



February 6, 2008

Re: Letter of Support for the Youth PROMISE Act, H.R. 3846

Dear Representative:

The Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice (CHHIRJ) writes to express its strong endorsement of the Youth Prison Reduction through Opportunities, Mentoring, Intervention, Support and Education Act (Youth PROMISE Act), H.R. 3846, and urges you to cosponsor this important legislation.

By way of a brief introduction, I founded the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at the Harvard Law School in 2005. The Institute is committed to honoring the extraordinary life of one of the great lawyers of the twentieth century, Charles Hamilton Houston. It furthers Houston's vision of achieving racial justice and equality through research, policy analysis, scholarship, and collaboration with community leaders and organizations. Our niche lies in our ability to harness the expertise and resources at Harvard and beyond, to translate research into policy, advocacy and legal action, to help educate a new cadre of civil rights lawyers, to influence the agendas of major civil rights organizations, and bring together individuals from diverse backgrounds, professions, and perspectives to develop new strategies and solutions to structural inequalities. The Institute is initially focusing on three areas that we consider central to the struggle for racial justice: addressing the opportunity gap for students of color, reforming criminal justice policies, and improving prospects for people of color and foreign-born residents to enjoy the full benefits of citizenship.

One of CHHIRJ's most prominent initiatives is entitled: "Redirecting the School to Prison Pipeline," which has two overarching goals: (1) to reduce the staggering high school dropout rates for students of color and (2) to prevent young people of color from getting tangled up in the criminal justice system. By conducting an analysis of the conditions and policies that characterize schools and communities that serve disproportionate shares of court-involved youths (or youths at risk of court-involvement), CHHIRJ aims to identify and advance, in collaboration with key community leaders, targeted interventions and practices to keep young people in school and out of legal trouble. Representative Scott's Youth PROMISE Act helps to facilitate attainment of that goal. We therefore applaud these efforts to keep young people out of the juvenile and criminal justice systems and in safe, nurturing educational environments where they can learn and thrive.

The Youth PROMISE Act provides support to communities facing the greatest youth gang, crime and delinquency challenges. Under the Act, local and tribal communities form PROMISE Coordinating Councils, including representatives from schools, social services, health and mental health providers, community-based and faith-based organizations, court services and law enforcement. Each council assesses the community's needs and strengths, evaluates current funding priorities – including local jail and prison expenditures – and then develops a comprehensive plan for implementing evidence-based and promising prevention and intervention strategies. These strategies

are designed to redirect young people who are vulnerable to gang involvement toward more productive and law-abiding alternatives.

Research clearly demonstrates the connection that exists between educational engagement and prevention of juvenile crime. Youths who are connected to school are far less likely to engage in the types of risky behaviors that may lead to delinquency. Attachment to school has been documented as one of the strongest protections against susceptibility to violence in young people. That is why we strongly endorse the Youth PROMISE Act's inclusion of local educational agencies in the Coordinating Councils, and its focus on funding both school-based and after school programs. Such programs may include Early Head Start, mentoring, conflict resolution training, sports, arts, life skills, employment and summer recreation programs, and alternative school resources for youth who are struggling to stay in school. Importantly, the Youth PROMISE Act also provides for a rigorous and comprehensive evaluation, including an assessment of the savings sustained by reduced rates of incarceration. The anticipated savings, which are significant, will be reinvested in the PROMISE plans, including educational programming.

Now more than ever, we need the long-term policy solutions offered in the Youth PROMISE Act. The Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), recently released statistics showing that, at the end of 2006, more than 2.25 million persons were incarcerated in US prisons and jails. These statistics also highlighted the sharp racial disparities in US incarceration rates, with black men incarcerated at a rate 6.2 times higher than white men. We now incarcerate more citizens than any other country, by far, at a rate seven times the international average. Incarceration rates in some minority communities are already four to eight times higher than any other incarceration rates found on earth.

CHHIRJ strongly opposes proposed gang legislation that will lead to the unwarranted federal prosecution of more youth – especially poor youth and youth of color – and result in an even greater increase in the already unacceptably high number of incarcerated children of color. No credible research suggests that any cost effective crime reduction can be achieved through additional incarceration. Rather, it is time for Congress to enact long-term policy solutions that will increase public safety and stem the tide of destruction and waste (both in terms of dollars and lives) characterized by our current criminal justice policies. The Youth PROMISE Act offers such a solution. This legislation makes sense, comports with the research on prevention, intervention and adolescent brain development, and will yield overall savings to the community in increased public safety, financial and life quality measures.

CHHIRJ endorses the Youth PROMISE Act, and urges you to do the same. For more information, please contact Dan Losen, Senior Policy Analyst at CHHIRJ, at harvardlosen@gmail.com. To co-sponsor this legislation, please contact Erin Davies at (202) 225-8351 or Erin.Davies@mail.house.gov.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Charles J. Ogletree, Jr.