

REMARKS

OF

THE HONORABLE KAROL V. MASON  
ASSISTANT ATTORNEY GENERAL  
OFFICE OF JUSTICE PROGRAMS

AT THE

NATIONAL SUMMIT ON PREVENTING YOUTH VIOLENCE

ON

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WASHINGTON, DC

Thank you, Theron. I'm delighted to see everyone and thrilled to join Attorney General Holder; the Director of the White House Domestic Policy Council, Cecilia Muñoz; and our other distinguished speakers and presenters this morning. Let me echo Theron's words of welcome. I know many of you have travelled long distances to be here, and all of you have taken time out of what I know are very busy schedules. We're extremely grateful for your participation and commitment.

I'd like to take just a minute to thank those who've made this summit possible. Many people were involved – too many to name – but I have to single out three people: Theron Pride, a Senior Policy Advisor in the Office of the Assistant Attorney General for the Office of Justice Programs, whom you've already met; Eugene Schneeberg, Director of the Justice Department's Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships and one of the Department's real leaders in addressing youth violence; and Geroma Void, who's expertly handled the countless logistical matters that have gone into making this summit possible. Thank you, Theron, Eugene, and Geroma.

I also want to thank my colleague Bob Listenbee, the Administrator of our Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. This is Bob's first summit as OJJDP's Administrator, but he's long been a champion of efforts to address youth violence and improve our juvenile justice system. Many of you recognize him as one of the co-chairs, along with Joe Torre, of the Attorney General's National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence. We couldn't ask for a better leader at OJJDP.

I also want to recognize our federal partners – both within and outside the Department of Justice, and on Capitol Hill. As you can see, the commitment to this effort runs to the highest levels. And behind each of these leaders is a host of dedicated staff working hard to make our vision a reality.

And finally, and most importantly, I want to say “thank you” to those of you from the local level. As the Attorney General has said many times before, we know that meeting these challenges ultimately depends on the commitment you make and the actions you take. We're grateful for all you do in your communities and are very glad to have you with us today.

We've got a very busy morning and a packed day ahead of us, and I know you're all anxious to hear from the Attorney General, but I'd just like to set the stage for what we're going to be talking about over the course of this summit.

For those of us in this room, and for many other communities across the country, we're trying to understand and deal with a serious and complicated problem. In too many neighborhoods, we've seen an explosion of violence committed by and – more troubling – against our young people. What makes it more disturbing is that, too often, this violence is tolerated, as if an article of faith.

The impact of this violence, and of our acquiescence, is greater than it appears on the surface. We can see the immediate physical damage it does, and we know it causes

emotional trauma in the kids it touches. But we don't always appreciate the full toll it takes on a child's body and mind and on the families and communities he or she belongs to.

A growing body of research in developmental psychology and neuroscience is showing us that trauma does great harm to the brain and can have life-long consequences. Kids who are exposed to violence have higher rates of heart disease, obesity, diabetes, and other physical issues. They are more likely to suffer psychological and emotional problems like depression and other forms of mental illness. They experience more social challenges like poor academic performance, difficulty finding a job, and delinquent and criminal behavior. They're at greater risk of future victimization and suicide. Exposure to violence damages a child's DNA the way smoking or radiation exposure does, which means it can significantly shorten one's life.

A young person exposed to trauma clearly suffers grave consequences, but we're all affected. It affects us in rising healthcare, criminal justice, and other public costs. And it robs us of a future generation of leaders. This is a significant public safety problem that is fast becoming a serious public health problem.

But there is good news, too. Just as research is showing us the extent of the negative effects of violence, it is also shedding new light on what we can do to counter those effects.

Many of us have begun to institute some of these evidence-based approaches in our own spheres of work. Our challenge now is to bring all these efforts together – to coordinate our activities so that we're prepared to address these developmental needs at every phase of the service delivery system.

You'll notice behind me a slide – and my thanks to Clare Anderson, the Deputy Commissioner for the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, for developing it. The slide shows the path from early trauma to later violence and maps out all the points at which we can intervene to return a young person to healthy development, beginning with the traumatic incident or incidents; moving through the first symptoms in a child's biological and psychological development; then into what they call in the clinical world “maladaptive coping” strategies – eating and sleeping disorders, anxiety, withdrawal; then next to anger, aggression, and other delinquent behaviors; and finally the perpetrating of violent acts.

Our goal is to put ourselves in the position of identifying where kids are in this process and matching them with appropriate interventions so that we can get them into safe and supportive environments and back on track developmentally.

For those of us at the federal level, this means breaking out of our silos and working collectively to ensure that our programs fit together as seamlessly as possible within a larger framework of prevention and response. This is something we're already doing through the Forum and our Defending Childhood Initiative, bringing together

agencies from across the government – the Justice Department, and the Departments of Health and Human Services, Education, and Housing and Urban Development, and others. We need to build on this progress and make sure we’re aligning our work so that we’re equipping communities to address kids at each level of this trauma-to-violence process.

More will be said about this throughout the summit. In the meantime, I encourage everyone to think about the solutions to the problem of youth and violence in terms of healthy development.

I’m excited about this emphasis on a trauma-informed approach to violence. It holds tremendous promise because it focuses our collective efforts on a major root cause of violence and clearly outlines when and how we can respond to get young people off the path of poor choices and self-destructive behaviors. If we use this structure to guide our work, I believe we will start to see tremendous progress in our efforts to reduce violence and improve the health of our youth.

I look forward to working together with all of you to make this vision a reality.

Now it’s my pleasure to introduce our two very distinguished speakers. I’ll introduce them both now, then turn it over to the Attorney General. Ms. Muñoz will take the podium immediately after Attorney General Holder speaks.

First, it’s my honor to introduce the leader of the Justice Department, who is also the leader of our efforts to reduce youth violence. Ever since I’ve known him, Eric Holder has put the safety of our young people at the top of his priority list. His commitment goes back to his days as U.S. Attorney, superior court judge, Deputy Attorney General, and now as the nation’s chief law enforcement officer. His commitment has never wavered, and it is one of the highlights of my career to have the opportunity to work closely with him on his Defending Childhood Initiative.

He’s been a champion of the National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention from the start. His presence at every one of these summits is testament to his commitment to these issues. I feel so fortunate to have him leading the Department’s efforts to address children’s exposure to violence.

Following the Attorney General will be Ms. Cecilia Muñoz, who I’m delighted could join us today. Ms. Muñoz is the Assistant to the President and Director of the Domestic Policy Council, the coordination center for the National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention.

She is one of President Obama’s closest advisors. Before taking over at the Domestic Policy Council, Cecilia oversaw the Administration’s relationships with local governments, our key partners in the Forum. Now she coordinates all the President’s domestic policy initiatives.

She has a strong background and interest in issues affecting minority communities. Before joining the White House, she was Senior Vice President of the Office of Research, Advocacy, and Legislation at the National Council of La Raza. She championed issues ranging from civil rights to immigration reform on behalf of the Latino community.

Her commitment to addressing crime, poverty, and displacement is well-known throughout the Administration. She's a true advocate for the goals of the Forum and a big supporter of the work all of us are doing. We're thrilled that she could join us.

Now, to our first speaker – it's my honor to give you the Attorney General of the United States, Eric Holder.

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