



CURBING YOUTH VIOLENCE COMMUNITIES WORKING TOGETHER

Wednesday, June 11, 1997

Georgetown University Conference Center

3800 Reservoir Road

Washington, D.C.

9:03 a.m.

STATEMENT OF KENNI ZELISNY, SPECIAL ASSISTANT TO THE ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

Ms. Zelisny: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the Department of Justice symposium on Curbing Youth Violence, Communities Working Together.

My name is Kenni Zelisny, and I am the special assistant to the Attorney General.

As an administrative matter, please note that there have been some minor changes to the agenda that are noted in your registration packet.

Also after the second panel at 11:30, there will be some activity in here as the room is prepared for President Clinton's arrival. Please remain seated during that time.

It is my great pleasure to introduce to you Attorney General Janet Reno. In her characteristically understated way, Ms. Reno has been one of the strongest voices on the issues of youth violence and juvenile crime throughout her career.

Since coming to the Department four years ago, Attorney General Reno has made youth issues one of the cornerstones of her tenure.

We hope that you will find this conference a valuable review of what works around the nation to reduce juvenile crime, and that you will take back with you some helpful new strategies and approaches for addressing this issue in your communities.

Attorney General Reno.

[Applause.]

STATEMENT OF HON. JANET RENO, ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Attorney General Reno: Thank you very much, Keni.

And I thank you all for being here today. I welcome you to Washington, and I just want to tell you how much I appreciate what you do in your communities or in your particular undertaking addressing the issue of youth violence.

I see some familiar faces. I see people who are making a difference in their communities, who are showing what works, that show all of America that we can truly make a difference.

We, in the Justice Department, decided to have this conference because we want to highlight those strategies that are working in the country. We want to hear from you who are on the front lines about what we should be doing in Washington to make a difference.

We also wanted to explain where we think we are in Washington so that we can move forward together in a unified way.

For the past four years, I have worked with the President to implement a comprehensive strategy to stem the tide of violence in this country. That strategy has to date had three basic components: Put more police officers on the streets who will involve citizens in community initiatives that can make a difference; ensure firm, fair punishment that fits the crime for people who break the law; and, three, develop programs, prevention programs that give our children a chance for a strong and positive future, that give them an alternative to crime.

Happily, we are starting to see some results from these strategies. Crime figures show that for the fifth year in a row the number of violent crimes in this country has decreased. That is the longest period of decline in over 25 years.

Last year for the first time in seven years, the national juvenile violent crime arrest rate and the juvenile murder arrest rate went down.

Today I want to draw your attention to another exciting new piece of evidence that all of your efforts are really beginning to pay off. A few weeks ago, the Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics completed the juvenile adult breakdown of its 1995 crime victimization survey.

That study shows that the amount of juvenile violent crime in the United States in 1995 declined by 25 percent. I looked at it and did not believe it. And I still understand that statistics can tell different stories, but this is measured in a comparison, and I think it is very heartening.

That 25 percent decline in a single year is by far the largest decline in juvenile violent crime in the history of the crime victimization survey.

But these encouraging statistics are not a signal for all of us to ease up on our efforts. Indeed, juvenile violent crime rates are still unacceptably high in many of our communities, both urban and rural throughout this country.

And expected demographic shifts over the next 20 years suggest that juvenile crime may still increase even if the rate of juvenile offenders continues to decline. Each of us must contribute. We are here today to do that. And I think, listening to each other, working together, we can come up with proposals that can make a difference.

We need to talk with each other, to figure out what more we can do, to not accept success to date, but to say, "Okay. We have proved we can do it. What more can we do? How can we do it better? How can we reach out to more children? How can we truly make a difference?"

That is the reason the President and I have been working these past few months to encourage Congress to enact an anti-gang and youth violence act. The debate on Capital Hill is now in full swing on this issue.

There are some that say, "Let us punish more. Let us build more facilities to punish."

There are others who say, "Let us do prevention."

But I think everyone in this business understands that we cannot go from just one extreme to the other, that what is the most effective approach is the balanced approach, one that is fair and firm and says to a young person, "You are going to be held accountable for what you do in a fair way. But then there is going to be after-care and follow-up when you return to the community."

At the same time, we have got to look at the youngsters who are now committing serious crimes, look at their pre-sentence investigations and say, "What could we have done along the way to have prevented it in the first place?"

One of the reasons I was so glad to see that there are young people here today that you will be hearing from is that they have such a wisdom. I was recently in Madison, Wisconsin at the Juvenile Detention Center there. I asked, as always, "What could have been done to have avoided this problem in the first place?"

And they say, again and again, "Something positive and constructive to do in the afternoons and evenings, somebody to talk to, an adult who understands how hard it is to grow up in this nation, somebody who knows when to give me a firm lecture, and somebody who knows when to give me a good pat on the back, and someone who does not put me down and make me feel small."

We really can make a difference if we understand that it is a matter of holding people accountable but giving them the tools to understand how to cope with this world. And that is the reason I am so pleased with the comprehensive strategy that the President put forth this past February.

This important legislation includes four elements: Targeting gangs and violent juveniles; keeping our children gun-free and drug-free; keeping our children on the right track through prevention programs that can truly make a difference; and reforming the juvenile justice program within the Department.

The legislation provides new resources to help states and localities target gangs and violent juveniles. Under the prosecutors' initiatives, funding will be available over two years for local prosecutors and anti-gang initiatives designed to pursue, prosecute and punish appropriately dangerous gang members for their crimes.

The bill also provides funding for youth violence courts initiatives. These grants will provide new resources for specialized court-based programs like juvenile gun and drug courts, to more effectively handle violent youthful offenders as they

proceed through the system.

For too long now, I have heard people say, "You provide the resource up front for police but you do not provide the resources for police and courts."

And juvenile judge after juvenile judge has said to me, "I think I know what to do with the kids that I get in my court. I just do not have the resources to do it."

This is an effort to provide resources directed and targeted towards the courts and towards the prosecutors so that they can link with probation officers, link with community police officers, build community initiatives that can make a difference.

We have worked to keep our kids gun and drug free by requiring gun dealers to sell child safety locks with every handgun, by expanding the Brady law to prevent juveniles convicted of violent crimes from buying guns when they turn 18, and by enacting tough new measures to crack down on drunk and drug driving.

Clearly, we must deal with the enforcement side. But if we want ever to make a difference and to have fewer troubled and dangerous young people in the future, we must invest in the future now.

Keeping our young people in school is an important step toward keeping them out of trouble. Once children leave the schoolhouse door, they are often more vulnerable to influences in the -- on the streets and even in their homes, as the children of America live a more unsupervised life than probably at any time in history.

Under the legislation, funding will be available for an at-risk children initiative which will help communities establish anti-truancy, school violence and other similar initiatives aimed at getting or keeping high-risk juveniles on the track to success.

But we do not try to dictate what these programs should contain. We want to hear from the people who are on the front line about what they need in their particular community where they understand their needs and resources better than we do, what they need to make the job effective.

In addition, the Administration's strategy within the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services calls for funds for 1,000 new after-school initiatives, for schools to stay open after the school ends and on weekends and in the summer.

By allowing schools to stay open longer, they can become community learning centers, providing students, parents and communities with access to valuable resources. And I just learned -- got another good suggestion: Let us try to focus on jobs after school as well. Let us start making the transition into the real world of employment.

Again it is the excitement of a conference like this where we share ideas that really helps us develop effective legislation.

And finally, we propose a redesigned, streamlined component within the Justice Department that is better equipped to respond to the changing nature of our juvenile crime.

Our guiding principles in creating this new office have been to increase flexibility for state and local governments and to be more focused, more efficient and more effective in our support of state and local prevention and enforcement efforts.

In 1994, we passed a crime act that I think has made a difference. For two years, we went to communities. We heard what was needed. We tried to fashion an act that truly, truly could be effective.

I think it has been. I think we were able within the context of the legislative process to come up with a balanced bill. But we have to move forward. We have to focus on this issue of youth crime. And that is the reason your participation in this conference is so important to us today.

Nothing gets written in stone at the outset. The legislative process is an evolving process. We would like to work with you in the months to come, to come up with a solid piece of legislation that balances punishment and prevention.

But to do that, particularly in the prevention area, it requires good solid data and good solid examples about what is working.

Congress, just like everybody else, will be willing to appropriate the monies if they know the monies are not going into a dark hole, and if they know those monies are going to serve to reduce crime, prevent crime, prevent the tragedy of crime and prevent the cost of detention facilities.

We have to take the results of this conference and the ongoing work that you are doing in your communities and in your programs across this nation and provide those solid examples so that together, the federal, state and local governments,

the private sector, the religious community, the schools, all of us, can work together to give our children a future.

I cannot tell you the excitement for me of these last four years. I came to Washington at my confirmation hearing, telling the Senate Judiciary Committee that youth violence was to me the single greatest crime problem in America.

For 15 years, I had seen crime rates go up and then go down a little bit and then go up a little bit more and then just down a little bit. And from a distance, I wondered whether we could really make a difference.

In these four years, I have seen people in communities after communities across this nation, people in Washington, people from all walks of life come together to truly prove we can make a difference.

Thank you all so very much for all of your efforts.

[Applause.]

[Whereupon, at 9:18 a.m., the speech was concluded.]