

**REMARKS**

**OF**

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OFFICE OF JUSTICE PROGRAMS**

**AT**

**CITIES UNITED:  
BUILDING COMMUNITIES TO REDUCE  
VIOLENT DEATHS AMONG BLACK MEN AND BOYS**

**ON**

**SUNDAY, MARCH 11, 2012  
WASHINGTON, DC**

Thank you so much, Jamira. It's an honor to be introduced by one of our current and – most certainly – future leaders.

I'm very pleased to be here, and I want to begin by bringing greetings from the Attorney General. He asked me to convey his appreciation to all of you for the work you're doing to reduce violence against African American men and boys in your communities. This is an issue about which he feels deeply passionate, and he joins you in your commitment.

As he often says, fighting violence in our cities and building a fair and effective justice system – a system that keeps citizens safe and maintains its legitimacy in the eyes of everyone it serves – has never been more difficult, and never more urgent. You are all to be commended for taking on this challenge, and for the great work you're doing on behalf of our nation's communities.

Let me particularly thank Mayor Nutter and Mayor Landrieu, whose leadership has made this effort possible. My appreciation also to our sponsors: the good folks at the National League of Cities – especially Don Borut, Carolyn Coleman, and Leon Andrews; Casey Family Programs – represented by Dr. William Bell and Antoinette Malveux; and Shawn Dove from the Open Society Foundations Campaign for Black Male Achievement. Thank you all.

And I have to single out Jack Calhoun, who's done so much for us as part of the National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention. Jack has been a wonderful partner and an excellent guide in our work to address youth and gang violence.

I'm very glad to be here today, because I don't think this meeting could come at a better time. In spite of historically low rates of crime nationally, some communities – and especially, particular sectors of those communities – are working to beat back a rising tide of violence, much of it committed by and against young people. One need only to read the headlines to see that in some cities, safer homes and safer streets are the exception rather than the rule, particularly for young black men. In some cases, even very young children have become victims of gun and gang violence.

Tragically, these stories – of teenagers, school-age children, and even infants dying by gunfire – only underscore the facts. We know black males between the ages of 16 and 19 have the highest rate of violent victimization of any race and any age group. And, for African American boys and young men between the ages of 10 and 24, homicide is the leading cause of death, resulting in more deaths than the next 9 leading causes combined.

But crime and violence are not inevitable. Research and experience demonstrate that when communities engage in multi-disciplinary partnerships and adopt balanced, data-driven approaches, violence decreases while desirable outcomes for youth improve.

Through the National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention, the Department of Justice and other federal agencies are supporting efforts that bring together citizens, community and faith-based organizations, law enforcement, public health professionals, business and philanthropic leaders, and others to address youth and gang violence in a strategic, comprehensive manner.

Six cities are participating – Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Memphis, and Salinas and San Jose, California – and they’ve all developed and are well into implementing their comprehensive violence prevention plans. It’s been exciting to see the level of support and enthusiasm the Forum has generated. We’ve had excellent participation from the sites, and terrific exchanges of information and ideas.

In our view, it’s time to expand this conversation and take it national. Soon, we’ll be selecting four more Forum sites through a competitive process – we’ll be making announcements about that in the near future. And we’re very pleased that Dr. Bell and Mayor Nutter, along with Mayor Villaraigosa from Los Angeles, will be at our National Summit on Preventing Youth Violence, taking place here in Washington on April 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>. They’ll be talking about how to take this important work that Cities United and the Forum are doing to the next level.

With that in mind, I want to talk for a moment about collaboration. I think we owe it to our kids and communities to be sure that we’re working together and leveraging efforts wherever we can. The Forum is looking for new partners to work and coordinate with, and I know one of your goals is to have the White House focus on this issue and make recommendations for actions to be taken at the local level. Let me respectfully suggest that the Forum, which is led by the White House, is a great place to begin those conversations.

Of course, comprehensive initiatives such as the Forum require a balanced approach that makes room for prevention. Prevention and intervention programming is critical if we hope to stop the cycle of violence. We know through our own research at the Department of Justice that a majority of kids – regardless of race – 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.

This is alarming, and it’s unacceptable. Fortunately, we also know early intervention can be effective in countering the effects of violence. There are excellent programs that have been shown to enhance resiliency and foster healthy child development. We need to raise awareness of these approaches and find ways to get them into communities where children are at particular risk of violence.

A year-and-a-half ago, the Attorney General launched his Defending Childhood Initiative, which is designed to do just that – prevent traumatic experiences from leading to a future of crime and other problems. The tag line is “Protect, Heal, Thrive.” We want these children to be safe, but we want more – we want them to grow into the leaders we know they can be when given the opportunity.

And prevention isn't just an individual or family concern; it's a concern for – and the responsibility of – the entire community. It's neither a secret nor a surprise that intervention efforts have a better chance of success when they engage community residents. Under our Community-Based Violence Prevention Demonstration Program, which is managed by our Juvenile Justice Office, we're supporting efforts that involve citizens.

This program supports federal, state, and local partnerships to replicate evidence-based strategies such as the Chicago CeaseFire model. Oakland, Denver, Brooklyn, and Washington, D.C. are currently participating, and three new sites are being added this year – Newark, Boston, and Baltimore. And I want to also mention that the President's budget request for the next budget year asks for more money for this program and for other community-based efforts funded out of my agency.

As we engage the people in our communities, we also need to address the disparities encountered by African American males when they come into contact with the system, whether as offenders or as victims.

It's not news to anyone – least of all to the people in this room – that rates of incarceration for black men are shockingly high. What is less well understood – at least by the public – is the collateral impact that has on African American families. It's a stunning fact that one in nine African American children has a parent behind bars. And, studies show that these kids often struggle with depression, learning problems, and aggression, undermining their own chances of success.

We need to find ways to factor this into our criminal justice policies, whether by making it easier for kids to remain in touch with their parents while in prison, or through mentoring and other programs that address the needs of these children. And, it's critical that we look at family reunification as a vital element in reentry planning. Almost everyone who's incarcerated will be released at some point, and studies show connections with one's family are one of the key ingredients for potential reentry success.

We're making a strong effort to engage families under our Second Chance Act programs. Last year, we awarded grants to support mentoring of formerly incarcerated fathers and mothers with minor children. All told, we now support more than 370 Second Chance reentry projects, and the President's recent budget request reflects a continued commitment to this important program.

On the other side, we need to ensure that African American victims are getting the services they need. Sadly, just as black men are overrepresented in the corrections system, they are very much underrepresented in the services system. Instead of stereotyping and blaming these victims, we should be helping them – both because it's the right thing to do, and because a just and humane response to violent victimization helps to clear a path to a violence-free future.

Our Office for Victims of Crime, through its Vision 21 initiative, is supporting two projects designed to help improve our response. One project will support a network of hospital-based violence intervention programs to provide victim services along with trauma care. The goal is to ensure the outcome of a hospital visit is healing and not retaliation.

A second project will support outreach workers and violence interrupters, who can help steer high-risk youth away from harmful choices and toward positive, healthy behaviors. I think these efforts will give us some good examples to build on in our work to reduce violence in America's inner cities.

When thinking about violence, another challenge we must keep in mind is that, too often, the cards are stacked against these young people. And speaking frankly, the system is not always designed or administered to support them.

Take our educational institutions, for example. According to a study released last week by the Department of Education, African American students are three-and-a-half times as likely to be suspended or expelled as white students. And although they make up only 24 percent of school enrollment, they represent 35 percent of on-campus arrests.

These findings track a major study in Texas last year, which found that, alarmingly, 83 percent of African American male students ended up in trouble and suspended for some period of time. And minority students facing discipline for the first time tended to be given harsher out-of-school suspensions – rather than in-school suspensions – than their white counterparts.

Perhaps it won't surprise you – I doubt it will – that these students had lower graduation rates and higher rates of later criminal activity, giving credence to the notion of a school-to-prison pipeline.

Last August, the Attorney General and the Secretary of Education announced a new initiative called the Supportive School Discipline Project to address this problem. This is a public-private partnership between the federal government, community groups, and philanthropies to try to gain a better understanding of what's going on in our schools that should be changed. If better academic opportunities are part of the solution to crime and violence, then we need to find a way to keep kids engaged in – not alienated from – their schools, and that's what this effort is all about.

Finally, we're working in other ways to support cities in their community safety efforts. Last summer, we launched a new "what works" database called [CrimeSolutions.gov](http://CrimeSolutions.gov). This new Web site includes information on more than 170 criminal and juvenile justice programs, each rated for effectiveness. And this spring, we'll be opening a companion Diagnostic Center to help mayors, policymakers, and other local leaders like you identify your public safety needs and implement these evidence-based strategies.

I'll also add that our Center for Faith Based and Neighborhood Partnerships is committed to taking this issue on as one of its main priorities. The Center has been working with cities throughout the country to help engage faith and community based groups in supporting black men who come into contact with the system.

Our goal through these and other efforts is to help give communities – particularly those facing the challenges you're discussing here – a chance to create opportunities for their residents – opportunities that have scarcely been available to African American men and boys.

At the Department of Justice, we want to work with you to stop the violence that's plaguing too many of our communities and – too often – robbing young black men of their future. Times are tough, budgets are tight, but I know when we pool our ideas, our resources, and our will, there's no challenge we can't overcome. I applaud your efforts to come together and unite your resolve. Working together, we can – and will – make a difference.

Thank you.

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