

Testimony of

The Honorable Senator Barbara Boxer

April 16, 2008

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Senate Judiciary Committee
Subcommittee on Crimes and Drugs
"Challenges and Solutions for Protecting our Children from Violence and Exploitation in the 21st Century"
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Thank you, Chairman Biden, for holding this important hearing and for your leadership on the issue of protecting our children.

This hearing is very timely. First, today marks the one year anniversary of the shootings at Virginia Tech. Our hearts go out to the students, families and other members of the community who were affected by that tragedy.

Also, this week is National Crime Victims' Rights Week, and this hearing provides a platform to discuss the importance of protecting our children from harm.

For me - as a mother, as a grandmother, and as a Senator - there is no greater obligation than the safety and well-being of our children.

Chairman Biden, together we teamed up to write the highly successful Violence Against Women Act, and I am proud to work with you again on legislation to protect our children.

I wish this was not necessary. I wish we could let our children play in the yard and walk to school or to a friend's house without worry. But we know we can't. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, children between the ages of 12 and 17 are more than twice as likely as adults to be victims of violent crime. And according to data from the National Incident-Based Reporting System, people under the age of 18 make up approximately 26 percent of violent crime victims reported to police, and 70 percent of all reported sexual assaults.

Those statistics tell me make clear that we are not doing enough to protect our children.

We also continue to see disturbing stories in the news. Earlier this week in San Francisco, a 12 year old girl went missing on her way to school. Billie McGee is a seventh grade honor roll student at S.R. Martin College Preparatory School. I know her family and friends are praying for her safe return, and I hope that anyone with information on her disappearance will come forward to police immediately.

That is why we are here today - to find better ways to protect our children as new and more complicated threats emerge each day.

First, I want to discuss the Combating Child Exploitation Act of 2007, which I am proud to co-sponsor with Chairman Biden.

The internet can be a wonderful thing. We can email, share photos, listen to music and watch video clips on YouTube. But even when our children use the internet responsibly, there are dangers lurking around every corner. In 2005, we held a hearing in the Senate Commerce Committee on Napster and other file-sharing networks, which were popular with kids who were illegally downloading music. During the hearing, to demonstrate the danger of encountering child pornography on file sharing sites, I did a search on a network for Britney Spears. Instead of her music, more than 70% of the returns were pornography.

We have to be ready to confront exploitation on all fronts. The criminals have gotten more advanced, and so must we.

The Combating Child Exploitation Act will help prevent the exploitation of our children by providing law enforcement with additional tools and resources to hunt down depraved individuals who traffic in child pornography. The bill would establish the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force, and requires that there be at least one task force in each state. The bill also requires the Attorney General to provide additional forensic capabilities to investigate internet crimes against children.

In short, Mr. Chairman, this bill will help us fight the battle against child exploitation more aggressively and effectively. I also want to talk about two additional bills I have introduced to protect our nation's children.

The first is the Violence Against Children Act, which I am so proud to have introduced with Chairman Biden and so proud to have the support of Senator Feinstein. The Violence Against Children Act provides a comprehensive approach to combating violent crimes against children.

The tragic story of young Mynisha Crenshaw, from San Bernardino, CA, shows the need for us to take action. On November 13, 2005, II-year old Mynisha was killed while having dinner with family when a gang-related dispute broke out and gunfire sprayed her apartment building, killing Mynisha and seriously wounding her 14-year old sister.

Imagine the heartbreak of her family, and the fear in the community that it could happen again. Well, just few months later, it did - II-year old Anthony Ramirez was shot in San Bernardino while playing basketball at a middle school, just a week before graduating elementary school.

We must do more to help communities like San Bernardino, and the Violence Against Children Act would do exactly that.

The Violence Against Children Act toughens federal criminal penalties for violent crimes against children that result in serious injury. The bill provides equal funding support for local police and prosecutors, and the children and families who are victims of violence. It also brings gang prevention resources to communities in need by creating an interagency task force - comprised of

the Departments of Justice, Education, Labor, HHS and HUD - responsible for coordinating and administering comprehensive gang prevention and intervention resources.

Mr. Chairman, this bill has been endorsed by 60 organizations and officials, including the National Association of Police Officers, Boys & Girls Clubs of America, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, the KlaasKids Foundation, the California State Sheriffs Association, and the Peace Officers Research Association of California.

Finally, I believe the time has come for the Senate to take action and provide safer schools for our children.

A year ago today, the brutal and senseless murder of 33 members of the Virginia Tech community shocked all of us, and served as a painful reminder of our obligation to help schools - from K-12 to colleges and universities - provide a safe environment for our children.

That is why on April 25, 2007, I introduced the School Safety Enhancements Act along with Senators Salazar, Lautenberg, Schumer, Durbin, Kennedy, and Brown. The bill would provide resources for partnerships between local law enforcement agencies and K-12 school districts to develop and implement enhanced school safety measures, such as tiplines and capital improvements. The bill also requires colleges and universities to conduct annual safety assessments and maintain emergency response plans.

The bill passed out of the Judiciary Committee on August 2, 2007. Since then, however, the bill has stalled for reasons unrelated to the school safety bill.

Mr. Chairman, the price of our inaction is too high.

According to news reports, there have been six shootings at K-12 schools and colleges in the year since Virginia Tech, including the recent tragedy at Northern Illinois University that resulted in six dead.

We cannot sit idly by for one more second.

I urge those who are holding the package containing the school safety bill to work quickly to resolve their concerns.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, thank you again for giving me the opportunity to speak today on this important issue. We have great challenges before us. But the enormity of the threats must not paralyze us. We can and must do more to protect our children.