

December 30, 2008**EDITORIAL****A Job or a Gang?**

If the country has learned anything about street gangs, it is that police dragnets — hauling large numbers of nonviolent young people off to jail, along with the troublemakers — tend to make the problem worse, not better. Public policy should discourage young people from joining gangs in the first place by keeping them in school, getting them jobs and giving them community-based counseling and social service programs.

Federal and state programs that are supposed to provide jobs, services and counseling have been poorly financed for years. They are likely to suffer further as cash-strapped states look for ways to save money. The timing couldn't be worse.

A new study by James Alan Fox and Marc Swatt of Northeastern University suggests that violent crime among young people may be rising, that the much-talked-about reduction in the crime rate in the 1990s may be over, and that much more must be done to prevent young people from succumbing to the gang culture.

The study also shows that the murder rate for black teenagers has climbed noticeably since 2000 while the rate for young whites has scarcely changed on the whole and, in some places, has actually declined. While more financing for local police would be useful, programs aimed at providing jobs and social services are far more important.

It is too early to say whether the numbers represent a long-term trend. But the economic crisis has clearly created the conditions for more crime and more gangs — among hopeless, jobless young men in the inner cities. Once these young men become entangled in the criminal justice system, they are typically marginalized and shut out of the job market for life.

President-elect Barack Obama's administration and Congress will need to address the youth crisis as part of the country's deep economic crisis. That means reviving the federal summer jobs programs that ran successfully for more than 30 years. It also means directing more federal money at proven programs that keep young people in school and out of the clutches of the gangs.

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