

REMARKS

OF

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OFFICE OF JUSTICE PROGRAMS

AT THE

MEETING OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES  
COMMITTEE ON A PRIORITIZED PLAN TO  
IMPLEMENT A DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH IN  
JUVENILE JUSTICE REFORM

ON

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2014  
WASHINGTON, DC

Thank you, Professor Bonnie. I'm very pleased to join you all this morning. I want to thank the National Academy of Sciences for inviting me to speak and for working so closely with our Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention on the important issue of juvenile justice reform.

I particularly want to thank this committee for the work you are doing to improve our nation's juvenile justice systems. Strengthening these systems is not only a core part of our mission at the Office of Justice Programs, but a top personal priority of mine. I believe that the key to ensuring public safety is the work we do on the front end with our young people – identifying children who are exposed to violence and trauma, intervening with at-risk youth early on, and giving kids the support and skills they need to stay on – or in some cases to find – a path of responsible, productive behavior.

The NAS report that this committee was created to respond to hit the nail on the head in emphasizing the need for a developmentally informed approach to juvenile justice. For too long, our juvenile justice policies and practices, while well-meaning, have been guided by assumptions that have proven to be wrong. They've treated those who come into the system not as kids needing help and capable of being put back on a healthy developmental path, but as hardened adult criminals barely deserving of our attention.

The consequences are unfortunate, sometimes tragic, for our kids and for the safety and health of our communities. Young people are removed from their families and positive support networks, they're taken out of schools and put into facilities where they have little opportunity to develop prosocial skills, and they find themselves with juvenile and criminal records that, in most cases, will follow them throughout the rest of their lives. The result is that these kids, who actually have the potential to change and be productive citizens, begin a long, tough journey that may well lead to bigger crimes and continued involvement with the justice system.

Thanks to research in developmental psychology and neuroscience, and to enlightened thinkers like all of you, we now know that we can do better. We know the harm that these misguided practices of the recent past can do, and even more, we know that there are programs and approaches that can have a profound, positive impact, both for our kids and for the safety of our communities.

One of our primary responsibilities at the Office of Justice Programs is to identify these approaches and get that information out to practitioners and policymakers. Through our research function, we're helping to expand the base of knowledge about what works in juvenile justice. Then through our programs, we're taking that knowledge and promoting evidence-based practices that we know can make a difference in the field.

Our Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention – which is headed by one of the most knowledgeable and committed advocates you'll ever meet – is leading our work. Bob Listenbee has been working hard to get the message out about his office's mission and about the critical things they're doing to improve juvenile justice in America.

I was very pleased that one of the recommendations in the NAS report was to strengthen the role of OJJDP. OJJDP plays a vital role in guiding state, local, and tribal juvenile justice policies and bringing the latest evidence into the field of practice. As our base of knowledge grows, as it has in recent years, OJJDP's role in marrying research to practice will be more important than ever.

Bob and his staff are already working hard to make our nation's juvenile justice systems more evidence-based. They oversee important – groundbreaking – work aimed at strengthening the juvenile justice system and helping kids stay or get back on a healthy developmental path. They're also working to shrink the juvenile justice system, to reduce harm to children and help them heal from traumatic experiences. They're encouraging states, territories, and tribal communities to divert status and low-risk offenders before they enter the system. They're committing youth to community-based programs where assessments indicate that's appropriate. And they're working to develop a continuum of diversion and community-based programs as alternatives to detention and out-of-home placement.

All this, of course, begins by intervening early with children who are exposed to violence and trauma. As you well know, the incidence of this exposure is disturbingly high. Our own research tells us that 60 percent of children in the United States 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. And as you also know, this early exposure to violence can lead to a host of future problems, including later criminal behavior. So we need to intervene with these kids as early as possible to interrupt the trauma-to-violence process.

In 2010, the Attorney General launched his Defending Childhood Initiative. This initiative was, in part, a response to the research findings I just cited, but it's also an issue of long-standing interest and concern to him, going back to his days as U.S. Attorney and Deputy Attorney General in the Clinton Administration. The purpose of Defending Childhood is to reduce this exposure and mitigate the effects on children who do encounter violence. We're doing this by supporting additional research to help us better understand the dynamics and the scope of violence and trauma in children's lives. We're also supporting promising intervention programs in communities across the country. The goal is to get these kids into safe and supportive environments and back on track developmentally.

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. The NAS report makes this point, as well. Programs like CureViolence in Chicago and the Group Violence Reduction Strategy, which was pioneered in Boston under the name CeaseFire, have helped to show us what's possible when the full community becomes involved.

These programs involve partnerships between law enforcement and community members, and they recognize that juvenile delinquency and youth crime are not problems

we can simply arrest our way out of. We need to get residents and local stakeholders involved – help them send a message to young offenders that wrongful behavior won't be tolerated, but that assistance is available to help them change and succeed. The results are remarkable.

OJJDP 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 the ones I've mentioned 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.

We're applying this approach to another effort called the National Forum for Youth Violence Prevention. This is a White House-led effort with my agency – and particularly, OJJDP – managing most of the day-to-day activities. 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. There are ten cities carrying out comprehensive plans to reduce violent crime and improve opportunities for youth. We've gotten high levels of support in every participating city and from the Administration, and we're seeing some really promising work being done with some very broad partnerships.

And while the promotion of evidence-based prevention and intervention programs must be central to reform, we must also deal with the disproportionate representation of people of color in the juvenile justice system.

As the NAS report points out, one of the three pillars of a developmental approach is fairness. Youth who come into contact with the system have got to believe they're being treated fairly and with dignity. Otherwise, the chances of understanding and complying with the law go down.

Unfortunately, the experience of minority youth who come into contact with the system is not conducive to a sense of the system's fairness. African American youth are arrested at more than twice the rate of white non-Hispanic youth. They 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 all too often – as 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.

One of the four core requirements under the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act is reducing disproportionate minority contact with the juvenile justice system. Bob has spoken out passionately about the importance of this issue, and his office is addressing it from a number of angles:

- through its DMC Reduction Model, which serves as a guide to states through new approaches to address racial and ethnic disparities in the juvenile justice system, particularly among African American, Hispanic, and tribal youth,
- through mentoring programs for children of incarcerated parents,
- through juvenile reentry programs, and
- through a Supportive School Discipline program with the Department of Education aimed at addressing inequities in school disciplinary policies and keeping kids out of the school-to-prison pipeline.

I know this is an issue that this committee will take a close look at, and Bob and I are eager to hear your recommendations on how we can help to ensure fairness in our juvenile justice systems.

The NAS report and the work that this committee is doing come at a critical time in the history of juvenile justice in America. Policymakers and practitioners recognize the problems that the get-tough policies of the 80s and 90s have caused, and they want to know how we can make our systems more fair, more effective, and more responsive to the needs of our youth and our communities.

But we've got our work cut out for us. The recent appropriations act passed by Congress sent us a budget that, while good for OJP as a whole, cut funding for OJJDP. At a time when we're considering fundamental reforms, these cuts present a challenge. We need to continue to raise awareness of the importance of these issues, and to make sure the right people are getting the message about the vital work OJJDP does.

Bob and his staff are working diligently to help guide states and localities toward a more evidence-based and humane approach, and I know they will keep pressing forward. And they will have my full support and the support of the Attorney General.

Your guidance will be critical. You represent the best thinking in the field. Your ideas and your credibility will make a huge difference in the way OJJDP's role is perceived and in the way decision-makers at all levels think about juvenile justice.

I'm looking forward to the work you will accomplish and the recommendations you will make. On behalf of OJP and the Department of Justice, thank you for your contributions – and thank you for your time.

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