

REMARKS

OF

THE HONORABLE KAROL V. MASON
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AT THE

CONGRESSIONAL BLACK CAUCUS
NATIONAL SUMMIT ON VIOLENCE IN URBAN COMMUNITIES

ON

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CHICAGO, IL

Thank you, Congressman Rush. I'm very pleased to be here. And my humble thanks to you, to Congressman Davis, and to Congresswoman Kelly for inviting me to the great city of Chicago. Thank you, as well, Congresswoman Waters and Congresswoman Fudge, for your presence here today and for your leadership in Congress every day. It's an honor to be here to talk about something that I, and I know all of us here, care so very deeply about: the safety, well-being, and future of our youth.

I want to commend Chicago's congressional delegation and the entire Congressional Black Caucus for giving this issue their urgent attention. Indeed, there is nothing more urgent than protecting our kids. The citizens of Chicago are fortunate to have such outstanding and committed leaders, and I want everyone here to know – on behalf of the Attorney General – that the United States Department of Justice stands beside them as they work to end the violence that troubles this city and that has claimed far too many young lives.

In his remarks at the White House last Friday, President Obama talked about what we need to do to support our young African American men, the ones who are so often at the center of the violence we're talking about today. He spoke of the need to reinforce positive values and to send a clear message that America cares about them and wants them to be a "full part of this society." He said this isn't a job for some grand federal program, but he did say we all have a role – those of us in Washington, those of you in Chicago, and people across the country. And it's a job we can't afford to put off any longer.

Consider that, nationwide, seven children and teenagers die from gunfire every day. Consider that 84 percent of murder victims ages 10 to 19 are killed by a firearm. Consider that black males between the ages of 16 and 19 have the highest rate of violent victimization of any race and any age group. And consider that, for African American boys and young men between the ages of 10 and 24, homicide is not only the leading cause of death, it results in more deaths than the next four leading causes combined.

I could keep citing statistics, but I know I don't have to. You see it every day in your communities. For too many of Chicago's neighborhoods – and in too many inner-city neighborhoods across the country – violence is a daily, and a deadly, fact of life.

But as entrenched and as deeply rooted as it sometimes appears, we don't have to accept violence as an article of faith. The violence in neighborhoods like Auburn Gresham, North Lawndale, and Roseland is troubling, to be sure, but it is not inevitable. We know through experience and through research that when citizens band together and work to end violence, when faith and community leaders and local agencies engage with one another across disciplines and in a spirit of true problem-solving, and when stakeholders are willing to try new approaches that rely as much on prevention and intervention as enforcement and prosecution, we can reduce violence and dramatically improve outcomes for our young people.

We know this to be true because at the Department of Justice, we're building partnerships in cities like Chicago to prevent youth violence, and we're relying on the best research to inform our approach. The Department is part of a major effort called the National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention, which the White House launched three years ago. The Forum brings together citizens, community and faith-based groups, law enforcement officials, public health professionals, business and philanthropic leaders, and others to develop violence prevention strategies tailored to the needs of each community. Chicago is one of ten cities carrying out comprehensive plans to reduce violent crime and improve opportunities for youth.

We've gotten high levels of support for this effort in every participating city, and the Administration's commitment is coming from the highest levels. With this broad backing, community stakeholders are working together to design bold new strategies to tackle their most intractable problems, and the work they're doing is showing tremendous promise.

It's important to emphasize the comprehensive nature of our approach. Enforcement alone is not the answer to the problem of youth violence. We cannot simply arrest our way out of this – and we wouldn't want to. The fact is that if we truly hope to bring about sustainable reductions in violence among our youth, we must look to prevention and intervention programs, as well as reentry programs that target young people.

We know from our research that a majority of American kids – more than 60 percent, actually – are exposed to some form of violence, crime, or abuse, ranging from brief encounters as witnesses to serious violent episodes as victims. Almost 40 percent are direct victims of 2 or more violent acts. These numbers are alarming, and they're unacceptable. The Attorney General put it best. He said, kids are "living with violence at rates that we, as adults, would never tolerate."

The consequences of this exposure can be serious. It can lead to poor performance in school, to drug and alcohol abuse, to long-term psychological harm, and, yes, to later criminal behavior.

But there is some good news. We know that young people are adaptable and resilient, and that most want to do the right thing. Kids who have been put upon a path of delinquent and self-destructive behavior can get off that path and turn their lives around as long as someone is there to steer them straight. And as the research makes clear, the earlier this intervention happens, the better the outcomes will be.

That's why the Forum relies heavily on prevention and intervention. And that's why, almost three years ago, the Attorney General launched the Defending Childhood Initiative. This is an effort that my office, the Office of Justice Programs, is leading. Our goal is to improve our knowledge about what works to mitigate children's exposure to violence and prevent that exposure from leading to problems in the future.

We know there are great programs out there that can reverse the damage done by violence in a child's life. We're working to raise awareness of these approaches and find ways to get them into communities where children are at particular risk of violence. That's what we're doing through Defending Childhood: taking the knowledge we've gained through research and experience and turning it into workable strategies for preventing violence.

Back in Washington, even as we speak, the Associate Attorney General, the Administrator of our Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and other leaders in the Department, are meeting today with experts in the juvenile justice field to discuss, among other things, the findings of a national task force on children exposed to violence. The Attorney General commissioned this task force to recommend ways to expand our base of knowledge about what works and design a comprehensive strategy to reduce the incidence of violence in our children's lives. This is a top priority, not just of my office, but of the Attorney General and the entire Department of Justice.

But prevention and intervention aren't just the concern of an individual child or that child's family. They're the responsibility of the entire community. It shouldn't surprise any of us here that intervention efforts have a much better chance of success when they engage community residents. Programs like Chicago's own CureViolence and the Group Violence Reduction Strategy, now being used by the Chicago Police Department have helped to show us what's possible when the full community becomes involved. When residents send a message – saying to young offenders, “we won't tolerate your wrongful behavior, but we want you to succeed, and we're here to help you do that” – the results can be remarkable.

Our juvenile justice office runs a terrific program called the Community-Based Violence Prevention Demonstration Program that supports evidence-based efforts to prevent and reduce youth violence. These programs are taking models like CureViolence and Boston's CeaseFire program and helping other cities adapt these approaches. Again, our goal is to take those practices we know to work and introduce them in communities that are facing similar youth violence problems.

But we can't stop there. Prevention and intervention are critical, but we must acknowledge, as a nation, that young men in our inner cities face disparities in our justice system. African American youth make up just 16 percent of the overall youth population, but more than half of the juvenile population arrested for committing a violent crime.

The rates of incarceration for young black men are shockingly high, and that has a devastating impact on their families and communities. One in nine African American children has a parent behind bars, and these kids often struggle with depression, learning problems, and aggression, undermining their own chances of success.

And all too often – as many of you know – when black teens get in trouble at school, even for minor infractions, they're more likely than others to be expelled from

school and end up in the justice system. Think about that, we want our kids to do better in school, so what do we do – we kick them out of school.

Too often, youthful indiscretions that should be dealt with by the schools or in the home have become matters for the court. Too many of our young black men are being dispatched to our criminal and juvenile justice systems. In too many cases, what should be the last resort is the first response. This must change, and we must be the ones to change it.

That's why I'm so proud that the Department of Justice, under the leadership of an Attorney General committed to change, is taking steps – bold steps – to end this cycle of disparity, displacement, and dislocation. We're doing it by working to reduce minority contact with the juvenile justice system. We're doing it by working with our federal partners under the Supportive School Discipline Initiative to keep kids in school and connected with their families and communities. We're doing it by pushing out information on effective programs through our CrimeSolutions.gov Web site and by using the OJP Diagnostic Center to help communities adopt these programs. And we're doing it by joining with cities like Chicago to show our young people that there is a better way than a life of crime.

But the Department of Justice can only be one part of the response, and not the most important part. The real answers must come from you, the civic leaders, the community organizers, the church leaders, the parents, and kids themselves. Mayor Emanuel is to be commended for his leadership in winning over business and philanthropic leaders to the cause. There are also terrific non-profit programs here dedicated to creating opportunities for youth, programs like BAM – Becoming A Man – that provide mentors and enrichment opportunities for at-risk youth. And I know there are many other groups determined to bring about the changes this city, and so many other cities, need.

I encourage you to find these groups, these pockets of determination, and be part of their work. And I encourage you to share your ideas and successes with us so we can share them with others across the country. If you know of successful faith-based partnerships, let us know so that our Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships can leverage that knowledge in other cities. If you're running a program that's making inroads with at-risk youth, tell us so we can get that information out there to others who need it. Help us spread the word. Believe me, your involvement, your ideas, and your spirit will make a difference.

We're standing with you at the Department of Justice. We know there are solutions to the challenges you're facing, and we will help you find those solutions. We can't afford not to. We are determined to succeed. We'll do it together for Chicago, and we'll do it for all America's children.

Thank you.

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