

# A Better Direction: Changing the Trajectory of At-Risk Youth

By Congressman Bobby Scott



America has become a reactive nation. For example, prior to the passage of the Affordable Care Act, we did not offer health care, we provided sick care. The same is true for how we approach juvenile crime prevention. Instead of offering prevention and early intervention programs for at-risk youth, we wait for them to make a mistake and then provide them a one-way passage into the juvenile justice system while elected officials use simpleminded rhetoric to debate just how draconian their penalties should be.

The U.S. currently locks up a higher proportion of its population than any other country by far, a rate the Pew Center on the States has concluded is counterproductive and wastes taxpayer money. This is the wrong way to go about raising our next generation. There are better alternatives—proactive, evidence-based and cost-effective strategies. We need to invest in a comprehensive approach that will help youth get and stay on the right track to success in order to break what experts at the Children’s Defense Fund are calling the “Cradle to Prison Pipeline” and instead create a “Cradle to College and Career Pipeline.”

One essential element to this comprehensive approach must be positive school discipline policies. Evidence shows that successful schools utilize evidence-based and scientifically valid practices for improving behavior and

creating a school climate that is more conducive to learning such as school-wide positive behavior supports.

Another essential element of this comprehensive approach must be the use of evidence-based early prevention and intervention programs—such as teen pregnancy prevention, pre-natal care, new parent training, nurse home visits, Head Start and other early childhood education programs, quality education, after-school programs, tutoring and mentoring programs, summer recreation and jobs, college access initiatives, and job-training programs—that work cost-effectively to reduce crime. These types of programs also save money in the long run that would otherwise be spent on law enforcement, building and maintaining prisons and social welfare programs.

*“It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.”*

—FREDERICK DOUGLAS

That’s why I introduced the Youth Prison Reduction through Opportunities, Mentoring, Intervention, Support, and Education Act, or Youth PROMISE Act (H.R. 2721). The Youth PROMISE Act implements the advice we have

heard over the past several years from experts across the political spectrum concerning evidence and research-based strategies to reduce gang violence and crime. If passed, the Youth PROMISE Act will authorize funding for use by communities to implement evidenced-based prevention and intervention programs. The legislation does not mandate specific programs; it leaves those decisions up to local communities. Communities will also be required to identify the financial savings that will result from using these evidence-based activities and recapture and reinvest a portion of those savings in order to continue the programs beyond the initial federal funding with the long term goal of self-sustainment. In this time of budgetary constraint, the Youth PROMISE Act is a wise investment. Ultimately, the Youth PROMISE Act will prevent crime while also saving lives, saving communities and saving money.

Frederick Douglass stated: “It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.” That statement rings as true today as it did when he first said it. It is up to the public to change the political discourse. Hold your elected officials accountable. Your voices are needed now more than ever so that students in our next generation will be more likely to receive a college degree than serve time in prison.



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represents the 3rd Congressional District of Virginia in the U.S. House of Representatives. He is currently serving his tenth term in Congress, where he serves on the

Committee on Education and the Workforce and the Committee on the Judiciary, where he is the Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security. Referred to as a “Champion for Children,” Rep. Scott is lauded for his priority and efforts to improve the well-being of children, including in the areas of healthcare, education and closing the achievement gap, and comprehensive juvenile justice reform. For more information about the Youth PROMISE Act, visit [www.bobbyscott.house.gov](http://www.bobbyscott.house.gov).