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Rep. Scott's blueprint can save young people

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SEN. DIANNE FEINSTEIN chose to promote her anti-gang bill earlier this month by visiting a youth community center, not a prison. So it's too bad her plan would invest most of its money into putting kids behind bars rather than helping them improve their grades or find jobs.

The California Democrat should consider throwing her support behind a competing measure authored by Rep. Bobby Scott.

The congressman from Virginia's 3rd District has introduced legislation that would commit \$2.6 billion in an array of gang-prevention programs, including mentoring, mental health counseling, Boys & Girls Clubs, after-school programs, summer jobs, college scholarships and early childhood education.

The Youth PROMISE Act would help communities with high murder and school dropout rates develop plans for reducing gang activity, set up the programs and track data to determine whether they are succeeding. The effort would be overseen by local councils composed of police officers, court officials, educators, church leaders and social service workers.

Scott wants Congress to rethink its historic emphasis on tougher enforcement measures against gangs, a philosophy that has put more teenagers in adult prisons and left them there to serve longer and longer sentences.

On the streets, though, enforcement-heavy programs have failed to get a firm handle on gang violence. Los Angeles, which spends two-thirds of its anti-gang resources on surveillance and incarceration, has six times as many gangs now as it did in the 1980s. In contrast, New York City and Boston have kept their gang-related crime down by pairing police efforts with early intervention for troubled youngsters.

But Congress continues to throw money at failing programs and starve those that are making progress.

The U.S. Senate unanimously approved the brass-knuckled Feinstein bill with little discussion. It would institute sentences of life without parole for juveniles and would federalize an assortment of street crimes associated with gangs by declaring them a threat to interstate commerce, an argument that has the bespectacled conservatives at the Heritage Foundation rolling their eyes and muttering constitutional epithets.

Fortunately, Scott has helped to stir up a healthy debate in the House of Representatives about the need for a new approach to gangs.

Getting kids out of gangs is a worthy goal, he says, but what then? If they all end up in prison cells or milling around on street corners, any reduction in crime will be short-lived.

"Success in fighting gangs can only happen if young people are given more positive alternatives," Scott said last week.

He's under pressure to compromise, melding enforcement and prevention into a single measure. But Scott is resistant because he's seen the "balanced approach" before. When budgets get tight, the prevention programs are the first to be sliced off and discarded.

Scott has been a passionate but thoughtful voice for juvenile justice reform for years. It's time his colleagues pay attention.

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