

SPEECH BY THE
HONORABLE JANET RENO,
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES
TO THE MEETING OF THE
NATIONAL RECREATION AND PARK ASSOCIATION

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P R O C E E D I N G S

(1:10 p.m.)

GENERAL RENO: Thank you so very much. I'm just delighted to be here this afternoon to talk about what I think is the most important issue in America, our children. Children today face a far more threatening world than I did in 1947, when my family put us in a cleaned-out van with a 50-gallon drum of water, a kerosene stove, and two bunk beds, and took us around Florida to Highland Hemmock Park, the Myakka River State Park, to the beginnings of the Stephen Foster Park, and helped us to see the State in the most beautiful manner possible.

The world is far more threatening today than it was for a ten year old in 1947. Indeed, the prospects today for many of our children are startling. Lacking a vision of productive adulthood and constructive activities to engage them during non-school hours, startling numbers of our children are veering into a new course of development: crime and violence, substance abuse, teen pregnancy. They drop out of school, they engage in gangs, and gang activity.

Many have grown up in a culture of crime and, without intervention, they will know no alternative. Many are growing up lacking the competence to handle inter-personal conflict without resorting to violence.

According to the report of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, entitled "Great Transitions: Preparing Adolescents for a New Century" -- and if you haven't seen that, use it with your city and county commission and your State legislatures -- nearly half of American adolescents are at a high or moderate risk of seriously damaging their life chances.

With high rates of divorce, increases in the number of families in which both parents work, and the growth of single parent families, slightly more than one-half of all American children will spend at least part of their childhood living with only one parent. In this situation, exacerbated by the erosion of neighborhood networks and other traditional social support systems, children now spend significantly less time in the company of adults than they did a few decades ago.

More of their time is spent in front of the television or with their peers in unsupervised environments.

Instead of safety in their neighborhoods, adolescents often face danger from crime and violence. Instead of economic security, they face a lack of jobs training and employment opportunity. In place of respect, they are often neglected, abused, and forgotten. Lacking clear and consistent adult expectations for them, they feel alienated from American society.

This isolation of our children has produced what I think is the greatest single crime problem in America today, youth violence. Beginning in 1985, we saw the incidence of youth violence increase dramatically -- all the more startling because during the same period of time the number of young people in America in that age group was declining.

But in more recent years the demographics show clearly that the number of young people in the age group that is affected will grow substantially in the next 20 years. Unless we do something about it now, the problem is going to get a lot worse in the future.

Clearly, as we think about the problem, we've got to produce a balanced approach, not an either-or approach. We've got to make sure that the young, violent, serious juvenile offender is punished, that it's fair punishment, that it's punishment that fits the crime and that is understood and that is anticipated and expected.

But we also must make sure that our communities are safe for our children and that we develop a balanced approach. That's why we've spent a lot of effort in making sure that we have programs for serious youthful offenders built into the 1994 Crime Act.

But as important as these facilities and secure institutions are for the serious offender, we've got to realize that for most juvenile offenders they're coming back to the community sooner rather than later. They're coming back to your

parks. They're coming back to the neighborhoods.

They can either be a threat to you when they come back angry and defiant, guilty of vandalism in your park, threatening the younger children in the park, or they can come back as your allies. And one of the things that I hope that we can do together is forge more partnerships between parks and recreation specialists and those who are returning from the juvenile justice system.

When we see in many communities the great percentage of young people who are somehow or another in the custody of the State -- as in some neighborhoods the great majority of your youth will or are now -- let us focus on our entire population if we are to make our communities safe again.

But we also have to realize that we need more police on the street engaged in grassroots community policing. The President made a commitment as he took office that he would put 100,000 community police officers on the street. People wondered whether that would be possible. We've already authorized dollars for some 35,000 of those officers, and now I've had the chance to see them in your communities, working with you, working with teachers, but most of all working with residents in the neighborhood they serve, to build trust, to build understanding, to identify problems, to work together to solve those problems.

It is so exciting to see two young men come up to the President of the United States in the Great Hall of the Department of Justice with their community police officer and say: Mr. President, this is the guy that's kept me out of trouble; I want you to know how much we owe to him.

It's exciting to me to see the partnerships that are developing between the parks efforts and police. The Los Angeles County Parks and Recreation Department has already received a grant from the COPS program for community police officers. And suburban Hennepin County Parks and Recreation Police will also benefit from just such a grant. We can do so much more, and I look forward to working with you.

But I learned a long time ago as a prosecutor picking up a pre-sentence investigation of a 16 year old adjudicated for an armed robbery, that we cannot wait until our children are adjudicated delinquent, until they are sent off to detention facilities, if we are ever to make a difference, particularly with the significant increase in the number of young people that will occur in these next 20 years.

As I would read these pre-sentence investigations, I would see points along the way where we could have intervened to give that child a future. At 11 years old when he was wandering the streets because his father had left or he had never known him, when his mother had become a crack addict, if there had been somebody there to mentor him, somebody there to answer his questions, somebody there to involve him in constructive activities after school, we could have kept him out of trouble.

That's the reason that both before and since I came to Washington I said: Yes, we've got to punish; yes, we've got to provide sound policing; but most of all, we have got to give our young people a chance for a strong, positive, safe future.

If you don't understand it, and you all do --
(Applause.)

How do we tell people that? I get accused of being a social worker every now and then.

(Laughter.)

But I say to them that the Department of Justice estimates that the cost of keeping one teenager in detention for a year approaches \$30,000 a year. Nationwide that added up to \$2.3 billion for the incarceration of juveniles in 1993, a 35 percent increase in spending on juvenile corrections in just five years. We could do a lot more with those dollars spent early.

If that doesn't convince people, I say: Look, if we can prevent the crime, doesn't that make sense? Have you ever met a victim that would rather be the victim of the crime than have prevented it in the first place? We've got to make sure that people understand that you can prevent and deter crime, and if you can let's do it.

But if they still don't understand and you're at a city or county commission meeting or at the State legislature and they still question us, point out that unless we start making an investment in our children early on we are not going to have young people with the skills that can fill the jobs that can maintain America as a first-rate Nation.

Then if you're still having difficulty because there is a significant lobby of senior citizens who are questioning why spend money here, because they've already educated their child and their grandchild and their great-grandchild, point out that unless we have an economy staffed by strong and able people who have the skills to fill the jobs to

fuel the economy, pensions are not going to be worth the paper they're written on.

We're all in this together and we all have to make an investment in our most precious possession and in the foundation of our future, our young people. We must have a sustained commitment from all institutions that have an impact on children and their families, to work together to ensure their healthy growth and development. Simply put, if we can reduce the risk while increasing protection during the course of a young person's life, we can prevent problems and promote the healthy development of our children, our families, our economy, and the institutions we hold dear.

What is exciting to me is, since I have come to Washington and sometimes been called a social worker, I've also had the chance to travel across this Nation, to talk to sheriffs and to talk to police chiefs, to talk to the cop on the street. And all of them are saying the same thing.

Many of these people throughout the Nation understand that there are better tools and a better way to fight crime. Urban recreation and sports programs are considered by so many today to be a proven, cost-effective, and commonsense means of preventing crime and delinquency.

We must recognize and we must make clear to those who doubt or don't know, the significant contributions of park and recreation specialists across the country in promoting positive youth development and in providing programs that seek to assist high-risk juveniles.

The Carnegie Council report points out that it makes good sense to invest in community recreation. Local park and recreation departments are about so much more than baseball diamonds and swimming pools. The wide variety of programs offered by all of you and your colleagues throughout the country are currently addressing critical issues, such as gang involvement, homelessness, and drug abuse prevention.

The success of the work of you and your colleagues is demonstrated by the diverse programs that are offered year-round. The potential that you offer -- a much better future for our children -- is just enormous.

Yet it is often neglected in public debate and policy formation. The time has come to recognize and promote the collaborative efforts of park and recreation personnel who are committed to our Nation's youth, and I want to work with you and support you in every way I possibly can.

(Applause.)

Some people say: Well, look at the problem in Washington; we don't have that much money. These may be hard times, but they are our times. And I think they are some of the most exciting times, the most challenging times, and the time with the potential for the greatest reward of any time in our history.

But we've got to be persuasive. We need to provide more of the types of parks and recreation programs that act as buffers against juvenile delinquency. Recreational programs provided by park and recreational professionals can increase the social and physical development of children. They can be neighborhood or school-oriented, and they need to be accessible to all communities.

(Applause.)

Parks and recreation programs can be offered after school, during the summer, in the late hours, and for all age groups. Many of these programs are multi-disciplinary and uniquely capable of equipping a child with lifetime skills, not only in sports, but in cultural, artistic, and skill opportunities that can be so important.

These opportunities can address social issues such as self-esteem, conflict resolution, trust, teamwork, and peer support. I bet every single person in this room who's ever had the opportunity to work with a young person thinks with the greatest pride in everything that they've done of the time that a child came to their park one June day right after school, meaning trouble, causing trouble, with low self-esteem, a sense of aimlessness, and left that park to go back to school a stronger, better person, more confident in themselves, because you took the time to be the mentor and to give them the self-confidence to succeed.

We can all make that difference, but you have an opportunity that is so rare and so wonderful.

I am so impressed, and I was just really excited as I read through the materials before coming over here, that the National Recreation and Park Association is focusing, not just on parks, not just on recreation, but on the wellbeing of children, of at-risk youth and families, on public health and wellness, and on the conservation of public lands.

You understand the issue. And I am told that it was this awareness that led you to publish "Beyond Fun and Games: The Emerging Roles of Public Education in 1994."

While we've not measured how much crime is caused by a lack of space and recreation opportunities, the evidence does show that crime frequently drops when these facilities and programs are in place. And as you documented, you do such a service to us all.

Yet again, too often investments in parks and open space are generally considered a low priority. Let's change that. Let's talk about jobs and skills and future. Let's talk about the economy. Let's talk about what's happening to this Nation. Let's go to the board rooms. Let's go to the chambers of commerce. Let's enlist the help of all concerned in our community to build a fabric, to weave a fabric around our children at risk by showing people that it's not smokestacks, it's not automation, it's people that are at the foundation of a nation's greatness or an economy's success.

If we can't talk to people in just humanitarian terms, let's talk to them in common sense terms, because there is no dispute when you get down to the hard facts. As cities continue to witness rising crime and urban distress, it is becoming increasingly clear that support for parks and recreation is not a luxury. It is an investment in our own health and security and the stability of our cities.

(Applause.)

I have just reviewed your report entitled "Public Recreation in High-Risk Environments: Programs That Work." I think the major problem we have is, as I mentioned earlier, if people can be assured that you can prevent crime, they'll make the investment; but how do you prove that a particular program prevented crime or made a difference?

Again, you have risen to the challenge, not only by developing the programs that work, but now by documenting it so that I can take the book with me wherever I go to communities, such as I did yesterday, and say: Look, here is something that can tell you what works and what doesn't work in communities across this Nation.

(Applause.)

I'm pleased that the Department of Justice is working with you in disseminating this wonderful report to policymakers, to legislators, to community leaders who are seeking solutions to the problem. I'm impressed with the variety of the programs, which embrace gang prevention and intervention, academic enhancement, natural resource leadership training, substance abuse prevention, community empowerment, employment

training, and entrepreneurship, and artistic enrichment.

These programs are replicable, cost effective, and results-oriented. They illustrate the potential for collaboration, shared leadership, and community support to address complex social problems and foster the healthy development of our young children.

The key is so often collaboration. When you started out in parks and recreation, did you think that you would be linked with doctors in public health initiatives aimed at domestic violence?

It is so exciting to see prosecutors and parks and recreation professionals and doctors focusing together on two of the great public health problems of today, domestic violence and youth violence.

It is wonderful to see a planning engineer sitting down with a parks and recreation professional, figuring out how to best plan an open space in a new and developing area of the city. But we've got to do more.

Sometimes land costs more than a bus does. But one of the keys to making our cities more effective today, one of the keys to reaching out to so many people who live in rural and suburban America, is how do we design transportation systems that bring us together? There may be that wonderful opportunity across town, but it's three bus transfers away. How do we address transportation needs? We've got to collaborate together on that.

I was glad to hear that you're participating with Texas A&M University on a three-year empirical study to evaluate parks and recreation's role in alleviating problems created by at-risk youth. It's going to be fascinating to see the results, but I think I know what they'll say. I don't want to prejudge it.

Law enforcement officials who have seen the beginnings of success from these kind of programs are adding their voices to those calling for more resources for parks and recreation. Los Angeles County Sheriff Sherman Block says young people are less attracted to gangs when they have these other alternatives. And Police Chief Willy Williams of Los Angeles believes the city needs more safe parks and healthy recreational opportunities to keep youth off the streets and out of gangs.

And lest somebody tells you that you're just being a social worker, remind them that prevention is nothing new to the National Fraternal Order of Police. The FOP began running the Police Athletic Leagues in the 1930's and it currently

operates 23. Let us make sure that everybody understands the voices behind what you're doing.

These programs illustrate that parks and recreation programs are part of the solution to problems that endanger America's youth and thus endanger our future. The growing number of success stories from communities of all sizes and economic circumstances is the proof. The profiles of park and recreation programs in your new report offer clear evidence of their public worth.

The results include reduced involvement in gang activity in Commerce, California, significant decreases in juvenile crime in Fort Worth, Texas, within a one-mile radius of the community center offering late night programs, and a reduction of juvenile apprehensions in the area of Kansas City, Missouri, where midnight basketball programs were offered.

I don't think there's any question that what you do is some of the most important work in communities and States and parks across this Nation.

I am here, I think, today because of a number of people, because of people that forged the Florida State Park System, because of people that I met in Dade County, but particularly because of one person who represents to me what being a parks and recreational professional is all about. And that's Chuck Pezzolt.

(Applause.)

I can't tell you how many 7:30 meetings I've been to where Chuck Pezzolt arrived on time and stayed, and then I'd go out later in the day and he'd be in a park someplace putting into action what we had talked about. He would be at Urban Service Corps meetings as a member of the board. He would be at the Children's Services Council. He would be there when children were involved, to make a difference.

I want to particularly note the Good Life program in Dade County, which was Chuck's brainchild, stimulated by Arthur Ashe and Butch Buckholtz, who believed that sports and people related to sports had a major and positive influence on their lives. They strongly believed that exposing school-aged children to sports and athletics would help redirect the focus and lives of at-risk children.

With this basic goal in mind, the program exposes school-aged children to successful role models in sports. An essential element is the creation of a mentoring and volunteer system that ensures a pool of interested high school athletes.

For example, in a number of schools in Dade County as a prerequisite to making a varsity athletic team all players must coach teams in parks as volunteers. These athletes serve as role models and tutors for youth who have been identified as being at risk and have the potential to stray significantly from the traditional educational path.

I highlight this because I would like to leave you with several challenges, and I suspect that many in this room have already undertaken these challenges and done something about it. There were too many times in my time as prosecutor where I drove by empty parks with ragged materials, torn nets, vandalized facilities, and they were empty. No land by itself, no facility by itself, will help our children at risk in the long run. It is people that are going to help them, people who care and who are willing to make a difference.

When I go into a new community I try to make a point of talking to young people who are in trouble or who have been in trouble, and I ask them: What could have made a difference in your life? What could have kept you out of trouble? And poignantly, two responses almost consistently come back: Something to do in the afternoon and evening, not just sports but something to do that's positive; and somebody to talk to, somebody who understands how difficult it is to grow up in this day and time, somebody older who can tell me when I've done good and also give me a figurative kick in the back side when I've messed up, but whom I know will be spare.

Somehow or another, we have got to harness the tremendous energy that exists in our older adolescents, in our young people who are coming out of custodial facilities, who still want to be somebody, who want to make a difference, and put that extraordinary energy to work in our parks, so that they can provide a better, safer future for the children that come behind them.

We've got to figure out how to get that 65 year old volunteer who lives across town over to our park, where he can tell stories and relate to kids on an afternoon when other people are working and can't volunteer their time.

We've got to figure out how we create the spirit of volunteerism amongst corporate employers and employees, so that in that vital, critical time of 3:00 to 5:30 there are volunteers in our parks and recreational facilities who can be mentors and leaders and models for our children.

We've got to figure out how we persuade more

community police officers, as they leave the beat at 3:00 o'clock, to become the soccer coach for the soccer league that's forming at 3:30.

We can do it because America wants to make a difference. Those same kids that I talk to who have been in trouble or the bright and able kids in the community who haven't gotten in trouble, want to be somebody. They want to make a difference. They want to contribute. And the more we can give them positive opportunities to do so, the better.

Secondly, you know this better than I do and your report indicates it so clearly. Let's make sure that we provide variety. Let's figure out how we focus on the artistic abilities of a quiet young lad in the corner who's about to drop out of the whole program because people have laughed at him because he can't hit the baseball. Let's figure out how we give him a future.

Let's figure out how we blend the school system's efforts and other community efforts with efforts in our facilities and in our parks to give people skills that can enable them to earn a living wage. If we link job development people with parks and recreations professionals, we can develop partnerships that give us new opportunities.

Let us not do anything in a vacuum. When I took office, I saw prosecutors focused on getting somebody convicted and getting a sentence, but they didn't much care what happened after that. And public defenders were focused on getting the client off, but if he had a drug problem they didn't do anything about that. And doctors were worried about their little problem. Everybody was worried about his or her problem and they weren't looking at the problem as a whole.

If we are going to give our children a future, we have got to reweave the fabric of an entire community around our children, and in all our efforts as we collaborate together we must do so through our community and our partnerships.

The next thing, and more and more of you are doing it, but it always used to frustrate me when I would go to a city commission meeting for a purpose and find a number of people there arguing for moneys for a new park. I then would leave the city commission meeting at about 4:30 in the afternoon and drive past a local school. It would be locked and barred, with a beautiful playing field that wasn't being used.

We have such an opportunity to form a partnership between the schools and parks and recreational

facilities, to make sure that we give our children ample opportunities wherever they are.

And don't forget our rural areas. We think of children at risk as often being centered in urban areas. That's just not so. There are children at risk throughout America, children at risk on a farm out in the middle of nowhere, one parent not in the family, the other struggling to make ends meet. He or she needs something too.

Then finally, let us not forget our parks. I am very sad right now because one of the things that keeps me going is my desire to walk from here to Cumberland, Maryland, along the C&O Canal path, and I may have to canoe it or I may have to sneak behind the yellow barricades and still walk it. But I won't do that.

But I want to participate in rebuilding it. But as I think back on it, I've seen some Boy Scouts, some young people, but mostly I see people my age. We've got to make sure that, through transportation and other programs, we make all our parks, State and national, available to our children.

I gave Shay Bilchek a book once on the national parks system, and it was so wonderful to hear him come back after having taken his children and his bride across the country to see the park system and to see the light shining in his children's eyes.

You have created a magical world for the children of America. You have created a magical world for the adults of America. Thank you for all that you have done for all of us.

(Applause and end of speech at 1:45 p.m.)