U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on the Judiciary

Prepared Testimony of David M. Kennedy
Director
Center for Crime Prevention and Control
John Jay College of Criminal Justice
899 10th Ave.
New York, NY 10019
dakennedy@jjay.cuny.edu
(212) 484-1323

Before The House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security
Making Communities Safer: Youth Violence and Gang Interventions That Work
February 15th, 2007

I would like to begin by offering my sincere thanks to Chairman Scott, and to the committee as a whole, for holding this hearing and allowing me to be a part of it. Our topic today is profoundly important. Individual lives, the trajectory of families and communities, and in a very real way the success of the American experiment are at stake. Both the problem and our response to the problem have grave implications. The life of an individual and a city can be destroyed by gang violence. But those lives can also be destroyed by the demonization of offenders and well-intentioned but profligate law enforcement: by the demonization of law enforcement and what follows in its wake, such as the toxic "stop snitching" thug culture; and by the well-intentioned failures of powerless prevention and intervention programs. Getting this right is crucial.

Getting it right means a new way of thinking and acting. I am now persuaded that no amount of ordinary law enforcement, no amount of ordinary intervention, and no amount of ordinary prevention will get us what we want and need. I do my work amongst extraordinary people: police officers and prosecutors, gang outreach workers, social service providers, parents, ex-offenders. They work with profound seriousness and commitment. But it does not solve the problem, and I think it never will. We could put 100 times more gang members in prison, or fund 100 times the number of prevention programs, and that would not work either. Our traditional framework for addressing this issue is simply unsuccessful.

There is now more than ample evidence that there is a different and far better framework: one that is successful. My simplest and most profound message today is that we know, today, how to address this problem: in a way that saves lives, reduces incarceration, strengthens communities, bridges racial divides, and improves the lives of offenders and ex-offenders. The evidence has been accumulating for over a decade and is now extremely persuasive. In 1996, the famous "Boston Miracle" cut youth homicide by two-thirds and homicide city-wide by half. The Boston work was fundamentally simple and unexpectedly profound. Violence and drug activity in troubled neighborhoods is caused predominantly by a remarkably small and active number of people locked in group dynamics on the street. Boston assembled law enforcement, social service providers, and community actors – parents, ministers, gang outreach workers, neighborhood associations, ex-offenders, and others – into a new partnership that created sustained relationships with violent groups. The partners stood together and spoke with one voice face-to-face with gang members: that the violence was wrong and had to stop; that the community needed them alive and out of prison and with their loved ones; that help was available to all who needed it; and that violence would be met with clear, predictable, and certain consequences.

There are many myths about Boston. It was not draconian; there were very few arrests, and most enforcement used ordinary state law and probation supervision. It did not wrap every at-risk youth with services and support; we did not have the resources or capacity to do that. It did not rely primarily on law enforcement, or services, or the community; until the full partnership and strategy was created, no single group was very effective. But with the new approach, within existing law, using existing resources, everything changed. The first face-to-face meeting with gang members took place in May of 1996. By the fall, the streets were almost quiet. At its worst, in 1990, the city had 152 homicides. In 1999, it had 31.

The approach worked just as well elsewhere. Minneapolis was next – in the summer of 1996, there were 32 homicides; Minneapolis began its work over the winter, and in the summer of 1997, there were eight. The Indianapolis Violence Reduction Partnership, launched in 1998, cut homicide city-wide by 40%, and robberies and gun assaults in one of its most dangerous neighborhoods by 49%. In Stockton, California Operation Peacekeeper, implemented in late 1997, cut homicide among Hispanic gangs by about three-quarters. In Rochester, New York, gang violence fell by two-thirds between 2004 and 2005. In Chicago, a Project Safe Neighborhoods initiative evaluated by the University of Chicago and Columbia University cut homicide among violent parolees by nearly 75%; they became nearly as safe as residents of the safest neighborhoods in the city. In Lowell, Massachusetts a strategy adapted to Asian gangs shut down shooting almost entirely. In Nassau County, Long Island, the strategy has been effective against a gang problem that includes the notorious MS-13 network. In High Point, North Carolina, in Congressman Cobles's district, a parallel approach aimed at drug markets has virtually eliminated overt drug activity, violent crime is down over 20%, and a rich community partnership is working – often successfully – to help former drug dealers regain their lives. Inspired by High Point, Winston-Salem, Greensboro, and Raleigh have all followed suit, as have Newburgh, New York and Providence, Rhode Island, with others on the way. In

Richmond, in Chairman Scott's district, a city partnership began meeting with gangs city-wide in October of last year. I spoke with police department officials last week, before being invited to this hearing, and they are getting the same wonderful results we have come to expect. Last year at this time there had been fifteen homicides in Richmond. This year, there have been four. I am working with a team in Cincinnati, in Congressman Chabot's district, and with US Attorney William Lipscomb in Milwaukee, in Congressman Sensenbrenner's district, and I will say to them what I have said to their constituents: we are now essentially certain, from years of experience, that if the work is done seriously, the results will follow.

This is not an unalloyed success story. Not all jurisdictions have implemented the strategies properly. Some who have (including Boston, the first and still best-known site) have let effective interventions fall apart, highlighting the need for attention to institutionalization and sustainability (notably, Boston has recently expressed its commitment to reinstating Ceasefire in the face of a spiraling homicide rate). Frameworks for adapting the strategy to the most demanding jurisdictions, such as Los Angeles, need to be tested and refined. And the theory of the gang strategy – that cities have basic gang dynamics that need to be addressed as a whole – has made it impossible to set aside offenders, gangs, or neighborhoods as "controls", thus foreclosing the strongest random-assignment social science evaluations.

The evidence, however, is now quite clear. City after city has gotten the same kind of results. The strongest evaluation, the sophisticated quasiexperimental design used by the Chicago and Columbia researchers, shows the same impact as the original city-wide studies. The approach has been endorsed by both the Clinton Administration, through its Strategic Approach to Community Safety Initiative, and the Bush Administration, through its flagship Project Safe Neighborhoods initiative and the Executive Office for United States Attorneys (EOUSA). When Richmond had its first offender call-in early last year, former Virginia US Attorney Paul McNulty, now deputy attorney general, traveled back to Richmond to address the gang members personally. It has been endorsed by groups as diverse as Fight Crime Invest in Kids, in a report presented by law enforcement legend William Bratton ; by the Children's Defense Fund ; and by the National Urban League.

The story thus far is only a beginning. The Boston work is now over ten years old, and much has been learned during that time. The basic approach has always consisted of three essential elements: law enforcement, social service providers, and communities, all directly engaged with offenders. The most recent work, developed in High Point, has begun to show us how extraordinarily important the community component is, particularly what I have come to think of as "the moral voice of the community". In the High Point work, we for the first time faced squarely the heavily and toxically racialized narratives that lie at, or barely below, these issues. When law enforcement feels that communities have completely lost their moral compass, they will not think to work with or influence communities. When communities feel that law enforcement is part of a conspiracy to destroy the community, they will not think to work with or influence law enforcement. When networks of offenders tell each other that they are not afraid of prison, not afraid to die, and have to shoot those who disrespect them, then they will do so.

But if I have learned anything during my career, it is that law enforcement desperately wishes to help, that communities desperately want to be safe and productive, and that nobody wants to go to prison or die. This is the transformative lesson of the High Point work: that none of us likes what is going on. Law enforcement does not want to endlessly arrest and imprison, without making any impact. Communities do not want to live with violence and fear. Even gang members and drug dealers love their families and want to be safe and successful. Everybody wants those who will take help to have it. Everybody wants the truly dangerous to be controlled. We do not think we are of one mind, but in the most important ways, we are.

In High Point, law enforcement spoke honestly to communities: that they were not succeeding, and they knew it; that they had never meant to do harm to communities through enforcement action, but had come to realize that they had; that they would like to act differently. Communities looked inward and realized that in their anger over historic and present ills, they had not made it clear to their own young people that gang and drug activity was wrong and deeply damaging to the community. Both law enforcement and community came to understand that what they were dealing with was not so much individuals making bad decisions as peer, group, and street dynamics. So when the partnership met with High Point's drug dealers, the community voice was powerful, clear, and amazingly powerful. Scores of community members, including many immediate family, told the dealers that they were loved, needed, vital to the future of the community, would be helped: but were doing wrong, hurting themselves and others, and had to stop. Overwhelmingly, they heard, and they did. Very, very few had to be arrested subsequently, and many are now living very different lives. And offenders, communities, and law enforcement see each other in very different ways than they did only a short time ago.

This is transformational. Gang violence and drug crime is vicious, but so is mass incarceration. It is important that "at risk youth" get prevention, but it is equally important that seasoned offenders get it. It is important to have firm law enforcement, but it is even more important to have firm community standards. It is important that law enforcement take action when all else has failed, and that the community support them when they do. We now know that all of that can be brought to pass: within existing law, within existing resources, and remarkably quickly. This work is not just about crime prevention; it is about redemption and reconciliation. And it is real.

I want to say again that I cannot imagine any scale of investments in traditional activities, or even the starkest increase in legal sanctions, producing these results. We can do this today, immediately. If, ten years ago, the medical community had discovered a way to reduce breast cancer deaths among middle-class white women by 70%, every hospital in the country would now be using that approach. We have learned something that profound about this kind of crime problem. We should act like it.

The demand for these interventions is tremendous. Currently there is a small (but growing) number of researchers and practitioners who understand the underlying principles, have successfully implemented the strategies, and who continue to refine the basic approach. The logic of the approach is now quite well developed, as is its application in meaningfully different circumstances (west coast gangs vs. loose drug crews, for example); key analytic and organizational steps necessary for implementation; supporting aspects such as data and administrative systems; places in the process where errors are likely to be made; and the like. This is not a "cookbook" process, but the basic path and how to manage it is quite well understood. At the same time, the demand vastly outstrips current capacity to address it. New interventions are primarily driven by isolated researchers operating in "Johnny Appleseed" mode, working with individual jurisdictions to address their local problems. These researchers cannot begin to respond to even the requests that come to them directly. There is also increasing attention to these approaches from national groups such as the Urban League and the Children's Defense Fund. These demands cannot be met. When EOUSA held a two-day conference at the National Advocacy Center in Columbia, South Carolina in January of this year, some 200 people came from all over the country; many left committed to doing the work and are calling for help, but we have no way to give it to them.

There is no larger framework in place to "go to scale": to help implement the approaches where they are needed, learn from the constant refinements and innovations that occur at the local level, address key issues such as sustainability, and enhance the state of the art. The Justice Department's Project Safe Neighborhoods, which strongly endorses these strategies, has gone some distance in supporting these needs, but additional focused and very practical help to jurisdictions nationally is badly needed.

A national effort to go to scale is entirely possible. It would have something like the following elements:

• A national set of "primary" jurisdictions, distributed regionally and chosen to incorporate the range of gang issues (i.e., west coast gangs, Chicago gangs, MS-13, drug crews);
• Close, continuing support from the current pool of experienced researchers and practitioners to work with researchers and practitioners in these jurisdictions to help them implement the strategies locally;
• Regular convening of teams from the primary jurisdictions, teams from a larger set of "secondary" jurisdictions, the core pool of researchers and practitioners, and a larger pool of "secondary" researchers and practitioners. In these sessions, the basic strategies would be explained, implementation and implementation issues addressed; core technical assistance provided; on-the-ground experience from the primary sites shared and analyzed; innovations identified and shared; and key issues needing more detailed attention identified.
• Key documents such as implementation guides, research and assessment templates, process histories, case studies, evaluations, "lessons learned", and the like developed and distributed. These could be bolstered with more or less real-time websites supporting implementation, answering common questions, presenting site findings and progress, noting local innovations, etc.
• As the "primary" sites solidified, the focus could shift to the "secondary" sites, which would now be well prepared to undertake their own initiatives. Horizontal exchanges between sites by a now considerably larger pool of experienced researchers, law enforcement, service providers, and community actors would now be possible. Continued convenings, or perhaps a series of regional convenings, would support the work in the new sites, address issues arising in the original sites, and allow the national community working on these issues to learn from local experience. This "seeding" process could continue as long as necessary to "tip" national practice to regarding these strategies as the norm. The large number of actors participating in the effort would add to this through their natural participation in local and national discussions, writing and publishing, professional activities, and the like.
• In this setting, a core research agenda, addressing for example new substantive crime problems and institutionalization and accountability issues, could be framed and pursued. Findings could be translated quite directly into action on a national scale.

Funding for this effort would be necessary for the technical assistance, convening, documentation/dissemination, and site exchange components. While additional funding for operational elements would of course be welcome, experience shows that redirecting existing resources in alignment with the basic strategy can produce dramatically enhanced results.

We now know how to address gang issues of great significance to troubled communities and to the nation. Despite this fact, understanding and implementation is proceeding slowly and is not likely to govern national policy and practice without a deliberate strategic effort. The federal government should take the lead in ensuring that this happens.