



Department of Justice

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ADDRESS

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OF

THE HONORABLE EDWIN MEESE III
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

BEFORE

THE METRO CRIME STOPPERS

TUESDAY, MAY 6, 1986
MARTIN'S WEST
BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

NOTE: Because Mr. Meese often speaks from notes, the speech as delivered may vary from this text. However, he stands behind this text as printed.

I am pleased to have been invited here tonight to address this Fifth Annual Fund-Raising Dinner. Citizen participation and cooperation with law enforcement officials is absolutely indispensable to the proper functioning of an effective criminal justice system. Your efforts here in the Baltimore area are showing the way for a lot of other Americans.

Tonight, I'd like to share some thoughts with you about crime, how it affects society and what we might do about it.

If we look back just 20 years or so, during the 1960s and 1970s, we see that high crime rates became an unfortunate fact of American life. This was a deplorable development, but I'd suggest that the greater tragedy is that many Americans came to accept this situation as somehow being normal. Certainly there has been crime throughout man's history, and frontier America saw its share of lawless and violent acts. But the high crime rates to which we now accommodate ourselves are essentially a post-World War II phenomenon, with the greatest surge coming since 1965.

Many reasons have been given for this shocking new American reality, and no doubt the reasons are complex. But one tenacious myth that we have pretty well been able to discard is a view urged on us by some -- that rising unemployment has been the primary cause of soaring crime rates over the past two decades. In fact, a Joint Economic Committee Report of Congress in 1976 went so far as to state that "a 1.4 percent rise in unemployment in 1970 is directly responsible for 1,740 additional homicides."

Well, the evidence, when looked at carefully, does not support any such linkage. In fact, there have been decreases in crime during periods of high unemployment.

However, it seems there are some people in our country today who would like to blame crime on anything but the failure of our society to punish it. But crime is too serious a problem to be left to sociologists and well-meaning but misguided sentimentalists.

The social engineers of the Great Society opposed many of the things that we are doing today -- and doing well -- to change the crime picture. They couldn't bring themselves to hold criminals individually accountable for their acts and to punish them for their crimes. But individual responsibility and system accountability are making strong comebacks. And law-abiding Americans are better off for it. The Justice Department's best data shows that the increase in the prison population during the past decade is preventing as many as one million crimes a year from being committed by career criminals.

It is time again for all Americans to reject the belief that we must accomodate criminals. It is time for us to be less accepting and more demanding when it comes to crime. We must be less willing to excuse and more willing to police our neighborhoods. Less willing to concede whole blocks of our cities to criminals, drug dealing, and vagrants and more willing to pay the price personally and fiscally to take back what should belong to decent law-abiding citizens.

As distressing as the high crime rates have been over the past two decades, the incidence of crime itself is far outstripped by the fear of crime which afflicts Americans in their neighborhoods and communities. The discrepancy between actual crime and the fear of crime and the reasons for it were the subject of an important study that was released just a few years ago. It was called the Figgie Report, named after Harry Figgie, Jr., whose company sponsored the research. Your presence here tonight tells me that you already know something about the fear of crime, so I will only briefly summarize the findings of that report.

What it said was that four out of ten Americans -- forty percent of all Americans -- harbor concrete fears that they personally will become victims of violent crimes, such as murder, rape, robbery or assault. Four out of ten Americans also have formless fears about safety in their everyday environments.

The fear of crime crosses all demographic boundaries. It is pervasive. There is no group in society which is free from this fear. Nevertheless, even among this large percentage of the population, certain groups -- those who are living in large cities, women, minority groups -- experience particularly high degrees of fear. The type of fear varies somewhat from group to group.

Well, this widespread fear coupled with an increasing crime rate over two decades has severely altered the behavior patterns of Americans. It has affected where we choose to live, work, shop, send our children to school, even where to relax.

And according to a recent survey, fear of crime has affected investment and other business decisions more than either high taxes or labor costs. By altering the way people behave, this fear disrupts the economy of downtown areas. This was the finding of a report released a year ago by the Citizens' Crime Commission of New York City. They found that crime:

- reduces the number of pedestrians and the distances they are willing to walk;
- encourages people to remain within self-contained complexes and to use indoor walkways instead of going outdoors;
- decreases the level of face-to-face communication between downtown users;
- promotes the desertion of the downtown area after five o'clock; and
- increases auto use and thus the demand for nearby parking.

This type of altered behavior represents losses not only in quality of life but also in hard cash.

Well, those are the effects of the fear of crime. But we must also ask what are the causes. We would be mistaken to think that fear of crime is generated only by sudden, violent attacks, or for that matter only by crime itself. Professor James Q. Wilson of Harvard University has pointed out another source of the fear of crime that we often tend to overlook or forget. That is the fear of being bothered by what he has described as disorderly people. "Not violent people," he says, "nor,

necessarily, criminals, but disreputable or obstreperous or unpredictable people: such as panhandlers, drunks, narcotic addicts, rowdy teenagers, prostitutes, loiterers, even the mentally disturbed."

Back in 1968, when scholars and social commentators were losing their heads over "the urban crisis," and blaming the usual suspects -- such as poverty, unemployment, declining industries -- Professor Wilson went out and talked to city dwellers and asked them what it was that really concerned them the most. He found that their top concern was what they described as "improper behavior in public places." In other words, disorderly conduct. He found that this concern was shared by all racial groups and by various economic segments of our society.

The problem was, as these city-dwellers saw it, that standards of proper conduct weren't being kept up. And of course, keeping up standards begins at home. How we behave affects the behavior of others. That includes what we say, how we present ourselves, how we dress, how we keep our homes, and how we control our children.

We are now learning that at the community level, disorder and crime are joined like Siamese twins of trouble. Take, for example, a building where a window is broken. If the owner or superintendent of the building leaves it unattended, soon all the rest of the windows are broken. This is true in so-called nice neighborhoods as well as in those that are more decrepit.

Untended property becomes a target of vandalism--frequently committed by people, particularly young people, who would otherwise be law-abiding. As Professor Wilson puts it, "Vandalism can occur anywhere once communal barriers -- the sense of mutual regard and the obligations of civility -- are lowered by actions that seem to signal that 'nobody cares'."

Graffiti is another example. Nathan Glazer has written about the young vandals in New York City who cover every square inch of the subway cars with their names written in spray paint and black ink. Some of you have probably been to New York and seen this. At one time it got so bad that the New York Subway system was pre-graffitiing the cars because they preferred their graffiti to the obscene graffiti put on by the kids. In any event, the message that the subway rider gets, says Glazer, is "that the environment that he or she must endure for an hour or more a day is uncontrolled and uncontrollable, and that anyone can invade it to do whatever damage and mischief the mind suggests."

Can anyone doubt then why people in large cities have this fear of crime? The hapless attempts of the city to clean up and prevent the mess become further signs of official failure. The subway rider soon believes -- correctly or not -- that he or she is in a dangerous place. Many New Yorkers have stopped riding. They pay an unseen tax that never gets added into the IRS bill or the city tax -- and that's the 'tax of fear.' They pay for more expensive transportation, like taxicabs. Or worse they stop going into the city at all if they can avoid it.

"Untended" behavior, like untended property, has its consequences, too. Think about this scenario which Professor Wilson has described:

A stable neighborhood of families who care for their homes, mind each other's children, and confidently frown on unwanted intruders can change, in a few years or even a few months, to an inhospitable and frightening jungle. A piece of property is abandoned, weeds grow up, a window is smashed. Adults stop scolding rowdy children, or controlling them; the children, who are emboldened, then become even more rowdy. Families move out, unattached adults move in. Teenagers gather in front of the corner store. The merchant asks them to move; they refuse. Fights occur. Litter accumulates. People start drinking in front of the grocery; in time, a drunk slumps to the sidewalk and is allowed to sleep it off. Pedestrians are approached by panhandlers.

Well, as we would know, at this point the fear of crime sets in even without a crime actually being committed.

The situation, however, is not irreversible. It is not inevitable that serious crime will take hold or that violent attacks will occur. But many residents will think that crime is increasing and they will modify their behavior. They will use

the streets less often; they will cross to the other side when they see a stranger in their path; they will keep moving and talk to no one.

A community in this condition -- and I know you've seen them -- is highly vulnerable to crime. Unless something is done to turn the community around, the downward spiral continues. Next drugs are peddled; drunks are robbed; muggings follow and, as the saying goes, there goes the neighborhood. Another bite out of the city because too few people cared enough to do something about it.

I saw just the opposite of this syndrome recently. I had the privilege of being in New York City with the police commissioner there, Ben Ward. He showed me some videotapes of the Lower East Side taken from inside undercover police surveillance vehicles. They showed drug transactions going down in broad daylight. Then Commissioner Ward took me down to the actual scene. The drug transactions that had taken place some months before were no longer being carried on. In fact, the streets were clean and clear of drunks, narcotics peddlers and narcotics addicts.

What had happened? Commissioner Ward explained that in a determined effort called "Operation Pressurepoint" the police and the citizens of that particular area of New York decided that they were going to take the streets back. And they did. They went down to the Lower East Side and made arrests of the narcotic traffickers and anyone else who was committing a crime. And pretty soon the word got around. It was only a matter of months

after those streets were cleaned up that people started painting their houses and their stores. Better businesses moved in and property values went up. A neighborhood was reclaimed by those who ought to live there -- law-abiding people.

In other words, not only can a neighborhood go down, it can also be brought back up. And that is precisely our point. We in the Department of Justice and this administration would like to see more neighborhoods like the Lower East Side brought back up. We care a great deal about the nation's communities; we care about the state of our cities; and we care about the level of public order.

But we also know that massive federal intervention is not the solution to the breakdown of law and order in communities. Instead, we are committed to reversing the long-time flow of power and revenues away from State and local governments toward the federal government. We believe that the primary responsibility for the prevention and control of crime should rest at that level of government closest to the people.

At the same time, we want to improve the working relationship of local governments with the federal government. We'll do our part to support and assist local law enforcement in those areas where specialized resources exist at the federal level. And where state and local government cannot reach because of geographic or jurisdictional limitations.

We are working with local police, sheriff departments, district attorneys, attorneys general, and others through our law enforcement coordinating councils in each judicial district. In addition, we conduct frequent joint operations with local law enforcement.

But in analyzing the kinds of problems I've been talking about tonight, we also must ask ourselves: How can we do more to preserve our neighborhoods and our communities?

Tonight, I'd like to suggest a few things that might just make a difference:

First of all, our management of the criminal justice system must be improved. We must mark out clearly what our priorities are. We must mobilize and allocate our resources better and we must use a systems approach.

We have to recognize that when something happens in one part of the criminal justice system, it affects the rest. If we have a major drive to clean up a community and we cause more arrests for drug trafficking, that's going to have an impact on the district attorney's office and on the courts. And as we convict more criminals, that's ultimately going to affect prisons and the correctional system.

Unfortunately, one of the things we haven't done very well until very recently is put our money where our mouths are in terms of increasing prison capacity. In the past 25 years we have had an increase of over 400 percent in major crimes. We've had an increase of over 400 percent in people arrested for those crimes. And the public has demanded stronger sentences from the

judges. But in the same period of time we have increased our prison capacity in the United States by only about seventy-one percent. And most of that increase has come in the last few years.

So we must think systematically about our system of criminal justice, looking at all its components, including prison capacity.

Second, we must restore the balance between considerations of public safety on the one hand and the rights of the accused on the other. This will require judicial and legislative action. We will continue to appeal to our nation's highest court to halt the escalation of the rights of criminal defendants at the expense of law-abiding Americans.

Third, society itself -- local governments particularly-- must develop new strategies and direct more resources to reclaiming our neighborhoods. We've got to figure out how to handle drunks and vagrants. We've got to figure out how to handle unruly behavior. There's been a definite trend in recent years against strong law enforcement acts for the ordinary type of street disorderliness. Vagrancy laws have been struck down by the courts. And there's been a tendency to regard public drunkenness and public begging as kind of harmless fact of life in the city. But if we're going to give our communities an appearance of orderly conduct and lawfulness, then we've got to figure out how to address and solve these problems as well.

And, finally, an essential ingredient is more citizen involvement. Police agencies, with their limited resources, cannot possibly be effective in controlling crime without the help of concerned citizens. Fortunately, more and more areas -- like metropolitan Baltimore -- are awakening to this fact.

Citizens' crime commissions, like the Metro Crime Stoppers, have become an important line of defense. Today, more than 600 Crime Stoppers programs exist nationwide. Since 1981, they are credited with solving over 75,000 crimes and with recovering stolen property and narcotics worth more than \$450 million.

In addition, citizen volunteers in virtually every county in America are supporting local police and sheriff's departments by serving in reserve and auxiliary programs.

Well, there's much to be done and some new approaches to citizen involvement may yet be called for. The Department of Justice will continue to study new ways to build partnerships among law enforcement, the private sector and the community. But in the initiatives already underway you and Metro Crime Stoppers have a role to play.

I congratulate and commend you on your fine work. I wish you continued success and I look forward to watching you in the future achievements that I'm sure will be there.

Thank you.