

Statement of

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein

United States Senator
California
April 16, 2008

Hearing Statement
"Challenges and Solutions for Protecting our Children from
Violence and Exploitation in the 21st Century"
Senator Dianne Feinstein
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I thank Chairman Biden for holding this hearing on an issue of immense importance and urgency - protecting our children from violence and exploitation.

One of the fundamental issues facing us today is the rise of criminal street gangs and the effect these gangs are having on our nation's youth. This country is in the midst of an epidemic of gang violence, often involving teens and children as both victims and perpetrators.

Nationwide, the FBI has identified at least 30,000 gangs, with 800,000 members. More gang members are now on the streets of this country than police officers. The FBI estimates that gangs are having an impact on at least 2,500 communities across the nation. These criminal street gangs engage in drug trafficking, robbery, extortion, gun trafficking, and murder. They recruit children and teens, destroy neighborhoods, cripple families and kill innocent people.

A person only needs to pick up a newspaper or watch the evening news to see how gang violence is affecting our youth. Gang violence occurs on a daily basis across the country. Examples from California show the devastation that gangs cause on children.

In February, gang members in Los Angeles armed with AK-47 assault rifles and semi-automatic handguns, shot and killed a 37 year old bystander as he held the hand of a 2 year old girl.

Late in February, eight people waiting at a South Central bus stop in Los Angeles were wounded when a suspected gang member fired into the crowd. Five of those wounded were children.

On March 2, Jamiel Shaw, a 17 year old football star and academic standout, was gunned down by two gang members outside his home in Los Angeles.

On March 4, 2008, six-year old Lavarea Elvy was shot in the head by gang members while riding in a family car in the Harbor Gateway area of South Los Angeles.

On March 7, 2008, 13 year old Anthony Escobar was killed by gang members while picking lemons in a neighbor's yard in the Echo Park area of Los Angeles.

Stories like this are not limited to California. They are becoming commonplace across the country. Gang violence is literally holding neighborhoods hostage and Congress needs to do something about it. Our national gang problem is immense and growing, and it is not going away. Our cities and states need our help - a long-term federal commitment to combat gang violence.

It is time for the House of Representatives to act on S. 456, the Gang Abatement and Prevention Act of 2007, that was passed by unanimous consent by the Senate last year. That bill is a balanced, reasonable mix of prevention and enforcement policy and provides an extended Federal commitment to help fight criminal street gang violence nationwide. The bill would authorize more than \$1 billion over the next five years in a coordinated approach that will combine Federal, State, and local law enforcement efforts, expand witness protection, and expand services geared toward gang prevention.

Specifically, the bill would provide:

- ? \$411.5 million in funding for gang prevention and intervention programs for at-risk youth.

- ? \$270 million in funding for needed witness protection programs in gang prosecutions.

- ? \$437.5 million in increased funding for the Justice Department, prosecutors, FBI agents and others to increase investigations and prosecutions of gangs and other violent offenders.

- ? Make recruiting members of criminal street gangs a federal crime - with extra punishments for recruiting minors.

- ? Criminalize violent crimes committed in furtherance or in aid of criminal street gangs, similar to the RICO laws currently used to prosecute Mafia-style organizations.

- ? Increased federal penalties for gang-related crimes, including murders carjacking, kidnappings, robberies, and money laundering.

- ? New High Intensity Interstate Gang Activity Areas, focusing federal, state, and local resources where the most gang activity is occurring.

This legislation recognizes that the root causes of gang violence need to be addressed - identifying successful community programs, and then investing significant resources in schools and civic and religious organizations to prevent young people from joining gangs in the first place. The bill is tough on gang crime, but also provides badly needed funding for gang prevention programs.

I also strongly support Senator Boxer's Violence

Against Children Act, and was an original co-sponsor of that bill. Her testimony at the hearing today will highlight that bill, and I am proud that we were able to incorporate the High Intensity Interstate Gang Activity Area concept contained in the Violence Against Children's Act into the comprehensive gang bill passed by the Senate.

It is past time for the federal government to come to grips with our escalating levels of gang violence and the devastating effect that gangs have on our children.

I thank Chairman Biden for holding this hearing, and I hope it will assist Congress in moving forward with comprehensive gang legislation.