

## South Carolina legislature addresses gang activity

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Since 2002, gang activity has almost doubled, accounting for almost 700 criminal charges in 2005. These charges included such crimes as murder, rape, and kidnapping, although aggravated assault, simple assault, intimidation, and robbery represented most of the activity reported. It is obvious that South Carolina is facing a serious gang problem that demands attention.

Needless to say, the reality of gangs and their activity is ugly and is a serious obstacle to the development of our young people into responsible, contributing members of our community.

Unfortunately, gang activity is increasing in Kershaw County. I commend the Kershaw County Sheriff's Department, and especially the School Resource Officers, for their efforts to reach out to the community to educate our citizens about this disturbing problem. However, gangs have been difficult to control because mere association and the choice to express one's self by wearing a certain color, for example, are not illegal. Only when actions become violent can law enforcement get involved.

The South Carolina Legislature is making efforts to address this growing problem by giving law enforcement more tools to prevent crimes associated with gang activity. I have signed on to several pieces of legislation that seek to halt the escalation of gang activity in our State.

H. 3093 and H. 3049, both known as "The Criminal Gang Prevention Act," add new offenses that law enforcement can use to combat gang activity. This bill would make it illegal to coerce someone into joining a gang or preventing someone from leaving a gang. These bills also provide penalties for intimidation of victims or witnesses. Under this legislation, law enforcement will be able to seize weapons and money reasonably believed to have been used or that will be used in criminal gang activity. In addition, this legislation makes the state grand jury available to improve the ability of the State to prevent, detect, investigate, and prosecute crimes involving gang activity.

The bill also establishes a statewide criminal gang database to facilitate the exchange of information between federal, state, county, and municipal law enforcement agencies. This database and its corresponding staff person will benefit the entire state as better tracking will improve and better coordinate law enforcement's response to gang activity.

A companion bill in the Senate has already passed out of the Senate Judiciary Committee and is now in the Senate Finance Committee for further review.

Another bill, H. 3139, "The School Safety Act of 2007," focuses on the gang problem in schools. In many ways it mirrors "The Criminal Gang Prevention Act," but applies only on school property or at school-sponsored events.

Two provisions, in particular, apply specifically to the school environment. While many schools have imposed dress codes to help them deal with gang activity, some schools have gone a step further and are requiring students to wear uniforms. Based on the experience of some schools, this bill recognizes that schools may reduce disciplinary problems with a uniform requirement and creates a uniform pilot program. This bill would provide the funds from the lottery revenues for a school resource officer for three schools that initiate a uniform policy. Additionally, students who have been suspended or expelled must attend a conference with his or her parent and a designated school administrator before being allowed to return to school.

As with most issues that face society, good and effective laws are only part of the solution. Families, educators, and community members are all part of the equation that will help us give our youth the positive environment that they need to succeed and to avoid the dead-end, destructive path of joining gangs.