

Robert L. Listenbee
Opening Remarks
“Children Exposed to Violence:
Strategies for Investigation, Prosecution, and Treatment”
Przybla Center, Catholic University
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Thanks, Jelahn, for that kind introduction. It’s wonderful to be here this morning with all of you.

And I also want to join Mary Lou Leary in expressing my gratitude to the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the District of Columbia for organizing today’s conference, and to the Office for Victims of Crime for sponsoring this event.

As Mary Lou mentioned, Attorney General Eric Holder launched the Defending Childhood Initiative in response to the groundbreaking National Survey of Children’s Exposure to Violence, supported by the Office of Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The survey is the most comprehensive effort to date to measure children’s exposure to violence.

Let me share with you four key findings:

60 percent of children in the United States were exposed to violence, crime, or abuse in their homes, schools and communities, either as victims or witnesses—during the 1-year initial survey period.

Almost 40 percent of children were direct victims of 2 or more violent acts during that same period.

1 in 10 were victims of violence 5 or more times.

And nearly 1 in 10 saw a family member assault another family member.

This is totally unacceptable. And it goes without saying that exposure to violence can have a lifelong impact on a child’s well-being.

Research has shown that regular exposure to violence can interfere with brain development, emotional attachment, healthy relationships, physical health, and educational success.

The picture becomes even more complex when children are “polyvictims”—meaning, they are exposed to multiple types of violence, as is true for 1 in 10 children in this country.

Children exposed to multiple types of violence are at very high risk for losing the fundamental capacities necessary for normal development, successful learning, and a productive adulthood.

One study, it’s called the Adverse Childhood Experiences study, documents that traumatic experiences during childhood and adolescence can have a profound effect on adult health, well-being, and mortality a half-century later.

As Mary Lou mentioned a few minutes ago, I was appointed along with the baseball legend Joe Torre to co-chair the Attorney General's Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence. I'll talk more about the task force in just a moment.

It wasn't until Joe was in his 50s, and his wife told him he needed to seek counseling, that he figured out the source of his lifelong feelings of intense shame and low self-esteem. This is a guy who was headed toward the Hall of Fame, a great baseball player, a great baseball manager. And he had an issue with self-esteem.

What he discovered when he got treatment was that the source of these painful feelings was exposure to violence during childhood.

When he was growing up, he watched helplessly as his mother faced verbal and physical abuse from his father.

Now Joe is trying to help other children to heal from domestic violence through his Joe Torre Safe at Home Foundation.

I also was exposed to violence as a young person—violence on the streets of my community. I grew up in Mt. Clemens in Michigan—just outside Detroit.

In high school, street gangs with knives and baseball bats were commonplace.

By the mid-1970s, violence escalated, as local gangs graduated to guns and developed relationships with violent drug gangs in Detroit.

As a result of violence in the community, I have had so many relatives murdered and friends killed.

My family and I used to count the names on our fingers when I was a young man.

So I experienced violence up close and personal in my community.

I know what that's like, and it gave me a conviction that this kind of violence has got to be addressed.

Children's exposure to violence is a national public health crisis. Many children exposed to violence show up frequently in our emergency rooms and hospitals.

And if these public health needs go unaddressed, this becomes a serious public safety problem. These young people can also become the repeat offenders in our juvenile justice system.

It's important to note that exposure to violence is not limited to one community or one group of children. It occurs in all ethnic and racial groups; in urban, suburban, and rural areas; in gated communities and on tribal lands.

So that's a little bit of background on the scope and the seriousness of the problem.

Now, I'm going to speak a bit about the Attorney General's Defending Childhood Initiative—specifically, about the Attorney General's National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence.

In 2011, Attorney General Eric Holder appointed a 13-member task force of experts in medicine, the law, law enforcement, health, social services, and other areas of expertise to hold hearings across the

nation and offer recommendations for a coordinated national effort to reduce children's exposure to violence.

The Attorney General charged the task force with recommending ways our nation can prevent, reduce, and treat children's exposure to violence.

As we traveled around the country, the task force heard from dozens of people who work to prevent, reduce, and treat children's exposure to violence, as well as from many who have experienced it.

Their stories of what they had seen and lived through were sometimes horrifying but always inspired us to deeper commitment. What we learned from them has changed the way we think about this issue.

I came away from the task force hearings convinced that the long-term negative outcomes of exposure to violence can be prevented, and children exposed to violence can be helped to recover.

Children who are exposed to violence can heal IF we identify them early and give them specialized services, evidence-based treatment, and proper care and support.

I'm happy to report that in December 2012, our task force released a final report with more than 50 recommendations for launching a coordinated national campaign to reduce children's exposure to violence.

In April, Attorney General Holder signed off on the action plan, which means things are being set in motion . . . things are moving ahead.

The report charges leaders at the highest levels of the executive and legislative branches of the federal government with coordinating and implementing the task force recommendations.

There are too many recommendations in our report to mention in detail here, but today I am going to focus on six of those recommendations:

1. There should be universal screening, assessment, and treatment for children's exposure to violence across all systems, including the mental health, child welfare, and juvenile justice systems.
2. The task force also recommended universal training on children's exposure to violence for child- and family-serving professionals across all systems. This training would provide the knowledge and skills needed to recognize and address the impact of violence and psychological trauma on children.
3. Another recommendation that will be put into action is launching a national public awareness campaign. The campaign will involve a full range of outreach efforts to increase public knowledge about the scope of children's exposure to violence and to promote community action. As Administrator, I will be working with our partners to bring about a sea-change in public awareness so that we can change social norms to protect children from violence and its harmful effects.
4. American Indian/Alaska Native children have an exceptional degree of unmet need for services and support to prevent and respond to the extreme levels of violence they experience. So the fourth recommendation we will be moving on is the creation of a separate American Indian/Alaska Native commission that would explore the additional burdens confronting tribal

communities. Priorities for this task force would include developing appropriate models for identifying and treating Native children, supporting tribal communities as they develop their own solutions to the problem, and involving tribal youth in the creation of those solutions.

5. The fifth item we will be moving on is looking at how states can effectively blend funding streams to better serve children exposed to violence through local school systems, the child welfare system, the juvenile justice system, and the private sector. We are currently “mapping” sources of federal funding to determine the best way to accomplish this.
6. The sixth and final item I want to mention is the leveraging of public-private partnerships to support the implementation of the task force recommendations at the national, state, tribal, and local levels. The Office of Justice Programs has been developing and improving its capacity to partner with such groups by clarifying legal and practical considerations and guidelines for partnerships with outside organizations.

These recommendations, as well as the dozens of other recommendations in the task force report, are designed to marshal resources across the nation to confront what I can only call a national crisis.

A problem of this magnitude demands a strong and wide-reaching response.

I’m confident that, in the years ahead, we will make a concrete difference in the lives of many, many children in this country.

I want to close with some words from Attorney General Holder. He said:

“We have budget issues that we have to deal with. We have economic issues that we have to deal with. Yet, what could be more important than the children of this nation? What we do in this regard says an awful lot about who we are as a people and what kind of nation we want to be.”

And our vision statement at the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention goes right to the heart of the matter in thinking about the kind of nation we aspire to be.

At OJJDP, we envision a nation where our children are healthy, educated and free from violence. If they come into contact with the juvenile justice system, the contact should be rare, fair, and beneficial to them.

An estimated 46 million children living in the United States at this very moment can expect to have their lives touched by violence, crime, abuse, or psychological trauma this year.

We must not look away. We must protect them, and we must give them hope that their future will be better and safer.

Thank you.