



**REMARKS OF ROBERT L. LISTENBEE  
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BOYS & GIRLS CLUBS OF AMERICA  
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*REMARKS AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY***

Thank you. I'm pleased to join you all this afternoon and delighted to welcome Boys & Girls Clubs representatives to Washington. My office, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, has had a long and productive partnership with Boys and Girls Clubs, and I have always personally admired and valued the tremendous contributions your organization makes to our kids' safety and well-being.

The work you do to connect young people to mentors and steer them toward positive activities is not only an admirable goal, it is a truly effective way to help them overcome the obstacles to success that so many of them encounter. Your work is, without a doubt, making a difference.

Our organizations share an important mission—I would say it's a vital mission: We're both trying to equip our youth with the skills and tools they need to maximize their potential and become the productive citizens and visionary leaders that they are capable of becoming.

For many kids in our country, the path to achievement is a relatively smooth one. They come from homes where the parents are present and involved in their lives. They live in safe neighborhoods where they have healthy relationships with their peers. They have access to good education and jobs.

But for too many others, the road to success is not so well-paved. These kids come from communities where support networks are weak or lacking altogether. They're surrounded by poverty and negative social influences. And too often, as a result of these disadvantages, they find themselves caught up in the juvenile justice system.

Now, I served as a juvenile defender for over 20 years, and I happen to believe that contact with the system does not have to mean defeat for a young person's chances. The juvenile justice system has the potential to be a catalyst for positive and even transformative change. But by and large, it has not lived up to that potential. In too many cases, it has treated those who come into the system not as kids capable of being reformed, but as hardened criminals who are hardly worth our attention.

The consequences are unfortunate, and sometimes tragic, for our kids and for the safety and health of our communities. We see young people removed from their families and positive role models. We see them taken out of schools and put into facilities where they have little opportunity to develop prosocial skills. And we see them compiling juvenile and criminal records that are likely to follow them throughout their lives.

The result is that these kids, who actually have the potential to change and be productive citizens, begin a long, tough journey that may well lead to bigger crimes and continued involvement with the justice system.

It also leads to a crisis in attitude about the principles our juvenile justice system is supposed to stand for, not only personal betterment but faith in the fairness of our democratic institutions. Too often, the juvenile justice professionals who interact with youth treat them in a way that does not convey a sense of equity or engender respect for the law. This experience is especially prominent for minority youth.

Young African Americans are arrested at more than twice the rate of white non-Hispanic youth. They make up just 16 percent of the overall youth population, but more than half of the juvenile population arrested for committing a violent crime.

The rates of incarceration for young black men are shockingly high, and that has a devastating impact on their families and communities. One in nine African American children has a parent behind bars. And all too often, when black teens get in trouble at school, even for minor infractions, they're more likely than others to be expelled from school and end up in the justice system.

The result is that young people of color lose respect for the law, and they view the actions of the law's representatives with distrust and even hostility. This makes your jobs of getting kids on a path to responsible, productive behavior much harder than it should be. So what is the answer? How do we create a juvenile justice system that holds young people accountable while giving them a chance at redemption and change—and that treats them fairly?

I think it begins with organizing the system around the realities of our kids' developmental needs. We call this a developmentally informed approach to juvenile justice. For many years, our juvenile justice policies and practices have been guided by faulty assumptions—namely, that kids who come into contact with the system are morally and behaviorally entrenched and therefore should be treated like adults.

But research in developmental psychology and neuroscience has shown us that kids are differently equipped cognitively. Their capacity for impulse control and for regulating their behavior has not fully developed. They are more susceptible to the influence of their peers. And—critically important—they are capable of reforming their behavior, especially when guided by the proper intervention.

In other words, they are not adults, and if we want our juvenile justice system to work as effectively as possible, we must recognize the differences and act accordingly.

The good news is that we know there are programs and approaches that can have a profound, positive impact, both for our kids and for the safety of our communities.

First of all, we must begin by intervening with children who are exposed to violence and trauma. As you well know, the incidence of this exposure is disturbingly high. Our own research tells us that 60 percent of children in the United States are exposed to some form of violence, crime, or abuse, ranging from brief encounters as witnesses to serious violent episodes as victims. Almost 40 percent are direct victims of 2 or more violent acts.

And as you also know, this early exposure to violence can lead to a host of future problems, including later criminal behavior. So we need to intervene with these kids as early as possible to interrupt the trauma-to-violence process.

In 2010, the Attorney General launched his Defending Childhood Initiative. The purpose of Defending Childhood is to reduce this exposure and mitigate the effects on children who do encounter violence. We're doing this by supporting additional research to help us better understand the dynamics and the scope of violence and trauma in children's lives. We're also supporting promising intervention programs in communities across the country.

Next, we must involve the community by allowing its members to establish and communicate norms of behavior. At OJJDP, we're supporting programs built around partnerships between law enforcement and community members. Juvenile delinquency and youth crime are not problems we can simply arrest our way out of. We need to get residents and local stakeholders involved—help them send a message to young offenders that wrongful behavior won't be tolerated, but that assistance is available to help them change and succeed.

We have a program called the Community-Based Violence Prevention Demonstration Program that supports evidence-based efforts to prevent and reduce youth violence. And we're a central part of the National Forum for Youth Violence Prevention, which is led by the White House. The Forum brings together citizens, community and faith-based groups, law enforcement officials, public health professionals, business and philanthropic leaders, and others to develop violence prevention strategies tailored to the needs of each community.

Next, we must deal with the disproportionate representation of people of color in the juvenile justice system. Youth who come into contact with the system have got to believe they're being treated fairly and with dignity. Otherwise, the chances of understanding and complying with the law go down.

One of my priorities is reducing disproportionate minority contact with the juvenile justice system. My Office is addressing this issue from a number of angles. We're giving guidance to the states on eliminating racial and ethnic disparities in the juvenile justice system. We're supporting mentoring for children of incarcerated parents. We all know that a caring mentor who is consistently involved in a child's life over a significant amount of time can make all the difference in the world.

We're funding juvenile reentry programs. And we're part of a Supportive School Discipline Initiative aimed at addressing inequities in school disciplinary policies and keeping kids out of the school-to-prison pipeline.

These programs all form part of the President's My Brother's Keeper Initiative, which is designed to support young African American men who are willing to work hard and play by the rules. The President has asked for support from businesses and philanthropies and he's directed federal agencies to focus on ways we can improve opportunities for young men of color.

Our role at the Department of Justice is to focus on reducing violence and addressing the overrepresentation of these young men in the justice system. If we can do this successfully, if we can find ways to improve the safety and health of all of our young men and women, including our young men of color and reduce the disparities in the system, I think we will have achieved a great victory in reforming our juvenile justice system.

All this work comes at a critical time. Policymakers and practitioners recognize the problems that the get-tough policies of the 80s and 90s have caused, and many are eager to make our systems more fair, more effective, and more responsive to the needs of our youth.

We are working diligently to take advantage of this moment—to ride this wave of momentum to the reform that is so badly needed. But we need advocates like you, and young people like you, to help us reach our goal. We need you to continue guiding and partnering with our young people, showing them how they can reach their full potential and become the leaders that we know they are capable of.

I remember as a young man in Detroit that there were moments when I became discouraged, and it was caring adults who stepped in and broadened the horizons of what I thought I could accomplish. They gave me dreams—and they kept those dreams alive.

One of my favorite writers is Langston Hughes. He said:

Hold fast to dreams  
For if dreams die  
Life is a broken-winged bird  
That cannot fly.  
Hold fast to dreams  
For when dreams go  
Life is a barren field  
Frozen with snow.

The work you are doing—that we all are doing—is so important. Millions of children across this nation are depending on us. Let's continue to provide them with the hope that their future will be better and safer.

Thank you.