

# The Roanoke Times

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## Editorial: Prevent, or build

Rep. Bobby Scott's Youth PROMISE Act has been tagged as an anti-gang bill, but its impact could be far greater than keeping kids out of gangs.

America can continue to build more prisons for people who are drawn to a life of crime at a young age and persist into adulthood -- what the Children's Defense Fund calls the cradle-to-prison pipeline.

Or we can build at the front end -- not prisons, but strategies that target young people who are at risk of being sucked into gangs, drugs and ultimately a lifetime in and out of the criminal justice system.

U.S. Rep. Bobby Scott, D-Va., proposes to steer the crime-fighting policy agenda away from tough crackdown measures and toward comprehensive preventive measures through his Youth PROMISE Act.

His bill, H.R. 3846, aims to reduce juvenile delinquency and criminal street gang activity through prevention and early intervention.

Scott's bill deserves support. His approach shifts the focus from get-tougher-on-crime policy to bottom-up strategies that attack the root causes of criminal behavior.

His approach is not novel. It draws from "evidence- and research-based strategies to reduce gang violence and youth crime," Scott says.

Many of those strategies have been tested at state and local levels. Virginia, for instance, has had school gang-prevention programs and regional gang task forces in place for several years.

What's novel about Scott's proposal is the strategies' application at the federal level.

That has critics howling the bill would turn state crimes into federal offenses. That solves nothing, they argue, but merely federalizes criminal activity that should be categorized as ordinary street crime.

The argument discounts the bill's sensible premise: Attack criminal proclivities by eliminating factors that pull young people into crime in the first place.

Under the Youth PROMISE (an acronym for Prison Reduction through Opportunities, Mentoring, Intervention, Support and Education) Act, communities with the greatest youth gang and criminal activity would form a local PROMISE coordinating council.

Each council -- with members including representatives from law enforcement, schools, social services groups, court services, health providers and the faith community -- would develop a plan to implement prevention and intervention strategies that target at-risk youth.

There is a price tag; the bill would provide resources to these communities.

But prisons -- building them and housing criminals in them -- carry a price tag, too.

The state House Appropriations Committee was told two weeks ago that Virginia could be forced to build one prison a year to keep up with its growing prison population.

Building prisons to hold a flood of inmates is a back-end approach. Redirecting the human pipeline is a much more effective one.

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