

TOP NEWS

Editorial: Reduce gang violence, change sentencing laws

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BALTIMORE -

The same gang members responsible for drug running, murder and extortion in prison are also responsible for it in our communities. So it should anger us that gang membership is increasing in our prisons and feeding the spread of this urban cancer into our suburbs.

Earlier this month, *Examiner* staff writer Luke Broadwater reported that state prisons in Jessup house 250 gangs with 1,900 members. Last month gang thugs murdered two people at one of the facilities there.

“There are more gang members coming out of prisons than ever before,” said Trooper Greg Kies of the Maryland State Police, who has investigated gangs for 10 years.

Law enforcement experts place the number of gang members in Maryland at about 10,000. No one was counting 10 years ago, say officials. But Kies says activity has increased over that time. And the activity is spreading out of the cities in which it is born.

According to the State’s Attorneys Office, 52 gang members in 13 different gangs operate in Carroll County. In Howard County, police report a growing crime problem caused by the notorious Latino gang MS-13. And in Harford County, a judge earlier this month sentenced an 18-year-old to life plus 60 years for a 2004 murder described by prosecutors as a rite of passage to join the Bloods.

The reasons for the increase in membership and spread to the suburbs are diverse. To build their financial power and influence formerly single-race gangs recruit members across ethnic and age groups. Some children as young as 8 and 9 are joining, said Trooper Kies. So are girls, who are often more violent than their male counterparts.

Gov. Robert Ehrlich allocated \$5.6 million earlier this month to fund new anti-gang efforts, including educating communities and schools how to identify gang members by tattoos and clothes.

Yet funding anti-gang efforts without addressing what fuels them — drug trafficking and weak family and community ties — is like burning money.

With some 21 percent of state inmates jailed for drug offenses, and 80 percent of Maryland’s prisoners abusing drugs and/or alcohol, it’s no wonder correctional facilities breed gangs and more drug trafficking.

Decreasing incarceration rates for drug possession by emphasizing treatment is one way to address the gang problem in Maryland prisons. In California, people convicted of first- and second-time drug possession are treated instead of jailed. In the five years since the program began, the state’s drug possession prisoner population has fallen 27 percent, according to the Justice Policy Institute in

Washington.

Ehrlich's 2004 substance abuse treatment initiative, designed to redirect addicts from prisons and jails into substance abuse treatment, is a good first step. But the legislature needs to pass a measure that addresses the problem before addicts enter prison. Maryland's Campaign for Treatment Not Incarceration lauds the 2004 treatment legislation but complains that "Maryland's harsh mandatory minimum drug laws and sentencing guidelines are pushing in the opposite direction."

The group advocates getting rid of mandatory minimum sentencing and reducing the number of people locked up for nonviolent offenses. We agree.

It's hard to understand why the state promotes a system that makes people more violent when they leave prison than when they entered.

Transforming the war on drugs to a war on addiction would save Maryland taxpayers millions of dollars. It would remove the incentive to join a gang. Most significantly, it would cut off the funding source for their growth.

The state legislature must end mandatory minimums to help save lives from a cycle of violence and addiction, to reduce crime in our urban areas and halt the inexorable spread of gang violence to the suburbs.