

REMARKS

OF

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AT THE

INTER AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK  
FIFTH INTENSIVE TRAINING CLINIC IN CITIZEN SECURITY

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Thank you, Thomas [Abt]. I appreciate that introduction.

Let me echo Thomas and thank the Inter American Development Bank and all of you for your interest in violence prevention and for engaging the Department of Justice in your work. I believe the main ingredient of any successful community safety initiative is the desire to make a positive difference, and I can see a strong desire and commitment here. You are to be commended.

Let me begin by anticipating and answering a question you might have about the work we're doing in the Department. You may wonder why we're placing such a tremendous emphasis on the problem of youth violence. After all, you may be aware that the United States is in the midst of an historic crime decline. Rates of both violent and property crime have been going down steadily for years. We don't know exactly why, but the fact is, our communities, as a whole, are safer than they've been in decades.

The problem is, this decline isn't uniform across cities. And even in cities where overall crime rates have gone down, there are pockets where crime has remained steady or even gone up. In fact, research shows that crime tends to concentrate in small areas – particular neighborhoods, sometimes areas as small as a city block or even a single building. So even though we can feel good that there's not as much crime in the aggregate, we can't, by any means, be satisfied that every community is a safe place.

For some communities, violence is a daily – and a deadly – fact of life. And what's so troubling is that in many cases, especially in inner-city neighborhoods, this violence is being committed by – and against – our young people. The stories you hear on the news bear this out, and so do the statistics. It's a tragic fact that for Hispanics between the ages of 10 and 24, homicide is the second leading cause of death in our country. For African-American youth, it's not only the leading cause of death, it results in more deaths than the next nine leading causes combined. And before this day is out, 16 more kids will lose their lives to violence.

As troubling as these data are, this situation is not beyond changing. In spite of the challenges faced by many inner-city youth, crime and violence are not inevitable, and a future full of hope and opportunity is within reach, if only we have the collective will to help them achieve it.

Research and our experiences in cities across the country show that when communities work in partnership – across disciplines and across levels of government – and adopt balanced approaches that rely on data and evidence, it's possible to reduce violence and increase positive outcomes for our youth. Of course, this involves breaking down barriers between sectors of the community and building trust between groups who have not always agreed on solutions or even on the problems.

Through our National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention, we're working to bring these diverse groups together and work towards common solutions. We're coordinating efforts across federal agencies and reaching out to communities to address

youth and gang violence in a strategic, comprehensive manner. And we're involving all stakeholders – citizens, faith-based and community organizations, law enforcement, public health professionals, business and philanthropic leaders, and others. The idea is to share ideas and explore solutions to these challenges.

Six cities – Boston, Massachusetts; Chicago, Illinois; Detroit, Michigan; Memphis, Tennessee; and Salinas and San Jose, California – have developed and are implementing comprehensive plans aimed at reducing violent crime and improving opportunities for youth. We'll be announcing four more sites very soon. We've gotten high levels of support for this effort, both from within the Administration and from local leaders, and it's been rewarding to see the enthusiasm it's generated. Community stakeholders are working together to design bold new strategies to tackle their most intractable problems, and the work they're doing is very promising.

For example, in San Jose, the mayor's office – in collaboration with community partners – runs something called the BEST Program, which supports a range of prevention and intervention activities. There's also a juvenile reentry initiative funded by our agency under the Second Chance Act that seeks to give young people coming out of detention facilities the skills they need to succeed. And I want to emphasize that this reentry component is critical. We know through scientific research – some of which has been cited in recent Supreme Court cases – that kids are capable of changing their behavior and turning back from a life of crime, if only they're given the support and the right opportunities.

In Boston, law enforcement and city and civic leaders are engaged in a terrific partnership with businesses and philanthropies to support summer and year-round employment for youth. They formed something called the Youth Violence Prevention Learning Collaborative that was able to provide 10,000 summer jobs this year. They're also providing job training and placement for the city's most high-risk youth.

These are the kinds of exciting partnerships and forward-thinking approaches we're seeing in the Forum sites. And again, these successes all center on broad community engagement.

They also take a balanced approach, which brings me to another point. Combating youth violence involves much more than a robust police response. It calls for a strong focus on prevention and intervention, which is all the more important when you consider the rates of violence to which our young people are exposed.

Some 60 percent of children are exposed to some form of violence, crime, or abuse, ranging from brief encounters as witnesses to serious violent episodes as victims. Many are victimized more than once. The Attorney General put it best when he said that children are “living with violence at rates that we, as adults, would never tolerate.”

The incidence of violence among our children is a grave concern in itself, but it's even more troubling when you consider the range of consequences – psychological and

emotional trauma, long-term health problems, poor academic performance, and an increased risk of delinquent and criminal behavior. Fortunately, we know that early intervention can be effective in countering the effects of violence. So part of the answer to youth violence is structuring programs that enhance resiliency and foster healthy development.

We're also exploring the link between community safety and other issues – poverty, public health, housing, education. These problems don't exist in isolation. They're all part of what our Acting Associate Attorney General calls a “mosaic of challenges.” Kids who are victimized and abused don't perform well in school, and when they don't perform in school, they can't get jobs. And when you have a group of under-educated, unemployed people, the community as a whole suffers.

And that's exactly what we've seen – people who come into contact with the justice system often come from and return to the same communities, so those communities are burdened with a disproportionate share of disaffected youth, and they don't have the means to address their problems. In some cases, they don't even have the resources to apply for grants. So a big part of our challenge is to build community capacity.

The Department of Justice is part of an Administration-wide effort called the Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative that seeks to help communities deal with these tough issues. Its goal is to transform neighborhoods in distress into neighborhoods of opportunity by using federal support to increase local capacity. The initiative is being led by the White House, and it involves five different federal agencies. Our role at the Department of Justice is to support strategy development and help communities access the resources they need to address neighborhood-level crime issues.

This goes hand in hand with another effort called Strong Cities, Strong Communities that's specifically trying to spark economic growth in several distressed cities by encouraging partnerships among government, businesses, philanthropies, and the non-profit sector. Because we know, as you do, that community transformation and economic success don't come through government alone. They happen when everyone comes to the table.

President Obama said recently that “we have no greater mission as a country than keeping our young people safe.” Preventing youth violence – and keeping neighborhoods safe and healthy – is the responsibility of all parts of the community. That's the message we're sending through the National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention and our other efforts. No one agency or organization can tackle this problem on its own.

By emphasizing partnerships, evidence-based and data-driven strategies, and a balanced approach, we've found a good formula for channeling our collective resolve. It's exciting to see that all of you are taking a similar path – collaborating, leveraging resources, and approaching the issue from all angles.

It won't be an easy process – I'm sure you already know that – but I believe that it's the surest way to achieve your goals, and I can't help but be optimistic that, in time, you will meet with success.

I wish you well in your efforts, and I look forward to hearing about your progress.

Thank you.

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