

REMARKS

OF

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AT THE

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL
22ND ANNUAL SONJA HAYNES STONE CENTER FOR
BLACK CULTURE AND HISTORY LECTURE

ON

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Thank you, Jasmine. It's an honor to be here to help celebrate the legacy of a woman whose life and work means so much to this university, and who instilled in so many students an unapologetic sense of pride in their heritage and culture.

I'm grateful to Chancellor Folt, who was kind enough to personally welcome me back to my alma mater, a place I loved as a student and continue to cherish these many years later. I am thankful, as well, to Joseph Jordan, whose stewardship of this fine center has been equal to the memory of its founder and namesake.

And I could never forget my Theta Pi sisters, many of whom have remained lifelong friends. I'm eager to see you all again tonight.

As a math major, I never had the opportunity to sit in on one of Professor Stone's classes. They were legendary, not only across this campus, but among African-American studies programs throughout America. I know I would have shared the awe and admiration of my fellow Tarheels, and I would have been enriched by her guidance and instruction.

Though I didn't know her personally, I am certain that she would have been very proud today – proud of the way that her memory has been honored by this beautiful building and all that it contains, proud of how the foundation of knowledge that she helped to lay has been put to such noble use by UNC graduates and faculty, and proud – most of all – of the enduring impact that she continues to have on young leaders like Jasmine Jennings, who will someday deliver a Stone Center lecture.

Whether or not you had a class with Professor Stone, you could not escape her influence at Chapel Hill. She made everyone feel the alive-ness of African-American history in the contemporary world. John Hope Franklin famously said that “One might argue that the historian is the conscience of his nation.” Professor Stone was that conscience-in-residence among us.

That sense of the presence of the past which she espoused is useful to us today, especially in the world of public policy, where I now have the privilege of working. As an African-American Assistant Attorney General, working for the nation's first African-American Attorney General, serving in the administration of our first African-American President, I have learned that, in spite of the obvious progress we are making on so many fronts, history is still very much with us.

When it comes to matters of crime and justice, especially, there is, frankly speaking, very little that is “post-racial” about the world we live in. Too many young men of color are still arrested and locked up for far too long. Too many black males are killed or victimized by violent acts. And too many minority families and communities are torn apart by high incarceration rates that have done little to make us safer.

If we are honest, we must admit that we have yet to transcend race as a factor in our nation's criminal justice practices, and this has led, in many cases, to hollowed-out communities and a crisis of faith in our institutions of law and order.

I don't mean to paint a bleak picture. The fact is, as a nation, we are in a much better position, from a public safety standpoint, than we were two decades ago. The rate of violent crime reported to the FBI in 2012 was about half the rate reported in 1993. And since President Obama took office, the rate of incarceration in our country has declined eight percent. There's no doubt our country is a much safer place and fewer people are being warehoused in our prisons and jails.

Still, the national statistics don't always convey the extent to which crime and violence are concentrated in certain communities – and particularly, in certain parts of those communities. We have learned through research that criminal activity tends to focus in what we call “hot spots” – limited areas, sometimes as small as a city block or even a single building. It's in these neighborhoods that violence is taking its greatest toll even as so many other communities grow and prosper.

These are areas with high unemployment rates, poor housing, low academic achievement, and – yes – large minority populations. While crime and victimization rates continue at historically low levels nationally, many communities of color are trapped in a cycle of poverty, criminality, and incarceration. Here, young African American and Latino men are at increased risk of becoming involved with our criminal and juvenile justice systems, as victims or as perpetrators – and sometimes, both.

Let me give you some numbers:

- One-half of all young men of color have at least one arrest by age 23.
- African Americans make up 38 percent of prison and jail inmates, but only 13 percent of the overall population.
- Nearly one out of every three black men in their twenties is in jail or prison, on probation or parole, or otherwise under criminal justice control.
- Overall, black males were 6 times and Hispanic males 2.5 times more likely to be imprisoned than white males in 2012.
- And black 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 disparity is very real, and so is the damage being done to these communities and families. I'll give you one more sobering statistic: One in nine African-American children has a parent behind bars. There can be no question about the destructive impact this disproportionate contact with the justice system has on communities of color.

The damage goes even beyond the immediate consequences of arrest and incarceration. An even larger problem is the erosion of trust that results when minority communities feel that they are targeted for hostile treatment by law enforcement.

We know, from painful recent experience, that historic tensions have the potential to ignite into widespread unrest today. What we've seen in Ferguson, Missouri follows an all-too-familiar pattern. Those of us old enough to remember can identify similarities between the events of the last several months and the outbreaks in the 60s in Newark, Detroit, Harlem, and Los Angeles – all precipitated by citizen encounters with the police.

The difference is that today, we know what we need to do to reduce the risk that a single tragic act becomes a city-wide upheaval. Research in what is called “procedural justice” has shown that those who come into contact with the police and other justice system agencies are more likely to accept decisions by the authorities and obey the law in the future if they feel they are treated fairly, even when they are penalized by criminal sanctions. Even better, the communities of which they are part will actively encourage respect for the law and cooperate with law enforcement.

This is encouraging, because it means that if we make a sincere effort to strengthen connections between law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve, we can hope to reverse the pattern of distrust and discord that have become too much a part of our nation's civic narrative. We can do this by ensuring fairness in the administration of the law, by working to eliminate bias in our systems of justice, and by addressing past wrongs and historic grievances. A number of communities are already engaged in this work, and the Department of Justice during this Administration has helped jurisdictions repair fractured relationships and restore faith in the integrity of the law enforcement function.

Two weeks ago, the Attorney General announced a major effort being led by my office in partnership with divisions across the Department of Justice. It's called the National Initiative on Building Community Trust and Justice, and its goal is to expand our base of knowledge about what works to improve procedural justice, reduce bias, and promote racial reconciliation, and to help communities address the challenges arising from suspicion and distrust between community members and local justice system agencies.

We're partnering with a renowned group of criminal justice experts from the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Yale University, the Center for Policing Equity at UCLA, and the Urban Institute who have extensive experience working with state and local police departments and communities on these issues. They've accumulated a vast knowledge of evidence-based models that they will test, refine, and expand in communities facing an array of challenges stemming from suspicion and distrust. They'll be advised by a national board of law enforcement practitioners and community and faith-based leaders that will work in close collaboration with the Justice Department.

Together, the Department and this consortium of experts will undertake five major activities:

- They will test strategies and provide training on procedural justice, implicit bias, and racial reconciliation in pilot sites;

- They will create a central information clearinghouse that will provide technical assistance to the field;
- They'll expand knowledge through new research;
- They'll develop materials to help carry that research into practice; and
- They'll promote a much-needed public dialogue about issues around race and policing.

They'll tackle a number of issues, from addressing strained relationships between minority communities and law enforcement, to improving interactions between police and domestic violence and sexual assault victims, to responding to concerns of the LGBTQ community.

Under the direction of our Attorney General, who has worked so hard to protect the civil rights of all citizens while supporting efforts that have improved public safety across America, this initiative represents a major step forward in resolving historic tensions in many of America's communities. Through it, we will build on pioneering work being done in some of the nation's most challenged areas and we will open doors to cooperation and trust that will lead to safer neighborhoods and a justice system that inspires the confidence of those it serves.

This effort is part of the President's *My Brother's Keeper* Initiative, which is designed to give every young person who is willing to work hard and play by the rules the chance to reach his or her full potential. Across the federal government, we're working to give kids the advantages that many of them have never had and help them succeed. Private foundations have also answered the President's call to action by announcing independent commitments in support of the goals of the initiative.

Helping kids succeed means ensuring that their path to success isn't impeded by threats to their safety, or by poverty, or by a lack of job opportunities. It also means making sure that young people stay in school and out of the courts. Unfortunately, in too many jurisdictions, school disciplinary practices have become gateways to the juvenile justice system. Too often, students who commit minor infractions are kicked out of school, and in too many cases, they never return.

A 2011 study in Texas that tracked students over the course of six years found that 60 percent – 60 percent! – were suspended or expelled at some point in middle or high school. And most of these suspensions and expulsions were the result of simple violations of schools' codes of conduct, like using tobacco or acting out. These zero-tolerance policies disproportionately penalize minority students. Studies show that black middle school students are suspended nearly four times more often than white youth, and Latino youth are roughly twice as likely to be suspended or expelled. The result isn't simply that these kids are missing the opportunity to learn and grow, which is bad enough. In many instances, they're being put on a path that leads them, directly or indirectly, to arrest and, too often, confinement.

That's why, under the umbrella of *My Brother's Keeper*, the Department of Justice is taking steps to help restore common sense to school disciplinary practices. Under something we call the Supportive School Discipline Initiative, we're working closely with our partners at the Department of Education to try to foster safe, supportive, and productive learning environments while keeping students in school. We've issued guidance to school districts on steps they can take to reform zero-tolerance discipline policies, and we recently awarded \$4.3 million to promote positive behaviors and increase school safety.

A child's future success is determined by many factors. Next to strong family support, none is more critical than a solid education. There is no question that young people who act out and commit infractions should be held accountable, but they must also be given a fair chance. The opportunity to achieve at a young age is crucial for so many reasons. In my field – criminal justice – supporting youth is critical because it's a bulwark against delinquency, crime, and violence. We are doing our kids – and our communities – a tremendous service when we give them the support and skills they need to stay on a path of responsible, productive behavior.

For many kids in our country, the path to achievement is a relatively smooth one. They come from homes where the parents are present and involved in their lives. They live in safe neighborhoods where they have healthy relationships with their peers. They have access to good education and jobs. But for too many others, the road to success is not so well-paved. These kids come from communities where support networks are weak or lacking altogether. They're surrounded by poverty and negative social influences. And too often, as a result of these disadvantages, they find themselves caught up in the justice system.

It's our job as educators, as policymakers, and as future leaders who – by dint of your own initiative and hard work – have found the recipe for achievement to help guide those who have been denied these opportunities. It's our role – a role that we should feel privileged to play – to be the voice that raises the chorus, the hand that lifts the fallen, the conscience of a nation.

The lesson of our history is that progress is a slow march, and, as Dr. King put it, it is "neither automatic nor inevitable." But it is not quick and easy success, but hard work and perseverance, that will give our accomplishments lasting importance. The progress we have made as a nation has been hard won, the result of courage and sacrifice on the part of countless heroic individuals. I believe courage continues to be called for in our own time. Challenges remain, inequities still exist, citizens in pockets of our country – the wealthiest and greatest nation on earth – still see life through the lens of despair. But we are in a position to help them find hope.

With our history as a guide – the history of adversity overcome and triumphs achieved – I know that we will find answers to the problems that remain, and that we will continue to become an even more perfect union.

Thank you.

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