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## Get-tough measures target gangs

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**BY LINDA STEIN**  
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In October, a 20-year-old college student was dragged from her car while stopped in traffic in downtown Trenton.

"Thugs snatched her jewelry, dragged her to the ground, beat and kicked her," Assembly Majority Leader Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-Mercer) said yesterday.

In January, Coleman said, a melee broke out among 40 people outside a high school in Jersey City. Two students were shot and two were beaten.

And in February, a man was arrested and charged with the shooting death of a Willingboro man and with wounding two others.

Coleman cited those incidents during a Statehouse news conference in Trenton as she unveiled 17 bills designed to take back New Jersey's streets from gangs.

The bills include gun courts for Mercer and Essex counties and hearings to determine whether bail money comes from legitimate sources.

Other bills would make it a second-degree crime to recruit a minor to join a gang. Another would bar the disclosure of personal information about grand jury witnesses, except their name, to shield them from intimidation.

"Gangs in New Jersey are flourishing, not just in the poor communities but across the rest of the state," Coleman said. "Gangs are large, well-organized and efficient. They are ruthless. We have a gang problem in New Jersey, and it's only growing larger. It's time we did something about it."

Coleman said a 2004 State Police report showed 17 percent of homicides were gang-related and 39 percent of gang activity occurred in the suburbs. Some 28 gangs had more than 100 members each, and there has been a 44 percent increase in gang activity since 2001.

The Bloods, Crips and Latin Kings are the most violent and also the most aggressive recruiters of new members, she said.

Gang membership for children younger than 15 quadrupled between 2001 and 2004, she said. Coleman said the bills will help prevent gang violence, protect children and witnesses from gangs and empower police and communities to fight gangs.

Some of the legislation targets prevention with anti-gang programs in the schools, she said. Another would offer youths employment and after-school programs.

Others would increase the penalties for possession of an assault weapon and for transferring a firearm to a minor and for possession of a "community gun," a weapon passed around for use in a crime. Those offenses would now carry a 10-year prison sentence and a \$150,000 fine, she said.

Another bill would regulate the sale of ammunition, and one would require the forfeiture of a vehicle if an illegal weapon were found inside.

"You can't have a drive-by (shooting) if you don't have anything to drive," Coleman said.

"At this point, we're not endorsing any specific bills," said David Wald, a spokesman for state Attorney General Zulima V. Farber. "We did have input on them. We share the assemblywoman's commitment to having the strongest possible laws to fight gangs and violence."

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