



**STATEMENT OF HON. JANET RENO, ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
FIRST MONDAY 2000
UNITE TO END GUN VIOLENCE
Monday, October 2, 2000
Johns Hopkins University
Baltimore, Maryland
7:25 p.m.**

Attorney General Reno: Thank you, Joe. Thank you all for that warm welcome.

I have really appreciated the opportunity to work with you and I am so proud to follow you, based on the good work that you have done here in Maryland.

It is so important for me to see disciplines, law, medicine, education, the mechanic, the plumber, across America people coming together to finally do something about guns.

Fifteen years ago or 25 years ago when Milton Eisenhower stood up, only a handful of advocacy organizations and other isolated individuals understood the grave threat that guns possess for this nation.

Today, however, when I travel across the country, I see people talking about guns, what can we do about them, how can we end this culture of gun violence, what difference can we make.

Too many people however draw back and say that, "I am just one person. I cannot make a difference." You can. I came to Washington talking about the need for prevention programs that work. People said she sounds like a social worker.

They are talking about prevention programs now. Each one of us can make a difference and it is time that we stood up and that we were all counted in saying that we do not have to have unregulated access to guns. We can use common sense, basic fundamental common sense in our approach to guns and truly, truly make a difference.

Each one of us can make a difference, if we will only be heard on the subject. Americans have been plagued by violence or the threat of violence every day for a long, long time now. None of us is immune. Violence does not recognize economic, racial, gender or geographic distinctions.

In 1998, the most recent year for which statistics are available, 30,708 people died from gun related injuries. This means that every day an average of 84 people, including ten children, are shot and killed and for each one of these deaths there are nearly three serious injuries.

In public health terms, indeed, it is a public health issue as well as a criminal justice issue. The rate of mortality from gun violence is roughly equivalent to that associated with HIV infection, a disease which has been recognized by the Centers for Disease Control as an epidemic.

In the last two years alone, more civilians have died in America from gun fire than all the soldiers killed during the nine years in the Vietnam War. The carnage caused by guns in the United States is unique among developed nations.

The murder rate for children killed by firearms in America is 16 times higher than in the 25 other wealthiest industrialized nations in the world. Consider this, during a five-year period in the 1990s, the city of Toronto across the border from us in Canada had a little over 100 gun homicides.

During the same five-year period in Chicago, a city of similar size and demographics, had 3,060 gun homicides. We do not have to put up with the violence that we have seen. A city across our border, a city very similar to Chicago

can do something about it. So can we in America. In addition to the human suffering caused by gun violence, the cost to society are astronomical.

Gunshot wounds account for approximately \$20 billion each year in medical, public services and work lost costs. Just imagine if we put that \$20 billion in to ending poverty in America and making sure that our children have appropriate health care, that our elders had appropriate health care, think of what we could do with those dollars.

It does not have to be as we have known it.

As future leaders in your community and in your professions, you have a tremendous opportunity to speak out, to work, to advocate and to make a difference. I know that the senseless and tragic violence that confronts us on the nightly news can leave us feeling overwhelmed and incapable of reversing the situation, but violence is not inevitable, nor an abstract force against which we are powerless.

We can end violence if we as individuals, as communities, as a nation stop condoning it and if we stop remaining passive in its face. The choices and the actions of each one of us when multiplied by all of those across this huge country can truly turn the tide.

We have seen the power of grassroots activism on other social issues. From the civil rights movement to issues of human rights and environmental protection, activists can begin by raising public awareness of these issues and by working to propose and implement solutions.

Change does not come overnight, but through the concerted committed efforts of people like yourselves it will come. Over the last seven years, reducing gun violence has been one of the priorities of this administration and for me personally. We have made tremendous strides.

We have funded more than 100,000 new community police officers, increased assistance to state and local law

enforcement by nearly 300 percent, instituted a wide variety of community based crime prevention programs for youth, created new programs to reduce domestic violence and drug-related violent crimes, worked to develop and promote promising prevention and intervention strategies to reduce crime and worked hard to pass the Brady Act which dramatically increased the effectiveness of our nation's gun control laws that prohibit certain categories of individuals, for example, felons, domestic abusers, fugitives from justice and drug users from possessing firearms.

This law does this by requiring background checks on people who want to buy guns from licensed dealers. The permanent phase of the Brady Act, the national instant criminal background check system or NICS as we call it, went into operation on November the 30th, 1998.

Since the Brady act was passed, Brady background checks have stopped over 500,000 felons and other prohibited persons from getting guns and we worked to secure passage of the assault weapons ban as well as legislation that prohibits possession of handguns by juveniles and requires zero tolerance for guns in school.

Many of these efforts represent attempts to prevent gun violence before it occurs, but when gun crimes are committed, U.S. attorneys and ATF agents along with state and local law enforcement make sure that gun criminals are investigated and prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

Working with state and local law enforcement and gun prosecutions in our country have increased by more than 20 percent since 1992 and federal prosecutors have focused federal resources on the most serious, the most violent gun offenders.

In fact, the number of high-end federal gun criminals, those that get more than five years in federal prisons, for them going to prison increased by more than 40 percent from 1992 until 1999.

These crime fighting efforts and others across this nation have contributed to a historic reduction in crime. From 1992 to 1998, violent crimes by firearms fell 35 percent nationwide and gun related homicides declined by 36 percent. Robbery with firearms and aggravated assault with firearms also dropped 39 percent from 36 percent respectively.

The uniform crime report figures from 1999 show that this trend is continuing. Last year violent crimes dropped an additional 7 percent. In real human terms these numbers mean that Americans are safer today in their communities, their schools, their homes, in their workplaces, but we cannot rest now.

Before coming to Washington, I served as a prosecutor for 15 years in Dade County Miami, Florida. I would watch the crime rate go down slightly and then people would become complacent and you would go to a meeting and they did not want to talk about crime. They wanted to talk about something else.

We cannot become complacent in the face of our success because what we have done is shown that we can influence crime, we can make a difference if we approach it from a common sense point of view, if we recognize that crime is not a partisan issue, not an issue just for Democrats or Republicans to opine on.

It is an issue for all America to speak out in good common sense terms and work together to do something about it. We cannot afford complacency. That is why I would like to present you today with a six point plan to see how we can continue to address gun violence in America, an approach that addresses both the causes and the consequences of the crime by backing up tough law enforcement with smart and effective prevention and intervention programs.

First, we must continue to aggressively enforce firearms laws. When guns fall into the wrong hands and are used in a crime, the full force of the law must be brought to bear. Criminals who use guns illegally must be met with stiff and

sure punishment so that people recognize that the law will not tolerate it.

Those who supply guns to criminals must be shut down and locked up. To enhance our aggressive investigation and prosecution of gun crimes, the president has asked in his budget for the funding to hire 500 new ATF agents and inspectors and over 1,000 new federal state and local prosecutors.

I hope that Congress will respond to this request by giving law enforcement the resources it needs to enforce the nation's gun laws.

Secondly, we must enact common sense gun legislation. We believe that law enforcement's ability to effectively keep Americans safe from gun violence will be limited unless Congress enacts legislation to close the dangerous guns show loopholes that let criminals and young people buy guns at gun shows anonymously, no questions asked.

We must enact legislation to require child safety locks for new handguns and we must strengthen the criminal penalties for armed career criminals and major gun traffickers.

In addition, we favor the elimination of the importation of large capacity ammunition clips banning juveniles from owning guns for life if they have a record of violence and requiring all-new handgun buyers to have a federal license from their state showing that they possess a Brady background check and a gun safety course before they get their guns.

The nation is waiting for Congress to act. This week before they go home, I think Congress should listen to the voices of the American people who overwhelmingly favor these common sense gun safety measures and pass these measures quickly.

But we can do more. It makes no sense as attorney general Karen pointed out, for you to have to go get a license to drive an automobile because it is a dangerous

instrumentality and for you to be able to go get a gun without demonstrating that you know to safely and lawfully use the weapon and that you are capable and willing to do so.

Common sense legislation that would provide for licensing would ensure that people possess guns only if they know how to use them correctly and legally and safely will make a tremendous difference. Let us speak out and talk in common sense terms about such legislation.

Third, in order to effectively reduce gun violence and sustain that reduction we must invest in long-term prevention and intervention programs. The crack epidemic hit Miami in about 1984 and we had to figure out what to do about crack involved infants and their mothers.

The doctors took me to the public hospital. In the neonatal unit were crowds and crowds of babies that cannot be sent home because their mothers were involved with crack and there was no one to take care of the babies.

They had been there for six weeks, sometimes two months. They had not been held or talked to except when changed and fed and they were not beginning to react with human emotions whereas the child across the nursery who had been born with severe birth defects that had her parents with her around the clock was beginning to react with smiles through the pain and discomfort but with human characteristics.

The neonatologist, the child development experts taught me then that the first three years of life are so important. That is when the child learns the concept of reward and punishment, develops a conscience.

I suddenly thought to myself what good are all the prisons going to be 20 years from now if this child does not have a conscience. When we talk about prevention programs we must talk about programs that begin at the beginning and give the children of America a strong and positive future where they can have self-respect and think that they can pursue

whatever goal they want regardless of their ability to afford it.

It means that we must make sure that our children have appropriate medical care. I have looked at too many pre-sentence investigations that showed that some illness along the way, untreated or untreated quickly caused emotional and mental problems that we are seeing the difficulties that we have now addressing which we could have solve so quickly if we had addressed them up front.

We have got to make sure that every child in America has the appropriate supervision after school and in the evenings, that they have an education that can prepare them for the future.

Something is wrong with a nation that pays its football players in the six digit figures and pays its teachers what we pay them in America today. It is time that we give our children the foundation they need to grow, to understand, to understand that the gratuitous violence that we see on television is not the way of life on our streets, but that we have chosen another safer, saner way of life, a life without guns.

Our young people need to develop problem solving and conflict resolution approaches. You have all had to deal with these problems, that if you have 10 gallons of gas and you traveled this far how far can you go after that. Let us put our problem solving skills to solving the everyday problems that we face.

Conflict resolution programs can make such a difference and demonstrate to young people how we can resolve conflicts without knives and guns and fists.

Fourth, we must use 21st century technology to fight crime. Modern technology can greatly enhance law enforcement law enforcement's ability to combat gun violence. For example, ballistic testing programs at the FBI and ATF have already helped advance over 16,000 criminal investigations of gun crimes in over 40 states.

With effective gun tracing, analysis mapping and improved ballistics identification systems, law enforcement can solve individual crimes, target illegal gun traffickers and provide a strategic overview of the illegal drug market.

Even 20 years ago when I became when I first became a prosecutor, if we were tracing gun organizations in Miami, we could get a piece of information here and a piece of information there, but we could not put it altogether.

Now we can build databases, put in arrest reports, incident reports, emergency room overdose or information, target where crime is occurring and why it is occurring and we can be so much more efficient.

Technology can also prevent gun related deaths. For example, the number of injuries and deaths from accidental shooting will decline if smart gun technology is supported and expanded.

This technology would make guns operate only in the hands of their authorized owners and it is fascinating to see how that technology is developing even as we speak.

We must educate the public about the dangers that irresponsible firearms handling and unsafe storage pose for children. This education must take place in every living room and classroom in America.

Today 40 percent of American households have at least one gun and more than one-third of American children live in homes where guns are present. In 13 percent of these homes about 1.4 million homes with 2.6 million children, there are unlocked firearms that are either loaded or stored with ammunition and in 43 percent of gun owning homes, there are guns that are stored unlocked and accessible to children.

There is no excuse for this. Gun owners must be encouraged to unload and lock up their weapons. I actually investigated and tried to figure out what to do in a case of a man who had been showing his friends his new custom-made weapon. There are two couples. The one couple went

upstairs to get ready to go out to the gun range.

The husband came down first. Then the wife. He took the gun off the shelf. He forgot that he had failed to take the clip out. He thought he was dry firing, but the clip was in. He fired, shot through his hand, ran outside jumping up and down, cursing himself only to come back in and find that the bullet had gone through his hand and had hit his wife.

She lived long enough to tell the other couple that it was an accident.

No one is immune from this and it makes very clear that we have got to do everything we can to properly protect at least our children from these weapons.

Fifth, as the attorney general pointed out, we must encourage the firearms industry to work with us to help reduce gun violence. This industry can do much, much more to help solve our country's firearms and violence problems.

It must do a better job of policing its own distributors to keep guns from falling into the wrong hands. Gun makers, gun sellers can help reduce the illegal supply of guns and keep criminals, unauthorized juveniles and other prohibited persons from acquiring firearms.

They can take steps to ensure that firearms are transferred only to persons who have the knowledge and experience to handle them safely. In addition to making its distribution practices safer, the firearms industry must do everything it can to design products to be as safe as reasonably possible, to incorporate existing safety devices on firearms and to devote significant resources to developing new safety devices and technology to prevent accidental shootings.

Finally, we must recognize that most solutions come from the community in which we live and when a community galvanizes itself into action, joins together across disciplines, across neighborhoods, across socioeconomic

lines, we can make a tremendous difference.

Federal efforts alone will not reduce gun violence. That is not what is reducing crime in America by itself, but it is America that is coming together in its communities, the collaboration, the leadership, the innovation that we are seeing is what is making the difference.

I am confident that together concerned citizens and dedicated law enforcement leaders can greatly reduce gun violence. In June of 1999, I directed each of the 93 U.S. attorneys across the country to work with state and local community leaders to develop comprehensive coordinated plans to reduce gun violence in their communities.

No single program or approach can be right for every community. We have got to design it for Baltimore, for Maryland, for the district -- it would be different for each.

Each U.S. attorney has worked closely with local law enforcement and elected officials to develop plans tailored to that particular community. Each plan is rooted in a problem solving analysis.

It offers innovative strategy that focus on the specific gun violence problems faced by the community. What can you do to reduce gun violence in your community?

Just a few thoughts. You might start here. This is promising strategies to reduce gun violence. It is done by the office of juvenile justice and delinquency prevention. It has got good common sense, tried and tested programs that are showing an effect in their community.

It profiles a number of programs throughout the nation that have been effective. For example, the book describes several hospital-based intervention for youthful victims of gun violence.

In the East Bay area in Oakland, I went to a hospital to see a trauma center started by a physician, who was an a

huge emergency room physician, but night after night he had seen young people come in, victims and then come right behind them he suspected too often came the perpetrators, because these were people that knew each other and generally got along and then would get in a fight precipitated by alcohol or something else and the problems would escalate one incident to the next.

He decided that it was time to intervene now with counseling, with support mechanisms, with aftercare as the young person left hospital. I went to the rooms to talk to the young men who had been the victims.

They had been victims before in some instances and they said we are now beginning to learn. We are beginning to learn that we can use conflict resolution skills and other skills to keep us out of trouble to keep us away from guns, to help us resist peer pressure.

The book also describes gun hotlines which have been successfully used in many communities to allow students and others to report illegal guns in schools and elsewhere.

I would encourage you to look closely at the book. You can order a copy today through the Alliance for Justice staff.

Educate yourself about your local gun laws and what your elected representatives are doing at the federal state and local levels.

Make your views known appropriately. Find out if your country and your county allows gun shows and if so whether background checks are required before guns are sold. If not, raise this issue with your county leaders and let them know what your community wants with respect to background checks on anyone who wants to possess a gun. Encourage those who do own guns to store them safely and securely and tell them to take nothing for granted and leave nothing to chance. To reduce accidental gun injury and death among children, the department is working with the ad council and national crime prevention council to develop a national public service advertising campaign to promote safe and

responsible gun storage.

The campaign encourages gun owners to store their gun safely, locked and unloaded so that children and other unauthorized users cannot get at them. Call your local media to encourage them to run these ads. If you are interested in promoting this campaign, call the national crime prevention council in Washington D.C. for more information.

Identify partners in the issue. I have talked principally to the young people right now. From Littleton came some young people to Washington to make sure their voices were heard. Two of them are seniors and they wondered how they were going to continue on, what they were going to be able to do when they went away to college. They decided, at least one of them, not to go to college the first year because they felt so passionately about what they had been able to develop in terms of gun legislation and gun actions that could make a difference.

Each one of you young people can make a difference if you become involved, if you care, and if you refuse to take no for an answer. Find out what strategies are already underway in your community and how you can help out, get a group of community leaders to meet with local gun leaders in encourage them to do what they can to make sure that the guns that they sell in your community do not fall into the wrong hands.

If we step up to the plate, if we refuse to become complacent, if we pursue these efforts, we can end the culture of violence in this nation and no longer will we have to be compared in such outlandish terms, in such astronomical terms as the 25 other largest wealthiest industrialized nations in the world.

People ask me of why I participate in public service, why I want to be attorney general, although I am getting ready to go home to Miami in January and get my red truck and drive across this country and climb the mountains I did not have a chance to climb because I had to be back in Washington

and talk to people I have not had a chance to talk to as long as I wanted to because I had to be back in Washington.

But I have seen this country in action and I can tell people why, why everyone should participate. Yes, in public service you get cussed at, fussed at and figuratively beaten around the ears. There are some days when you say why did I do this to myself, but after almost eight years in office I can tell you why.

This is a great nation with wonderful people, wonderful young people who want so to contribute and to make a difference. Each one of us can, each one of us can make a difference and never, ever in all my 62 years have I ever been so proud of this nation, its people and particularly its young people. It has a great future in your hands.

[Whereupon, at 7:45 p.m., the speech was concluded.]