

Statement of

# The Honorable Patrick Leahy

United States Senator  
Vermont  
June 13, 2005

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Ranking Member, Senate Judiciary Committee  
Field Hearing on "Prevention of Youth and Gang Violence"  
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I applaud Chairman Specter for holding this hearing to examine how we can prevent youth and gang violence. I know that this is an issue of great importance to his constituents here in Philadelphia and around the State of Pennsylvania, as well as to people all across America who want their children and their communities to be safe. I look forward to reviewing the testimony of today's witnesses as we consider legislative proposals and appropriations matters during this Congress.

I recently had the pleasure of cosponsoring a briefing on preventing youth violence with Senators Specter, DeWine and Kohl. The speakers at that briefing included young people who had received help from Federally-funded programs, law enforcement officials, and experts in child psychology. They talked about approaches that were working to reduce violence in Pennsylvania, Alabama, and in the District of Columbia. Their testimony demonstrated why we cannot simply view youth violence as a problem that can be addressed after the fact through punishment. Although appropriate punishment must be used to protect public safety, we must also look at what works to prevent at-risk youth from resorting to violence in the first place.

As we consider what should be done to address youth violence, there are a few points we should keep in mind. First, there are a number of Federal programs that seek to fund programs with a proven effectiveness in preventing juvenile crime. Unfortunately, President Bush has proposed cutting funding for these programs, part of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP). Congress should reject the proposed cuts and instead strengthen these programs.

Second, we should ensure that state and local officials continue to bear the primary responsibility for punishing juvenile offenders. Congress should provide them with the assistance they need without usurping their authority through legislation such as H.R. 1279, the gang bill recently passed by the House of Representatives that would effectively Federalize any crime committed by a gang member and drastically expand the Federal government's prosecution of juveniles as adults.

Finally, we should take the time to listen to experts in juvenile justice - prosecutors, defense lawyers, psychologists, nonprofit organizations, and others - before revising our laws or deciding what programs are worth funding. A great deal of research has been done and is being done in this area, and we in Congress should take advantage of it.