

U.S. gang crackdowns called a 'tragic failure'

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More police, more prisons and more punitive measures aren't the answer to reducing gang activity, concludes a new U.S. study that experts here say underscores the need for Canada to reject that approach in favour of investing in jobs, schools and programs for disenfranchised youth.

The study, released today by the Washington, D.C.-based Justice Policy Institute, says popular suppression approaches to gang violence are a "tragic failure" in Los Angeles and Chicago, while promoting jobs, education and healthy communities draws youth away from gangs and violence.

"Despite decades of aggressive gang enforcement – including mass arrests and surveillance, huge gang databases, and increased prison sentences for gang crimes – gang violence continues at unacceptable rates," the authors conclude.

Former Liberal MPP Alvin Curling, appointed by the province to conduct a youth violence review, said the report supports his opinion that putting more people in prison won't curb gang violence over time.

It also confirms the need for the provincial review to "go beyond the criminal aspects of things," Curling said yesterday.

Robert Gordon, director of Simon Fraser University's criminology department, has studied gangs on the West Coast and said the report confirms the "wisdom of the Canadian way."

"We shouldn't be tempted, particularly during periods of enhanced street-gang activity, we shouldn't be spooked into making bad policy decisions," he said.

The death of teenager Jane Creba in 2005 following a gang shootout in downtown Toronto was followed by a chorus of calls for stiffer sentences and crackdowns, a typical response, Gordon said. But he maintains research shows such tactics alienate local residents and trap youth in the criminal justice system.

An alternate approach took place in New York City where a variety of street work and intervention programs "outside the realm of law enforcement" were adopted and caused gang violence to decrease by the end of the 1980s, the study says.

It also found that in the U.S., gangs are responsible for a relatively small share of crime, youth gang membership fell between 1996 and 2004, white people make up a large proportion of gang members and most gang-involved youth quit before reaching adulthood.

The study says resources should be redirected from "failed gang enforcement efforts to proven public safety strategies." Toronto-based gang expert Lew Golding, of the Centre for Addiction and

Mental Health, agrees with the spirit of the report. Reactive strategies feed the problem, while interventions give confidence to youth who are empowered through bonding together.

When gang members are released from jail, they return "to the neighbourhood where all the influences remain," Golding wrote in an email.

The Justice Policy Institute studies alternatives to incarceration.