

Councilman
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PARKS, CARDENAS FIGHT BALLOT INITIATIVE THAT WOULD CUT GANG PREVENTION FUNDS WHILE CONVICTING 14-YEAR OLDS AS ADULTS

Los Angeles- On Friday, Councilmembers Tony Cardenas and Bernard Parks unveiled an aggressive opposition measure urging voters to take a stand against a controversial ballot initiative. The councilmembers say the proposed statewide Safe Neighborhoods Act will deny kids an opportunity to reform their lives, cuts funding for vital gang prevention and intervention programs, and spends billions of taxpayer dollars making sure kids are forced to share jail cells with adult prisoners.

Introduced by California State Senator George Runner, the proposed ballot initiative will make it mandatory for all teens starting at 14 years of age to be tried as an adult if they are convicted of any gang-related crime, even if they are not actual gang members. Standing with civil rights groups, youth activists, and worker organizations at a press conference, Cardenas and Parks called Runner's proposal "senseless" and introduced a measure asking the City Council to oppose it.

"By voting for this ballot measure, California will be feeding its children to the wolves," said Councilmember Cardenas. "This archaic initiative would require the taxpayer to foot the bill and send these children to the most expensive school we pay for – prison – where they will learn how to become better criminals. This should be called the Scary Neighborhood Act, not the Safe Neighborhood Act."

The press conference was held at the Rita Walters Learning Complex, a city-funded community center, which provides an array of programs like gang intervention and prevention, youth development, and parenting and employment classes for adults. City officials chose the location to show an example of a community-based program that deters kids from gangs in contrast to the approach of "more handcuffs and jail time." Councilmembers are getting an early start on an aggressive campaign to educate voters on the Safe Neighborhood Act, since signatures have already been collected to put it on the November ballot. Those signatures are currently in the process of being verified.

"This initiative is misleading; we should be more focused on youth development, prevention and intervention, and education," said Councilman Bernard Parks. "This bill severely cuts funding from some our most important youth development programs and places a single-minded approach on enforcing the law. Studies have reflected that law enforcement cannot arrest its way out of issues confronting our society. We need a more balanced and thoughtful approach to addressing the communities' needs."

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The taxpayer spends roughly about \$46,000 a year to keep one adult in prison. It only costs between \$1200 and \$1300 a year to keep a kid in a prevention program and out of prison.

Councilmembers say the initiative also takes advantage of Californians' fear of crime in order to justify limiting civil liberties. Main concerns of the ballot proposal include:

- It puts young people in adult jails, forcing children as young as 14 convicted of "gang-related" felonies to serve time with adult prisoners.
- It treats poor people like criminals. Those who get public housing money would be subjected to annual criminal background checks. Recent convictions would disqualify them for the aid.
- It denies bail to those merely suspected of gang-related crimes, turning their right to conditional release into an opportunity for punishment.

"After spending billions on police and prisons, LA has six times as many gangs and at least twice as many gang members as it did 35 years ago," said Kim McGill of the Youth Justice Coalition. "As our prisons have grown, the budget for public schools and universities -- as well as every other community service -- has shrunk. In the 1970s we were number one in the nation in school funding and test scores. Now we're 47th in school funding and nearly last place in test scores and graduation rates."

According to state officials, the act will cost one billion dollars the first year and \$500 million every year after if passed.

California already leads the nation in incarceration with more than 175,000 people in state prisons and county jails. For the past three decades, California's prison population has grown more than 700% contributing to the city and state budget crisis.

"This initiative is the most expensive revolving door the taxpayer will be obligated to pay for," said Cardenas.

More than 80% of the prison system is populated by people with non-violent drug offenses and administrative parole violations—issues, officials say, that can be addressed more successfully and cost effectively by community-based programs.

Currently, California spends over \$10 billion in incarceration costs. That exceeds what the state spends on the University of California budget and the Cal State University Education system. In fact, it almost triples both. (The state only spends \$3.8 billion on the University of CA budget and \$3.3 billion on the Cal State University System.)

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California also puts more people in jail than any other state (about 176,000 currently incarcerated, according to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation).

“The Safe Neighborhoods Act smacks of previous failed laws like California’s Three Strikes, Proposition 21, and the STEP Act, all of which swelled the black and Latino populations in state prisons but did nothing to make surrounding communities safer,” said Damon Azali-Rojas, organizer of both the Labor/Community Strategy Center and the statewide coalition to defeat the Runner Initiative.

“If we really look at what strengthens our communities, it’s not hard to see what works,” said Damon. “Instead of giving millions to a prison system that is sinking under its own weight, we could give a job to everyone on the gang database, treat drug and alcohol addiction medically, and reject racially targeted laws that split our communities.”

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