

Statement of

The Honorable Patrick Leahy

United States Senator
Vermont
December 5, 2007

Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy,
Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee
On "Reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act: Protecting Our Children and Our Communities"
December 5, 2007

Today, the Judiciary Committee considers the important issue of how we can best help our communities protect our most precious asset, our children, not only by keeping them safe and out of trouble, but also by helping to ensure they have the opportunity to become productive adult members of society. I thank Senators Specter, Kennedy, and Durbin for their leadership on this issue, and I particularly thank Senator Kohl, who has long been committed to this issue, for agreeing to share with me the responsibility of chairing this hearing.

The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act sets out federal policy and standards for the administration of juvenile justice in the states. It authorizes key federal resources for states to improve their juvenile justice systems and for communities to develop programs to prevent kids from getting into trouble. The reauthorization of this important legislation gives us a good opportunity to reexamine federal juvenile justice policy so that we can reinforce what has been working and change what has not.

The Washington Post reported last week on a study by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention that we should consider. The CDC determined that children who are held in adult prisons commit more crimes, and more serious crimes, when they are released than kids with similar histories who are kept in juvenile facilities. After years of pressure to try more and more kids as adults and to send them to adult prisons, we need to seriously consider whether that policy is working in the face of strong evidence to the contrary.

As a former prosecutor, I know well the importance of holding criminals accountable for their crimes with strong sentences. But when we are talking about children, we must also think about how best to help them become responsible, contributing members of society as adults. That keeps us all safer.

As I have observed before, Congress's and the Clinton administration's strong support for state and local law enforcement in the 90s with the COPS Program and other key grant programs contributed to historic declines in crime. The gutting of these programs by this administration and recent Republican Congresses has contributed to a reversal of that trend and to recent increases in crime rates. Press reports based on documents from the Office of Management and Budget suggest that the administration may be proposing further cuts in funding to law enforcement next year. I am afraid that similar trends are evident in the juvenile justice field, with effective prevention programs facing significant cuts in federal support, creating a dangerous vacuum. We need to reverse this trend and help our communities implement programs proven to help kids turn their lives around.

I have long supported a strong federal commitment to preventing youth violence, and I have worked hard on past reauthorizations of this legislation, as have many of my colleagues on the Committee. We have learned with time the importance of boosting support for state and local law enforcement and of balancing strong law enforcement with prevention programs aimed at keeping kids out of the criminal justice system. Some problems persist, including disturbing episodes of mistreatment of children and the continuing disproportionate representation of minorities in the

juvenile justice system. We must continue looking for ways to solve these troubling patterns and disparities, as well as to build upon past successes.

I thank the many prominent Vermont representatives of law enforcement, the juvenile justice system, and prevention-oriented non-profits who have spoken to me in support of reauthorizing this important Act and who have helped to shape my understanding of these issues. I know that many of my colleagues on the Committee have heard from passionate leaders on this issue in their own states, several of whom join us on today's panel.

I thank the distinguished panel of witnesses for coming. I am glad that the panel includes people with juvenile justice experience not only in large urban communities, but also in rural areas - areas with problems that may receive less national attention, but which for Vermont and many other states are just as real. Importantly, the panel includes representation from the federal, state, and local levels, people with years of experience both in law enforcement and in programs aimed at keeping children out of the criminal justice system. I know they will provide us with valuable ideas and perspectives today.

A careful examination of how to keep our children from entering or reentering the criminal justice system not only makes our communities safer by reducing the number of kids who go on to lives of crime as adults, but it also ensures that our children will lead safer and more fulfilling lives.

#