



**TESTIMONY OF REPRESENTATIVE ELIJAH E. CUMMINGS
JUDICIARY SUBCOMMITTEE ON CRIME, TERRORISM, AND HOMELAND
SECURITY
HEARING ON: "GANG CRIME PREVENTION AND THE NEED TO FOSTER
INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL"
TUESDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2007
2141 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING - 1PM**

Good Afternoon.

Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Forbes, and Members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you regarding gang crime prevention.

This is a very important issue to me. Just last week, during the CBC Annual Legislative Conference I hosted a three-panel issue forum that discussed the grip of gangs and drug-related gang activity, and their impact in our communities.

Violent crime in the United States is on the rise nationwide.

According to a report recently released by the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting Program:

- robberies surged in 2006 by 7.2 percent;
- homicides rose by 1.8 percent; and
- violent crime overall rose by 1.9 percent.

Taken together, 2005 and 2006 represent the first steady increase in violent crime since 1993.

We need look no further than my hometown of Baltimore City, where we are headed for record-breaking incidents of violence.

Yesterday, the *Baltimore Sun* reported that since January 1st there have been 231 homicides, eclipsing the rate set during the same period last year by 23. At this pace, it is conceivable that the City will regretfully reach 300 homicides by the end of the year. While this figure is significantly lower than the record-high 353 homicides in 1993, the current situation is simply unacceptable.

I find these statistics to be deeply troubling, and I know that they are attributable, in large part, to the ravages of gang activity in our communities.

As you know, gangs are a very real and serious threat, which do not recognize geographical, socio-economic, or racial boundaries.

They are not just plaguing our inner cities—we are finding them in increasing numbers in the suburbs, as well.

In Baltimore City, gang activity has historically been limited to small, neighborhood crews, but we are now seeing an alarming trend where these smaller groups are beginning to identify with the national gangs like the Blood and the Crips.

If we do not stop this trend before it spreads, we will begin to see gang activity across the country that is comparable to that of cities like Los Angeles, with whole generations affected.

We must also address the allure of gangs to our children. It is time for us to come together as a community to minimize these risk factors. The number one preventive action we can take to help our children avoid gang involvement is strong parenting.

We must be active in their lives, whether it is helping them with their homework, sitting down to eat dinner with them, or just talking to them about the events taking place in their daily lives.

We must be proactive in knowing whom our children are befriending and what they do in their spare time. We must ensure that our children know they are loved and valued. We must keep informed of their progress in school and be in communication with their teachers. We must provide constructive activities to keep them engaged.

It is also critical that parents learn the warning signs so that they might identify gang activity. The things our children say at the dinner table or to their friends on the phone or through the internet may be more than just harmless slang; they may be specific gang language. Likewise, a wardrobe filled with one particular color may not be indicative that the child merely favors it; it could be the color representing that child's gang.

Most gang members go through progressive stages of involvement, and early detection can play a key role in helping our children before it is too late. It is hard for any parent to believe that his or her child may fall victim to this epidemic, but the risk is real. We must be prepared to recognize and prevent the risk.

In my Congressional District, I have teamed up with Mr. Frank Clark, the Director of Gang Intervention and Investigation for the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services, to hold three gang prevention summits.

Mr. Clark gives an excellent presentation for parents, teachers, and other members of the community to educate them about the signs and language of gang activity to make sure that we do not mistakenly dismiss dangerous communication from our children as harmless or useless slang.

While preventing young people from being lured into gangs is such an important part of addressing the crime problem plaguing our country, it is only one of many steps we need to take.

One large part of reducing the violence in our communities is through recognizing that without witnesses, there can be no justice. I am referring to the "conspiracy of silence" associated with witness intimidation. Known murderers walk the streets because witnesses are too afraid to come forward.

I was motivated to address the issue of witness intimidation after the death of Angela and Carnell Dawson and their five children, ages 9 to 14. The entire family was killed in October 2002, when their home was firebombed in retaliation for Mrs. Dawson's repeated complaints to the police about recurring drug trafficking in her East Baltimore neighborhood.

Witness intimidation is a plague on our justice system. According to the National Institute of Justice, 51 percent of prosecutors in large jurisdictions find witness intimidation to be a major problem. These prosecutors also suspect that witness intimidation occurs in up to 75 to 100 percent of the violent crimes committed in gang-dominated neighbors. In my hometown of Baltimore City, it is estimated that witness intimidation occurs in 90 percent of the cases that are prosecuted.

We must combat the "Stop Snitchin" movement spreading through our streets, and we must come together as a community to rise against this campaign of intimidation and fear.

I have been working closely with the State's Attorney for Baltimore City Patricia Jessamy to help curb witness intimidation and spread the message that coming forward as a witness to a crime is not snitching—it is the right thing to do. In fact, we are working on putting together a public service announcement to air throughout Baltimore encouraging witnesses to come forward and educating them about how to effectively do so without becoming the victim of retaliation.

Protecting witnesses is a core government function. It is standard in the federal system and state and local prosecutors should have the same tools.

Currently, there is a great disparity between funding and witness services (if any) that are provided by local authorities and the federal witness security program within the U.S. Marshals Services that operates on a \$40 million budget.

In comparison, the witness assistance program in my hometown of Baltimore City, which has the unfortunate distinction of being one of the most dangerous cities in the United States, is only able to obtain \$300,000 per year from the state.

This is why I introduced H.R. 933, the Witness Security and Protection Act of 2007 that authorizes \$270 million over the next three years to enable state and local prosecutors who demonstrate a need for funds to protect witnesses in cases involving gangs or other violence to establish short-term witness protection programs.

Improving protection for state and local witnesses will move us one step closer to alleviating the fears and threats to prospective witnesses and help safeguard our communities from violence. It is time that we show our commitment to our constituents and the justice system—because without witnesses, there can be no justice.

In closing, please know that I appreciate the opportunity to testify before this Subcommittee. I also commend each of my colleagues on the panel for their work in the area of gang prevention and awareness.