

REMARKS  
AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

OF

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AT THE

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ANNUAL CONFERENCE

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Thank you, John [King]. First of all, I'd like to point out how far we've come that we have such a cross-section of federal representatives here talking about improving the well-being of minority communities. The Heckler Report represented one of the earliest efforts to address health disparities in this country, and I'm proud that the Obama administration continues to make this issue a top priority.

I'm encouraged at the gains we've made over the years in reducing these disparities, thanks in great part to the work of Nadine's office. At the same time, I think we'd all agree that there are still some stubborn similarities between the conditions at the time the report was issued 30 years ago and our own time. On the topic of violence – an issue of special concern for us at the Department of Justice – the report had this to say back in 1985: “No cause of mortality so greatly differentiates black Americans from other Americans as homicide.”

Now, looking at the situation today, the CDC says that African American males have the largest death rates from homicide among all racial and ethnic populations.” Homicide is the fifth leading cause of death for black males overall and the leading cause of death for black males between the ages of 15 and 34.

That old saw, “The more things change, the more they stay the same,” comes sadly to mind.

Even though crime rates nationally are at historic lows, we know that in some communities violence remains an intractable problem. These are areas with high unemployment rates, poor housing, low academic achievement, and – yes – large minority populations. 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.

Early last year, President Obama launched the *My Brother's Keeper* initiative in an effort to bring together federal, local, and private partners for the purpose of building and extending ladders of opportunity for our youth. My office and the Department of Justice as a whole play a central role by focusing on preventing and reducing violence, improving outcomes in the juvenile justice system, and ensuring that those who are victimized have access to services. We're also working closely with the Department of Education to keep youth in school and out of the criminal and juvenile justice systems.

Our approach to these issues is driven by evidence-based practices built upon a public health model where we clearly define the problem, identify risk factors, develop effective prevention and intervention strategies, and increase public awareness of the issue.

One great example of this is a new program launched this year by our Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and Office for Victims of Crime called Supporting Male Survivors of Violence. We know that young men of color are the segment of society most vulnerable to violence, yet the least likely to receive support.

What this means is that these young people – whose brains and bodies are still developing – bear a burden of trauma that they’re wholly unequipped to deal with. And too often, this trauma is resolved in anxiety, depression, psychological and physical health problems, poor school performance, drugs, alcohol, and – yes – violence.

This new program supports efforts to plug these service gaps by working with public health departments, hospitals, probation departments, schools, and community services. The Administrator of our juvenile justice office, Bob Listenbee, was in Baltimore last week with the city’s mayor and health commissioner and the Health and Human Services regional director to announce one of the awards, a \$1 million grant to the Baltimore City Health Department.

This project brings together health officials, faith-based organizations, social workers, and community representatives. They’ll be developing a shooting response protocol and creating a plan to raise public awareness about the consequences of victimization. We have similar efforts underway in 11 other cities, all designed to get services to those who need it and end the cycle of trauma that plagues too many of our communities.

One thing we’ve learned about combatting violence is that violence reduction is most effective when we rely on prevention and intervention, not just enforcement and prosecution. We can’t simply arrest our way out of this problem. Something else we know – and this should go without saying – is that violence reduction strategies work better when citizens and community stakeholders own the problem and band together to find solutions.

These two elements form the core of another effort we’ve been helping to lead – along with our partners at HHS, HUD, the Departments of Education and Labor, and the White House Office of Drug Control Policy. It’s called the National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention. The Forum brings together citizens, public health professionals, community and faith-based groups, law enforcement officials, business and philanthropic leaders, and others to develop violence prevention strategies tailored to the needs of each community. Chicago is one of the 15 Forum sites 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 the Administration’s commitment is coming from the highest levels. With this broad backing, community stakeholders are working together to design strategies to tackle their youth violence problems, and the work they’re doing is showing tremendous promise.

One of the surest ways to keep young people on the path to positive health and productive lives is by making sure that they stay in school and out of the courts. Unfortunately, in too many jurisdictions, school disciplinary practices have become gateways to the juvenile justice system. We know that 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.

Under the umbrella of *My Brother's Keeper*, the Departments of Justice, Education, and Health and Human Services are taking steps to help restore common sense to school disciplinary practices. Under the Supportive School Discipline Initiative, we're working 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've awarded funding to promote positive behaviors and increase school safety.

And for those young people who do come into the system, we need to make sure they're prepared to return to their communities ready to live crime-free, productive lives. Through the Federal Interagency Reentry Council, which is chaired by the Attorney General, 23 agencies from across the federal government are working to remove barriers to successful reentry and reduce the collateral consequences of incarceration.

One product of our collaboration – another Justice-Education partnership – is an experimental initiative called Second Chance Pell. For the past two decades, incarcerated individuals have been ineligible for federal Pell Grants, which could no doubt have been of great benefit. This new program provides a limited waiver of the statutory ban to help pay for postsecondary education and training programs. We also fund hundreds of reentry programs under the Second Chance Act. In the fiscal year that just ended, we made \$53 million in awards under the Second Chance Act, some to support juvenile reentry programs and improve community supervision of returning youth.

We're also funding mentoring and other services to help young incarcerated fathers build healthy relationships with their children. We know that more than 2.7 million children in this country have parents behind bars – and one in five youth in custody has or is expecting children. These young parents in particular need support.

And finally, if we really want to make sure our justice system is fair and effective, we've got to reconsider how we deal with the young people coming into it. We've learned from research in developmental psychology and neurobiology that kids are wired differently. They don't have the same capacity for impulse control and emotional regulation as adults do, and it's neither fair nor productive to treat them as though they do.

And there's another remarkable fact about young people: most of those engaged in delinquent behavior will naturally age out of it, which means that punishments that may be appropriate for adults are unnecessary and counterproductive for those who are younger. Our Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is devoting much of its activity to supporting reforms that align with the science and that will make our juvenile justice practices smarter and more effective.

And it's not just children and teens that this applies to. Research shows that the brain's architecture is in development well into the 20s. And like kids, the brains of young adults are still malleable, meaning they are more likely to respond to developmentally-appropriate, positive interventions. Given that so many crimes are committed by people in this age group, having this knowledge gives us a big opportunity to improve public safety. We're using this knowledge to drive decision-making across the agency.

So our work is very much geared toward eliminating disparities, reducing violence, and improving outcomes for minority communities. And I'm proud that we have such dedicated federal partners working with us and a President and an Attorney General who are so committed to closing gaps and expanding opportunities for people of color in the United States.

Now I'll turn it over to my colleague from the Department of Transportation, Dr. Helfer. Thank you.

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