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Congress is taking wrong approach with gangs

OTHER OPINIONS

No city has failed to control its street gangs more spectacularly than Los Angeles. The region has six times as many gangs and double the number of gang members as a quarter-century ago, even after spending countless billions on the problem.

But unless Congress changes course quickly, the policies that seem to have made the gang problem worse in Los Angeles could become enshrined as national doctrine in a so-called gang control bill making its way through both the House and Senate.

This issue is underscored in a study released this week by the Justice Policy Institute in Washington. It shows that police dragnets that criminalize whole communities and land large numbers of nonviolent children in jail don't reduce gang involvement or gang violence. Law enforcement tools need to be used in a targeted way — and directed at the 10 percent or so of gang members who commit violent crimes. The main emphasis needs to be on proven prevention programs that change children's behavior by getting them involved in community and school-based programs that essentially keep them out of gangs. ...

Proponents of the bill are assuring the rest of us that the statute will be modified to provide more money in support of research-based prevention programs and less for the failed policies of the past. But this bill is shaping up to be a disaster. ... Once jailed, these children will inevitably become hardened criminals and spend the rest of their lives in and out of prison.

The New York Times

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