

Congress must target roots of gangs

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CONGRESS is yet again trying to show the country that it is tough on crime.

"The Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression Act," a bill being fast tracked by the House (the Senate passed the bill by unanimous consent), is the latest offering. Unfortunately, the bill is full of problems.

The bill has a vague definition of what it means to be in a gang, stating that such an association can be "formal" or "informal." This new definition, deliberately overbroad, will label more young people as gang members and subject them to the provisions of the law even if their associations with each other are meaningless or benign.

The bill federalizes numerous state crimes as federal crimes to give prosecutors the power to go after alleged gang members. But individual states are already tackling such crimes.

The bill targets minorities. One section in particular, called "Illegal Aliens," will result in more arrests of Latinos by design. The U.S. Sentencing Commission estimates that of those arrested under this proposed bill, 75 percent will be black or Latino, even though there is significant gang membership among young whites, too.

And the bill's overall approach makes little sense. Gangs are not driving the crime problem in America. The Justice Policy Institute reported in July that "gang members play a relatively small role in the national crime problem." The institute's report shows that the incarceration and suppression approach that this bill endorses is a failure.

A number of groups working on issues surrounding the bill have come out against it. The American Civil Liberties Union calls the potential law "disastrous for minority youth and African-American youth."

The National Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Coalition, an association of 80 national groups advocating for children, says the bill is "fundamentally flawed with its misguided emphasis on punishment and incarceration over prevention and early intervention." The organization adds that the bill will lead to "an increase in the already troubling racial and ethnic disparity in the juvenile and criminal justice systems."

One member of Congress is offering a substitute.

Rep. Bobby Scott, D-Va., has introduced his own piece of legislation, "The Youth Promise Act," to address the problem of gangs in a real way. If Scott has his way, significant funds will be devoted to "mentoring, mental health counseling, Boys & Girls Clubs, after-school programs, summer jobs, college scholarships and early childhood education," he says.

This more comprehensive approach, offered by Scott, addresses the root causes of why our young people join gangs: poverty, poor education, alienation, lack of opportunity, lack of training programs and poor community support. These are many of the social issues that our elected officials rarely ever get tough on.

We need a more enlightened attitude toward solving our gang problem.

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