi-jurisdictional and includes the chief law enforcement from each jurisdiction and state as well as federal law enforcement officers charged with enforcement. Its goals include enforcement by “developing and sharing intelligence while using a coordinated response to gang activity and crimes...” Previously restricted by boundaries, those limitations are stripped from police. Prosecutors are also an active part of the task force.

Education projects operating within the Northern Virginia Gang Task Force include bilingual outreach materials, summer camps and mentoring after-school programs. With partners that include the Federal Bureau of Investigation and three million dollars in additional funding, Wolf has been a steady and consistent presence in the war on gangs. Respected by law enforcement and his constituency, Wolf pressed for gang initiatives when many officials and law enforcement adopted the “ignorance is bliss” mentality.

While Wolf has voiced possible support for the Youth Promise Act, it would appear that he favors gang prevention using a multi-pronged approach.

Wolf remarked that, “The task force operating here in the region has been successful because it has taken a three-pronged approach: suppression; prevention; and education. Coordination is key. Working as a region, where local, state and federal law enforcement and others all share resources, also is critical.”

Approaches adopted on a local, state or national level—whether federally funded initiatives or grass-roots programs—a back-to-the-basics approach has now been adopted across the country. The direct approach, through both actions and discussions, allow parents and youth empowerment by providing the knowledge needed for prevention.

Tags: [18th Street](#), [Abatement](#), [bill](#), [Boston](#), [Congress](#), [Congressman](#), [Crime](#), [Criminal Justice](#), [Crips](#), [CUNY](#), [David Kennedy](#), [Democrat](#), [Diane Feinstein](#), [FBI](#), [Federal Bureau Investigation](#), [Frank Wolf](#), [Gang](#), [Gang Abatement and Prevention Act](#), [gangs](#), [Government](#), [Harvard](#), [Harvard's](#), [Heritage Foundation](#), [High Point](#), [Houston](#), [hug-a-thug](#),

John Jay College, Kennedy, legislation, Los Angeles, Loudoun, MS-13, New York, News, Newsweek, North Carolina, Northern, Northern Virginia Regional Task Force, Police, policy, Prevention Act, Professor, Representative, Republican, Robert Scott, School, Senator, tenth district, third, United States, Youth Promise Act

Comments

Anonymous (not verified) on Thu, 2009-05-21 08:15

This is a great plan - but if Loudoun and the sheriff's dept, had admitted there was a problem 10+years ago- they wouldn't be dealing with this problem now!!

[reply](#)

Alexandra Trahos-Koussis (not verified) on Thu, 2009-05-21 09:40

If we work with the gangs not to sound old fashioned, "Are you sure we are not playing with fire?" Then again can we trust them and they (gang members) trust us. I guess a cliché would be a catch 22. Just seems that the world views life as cavalier these days.

[reply](#)

Ed Myers (not verified) on Thu, 2009-05-21 19:14

If the reason kids join gangs is to get the love and attention they don't get from parents, schools and society in general then shunning them will make the problem worse.

Let's solve the graffiti and trash problem by posting a highway sign with the gang's name. We allow politicians and real estate agents to post illegal signs cluttering up the neighborhood but the police only prosecute graffiti. Kids recognize injustice and see no reason to have respect for the law or the police since it is just the politics of power.

Imagine if we were to contract with a gang to remove illegal signs and litter. If they don't do a good job we remove our acknowledgement sign "Community kept clean by MS 13" and replace it with a sign "Area maintained by the Crips." We should give them a small stipend too.

We need to invite gangs to be productive members of society instead of hassling them until they move to another community or until we can put them in jail.

Of course ideas like this will never be implemented because gang members don't vote and politicians get elected by fanning the flames of fear and by demonizing marginal groups. For too long in Sterling we have tolerated demonizing Gays, Gangs, Muslims and Mexicans. I can't imagine we'd stop now unless we can appeal to people's pocketbook by showing how it would reduce taxes.

[reply](#)

Ted N. (not verified) on Thu, 2009-05-21 19:34

The Youth PROMISE act is a sound proposal for addressing the root causes of gang/youth violence and deserves a chance to prove it's effectiveness. Go to Change.org @ <http://bit.ly/Y085M> and let Congress know that it's time to try something different with the promise of better results.

[reply](#)

Add comment

Your name:

E-mail:

The content of this field is kept private and will not be shown publicly.

Comment: *

Word verification: *



[\(play audio CAPTCHA\)](#)

Type the characters you see in the picture above; if you can't read them, submit the form and a new image will be generated.

Copyright © 2009, Loudoun Independent Newspapers. All Rights Reserved.