

Dealing with gangs another way

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CHARLOTTE -- Prison and punishment isn't cutting down on the gang problem – it's only making it worse, this according to a new report by the Justice Police Institute in Washington.

The report, which compared gang prevention tactics across the country, comes at a time when North Carolina lawmakers are debating legislation which would crack down harder on gangs. The legislation is the same type of approach which the report largely rejects.

"This report challenges us again from the way that the General Assembly was headed, and it may take a while to really believe this," said Landon Adams, executive director of the Triangle Lost Generation task force.

Released Wednesday, the report concluded that gang arrest sweeps and similar tactics in cities like Los Angeles failed to reduce violence or the number of gang members.

"When it becomes the sole approach, then you have the community and law enforcement in an antagonistic relationship," said Fran Cook with the Gang of One organization. "We don't want that."



A council of mayors against gangs.

Earlier this month, mayors and legislators from across the state lobbied for the proposed Street Gang Prevention Act, which would increase the sentence for gang-related crimes and punish those who block anyone from leaving a gang.

"It's a three-legged stool," said Winston-Salem Mayor Allen Joines. "It's suppression, it's intervention and prevention all working together."

Adds Charlotte Mayor Pat McCrory, "We must wake up. They are stealing, they are robbing, they are selling drugs, they are killing."

According to the report, the best way to deal with the gang problem might not be increasing punishment, but increasing opportunities.

"If that ex-offender wants to leave the gang and that gang lifestyle, then we need to do that to support that individual and that process," said Cook. "That could be anything to housing, to employment."

Adds Adams, "We are just to be taking money away from important programs which we don't sufficiently fund in the state enough, and it's not going to leave us any safer."

Supporters of the report hoped legislators will take a hard look at the gang findings and perhaps take a different approach in combating the problem.

"We are not in a crisis situation," said Cook. "We are in a situation of opportunity here in North Carolina and that's to intervene with gangs before they ever reach the level of New York or L.A."