



**REMARKS OF ROBERT L. LISTENBEE
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AT THE
“SAVING OUR SONS: RESILIENCE AND WELLNESS FOR
OUR MINDS AND BODIES” EVENT
PHILADELPHIA, PA
JULY 25, 2013
*REMARKS AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY***

Thank you. It’s great to be back in Philadelphia, and I’m honored to be part of such an esteemed panel.

I recently took the helm at the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, or OJJDP. Our mission, quite simply, is to advocate for our country’s most vulnerable children.

Not a day goes by at OJJDP that I don’t refer back to the 16 years I spent as the Chief of the Juvenile Unit of the Defender Association of Philadelphia—or the 27 years I spent there as a trial lawyer.

One of the things that I learned all too well is that our sons definitely need saving.

Background:

African-American boys are exposed to violence in their homes, schools, and communities. And, too often, all they hear—from their peers, from pop culture, and maybe even from the men in their lives—is “be a man.” To frightened, traumatized children, we are saying, “be a man” – suppress your emotions, self-medicate, and solve your problems with violence.

These challenges aren’t just anecdotal. We have research that proves they exist.

Homicide is the leading cause of death for African-Americans from 10-24 years of age, according to a 2008 CDC report. Eighty-six percent of these homicide victims were male (“Healing the Hurt,” p. 25).

Young African-American men have a firearms-related death rate 10 times that of young white men (“Healing the Hurt,” p. 25).

The article notes that there are more African-Americans on probation, parole, or in prison today than were slaves in 1850.

The author Joshua DuBois turned to the research of Michelle Alexander who wrote *The New Jim Crow*. She argued that for low-income black men, minor drug offenses often lead to a lifetime of being left out.

These boys have no safety net. They make one mistake, and they enter the criminal justice system. Even if they come out, they are tainted—marked—denied access to jobs, education, housing and even the right to vote.

Thankfully, it isn’t all grim. DuBois bookends his story with the powerful tale of Joe. A kid whose father walked away. A kid who fell in with the wrong crowd, decided to take a hit of heroin, and ended up in jail – and then in prison. A kid who didn’t have a chance until he got into a rehabilitation program that worked. They saw him as a man with a future, and he began to as well. Now he’s running a non-profit in Baltimore. Joe succeeded because someone listened – because someone understood.

Before we can begin to address this problem, we have to fully understand what our children are facing. Likewise, we have to know why this is happening, before we can know how to stop it.

Defending Childhood:

In 2009, OJJDP began releasing the findings of the first National Survey of Children’s Exposure to Violence or, as we call it, NatSCEV.

The results were staggering. For example, 60 percent — yes, more than half — of the kids in this country were exposed to violence, crime, or abuse in the year preceding the study.

Almost 40 percent of American children were direct victims of two or more violent acts in the past year.

In response, Attorney General Holder launched the Defending Childhood Initiative, which has three primary goals. To:

- reduce children's exposure to violence;
- raise public awareness about its consequences; and
- advance research on ways to counter its destructive impact.

In 2011, the Attorney General appointed a National Task Force. This group of 13 leading experts was charged with creating a blueprint for addressing children's exposure to violence.

I was honored to serve as co-chair of this Task Force with baseball legend Joe Torre. We traveled the country holding listening sessions and public hearings.

There was a lot to hear—from survivors, community members, medical professionals, social service providers, practitioners, policymakers, and so many others. Much of it was hard to hear. But we refused to look away from the pain—to let our own fears stop us from acting.

Through testimony and research, we found that kids exposed to violence tend to flunk out of school. They often cannot get good jobs; they are more likely to get in trouble, and they are at a much higher risk of ending up in the juvenile justice system.

Our final report includes 56 recommendations — ranging from strategies to prevent violence against children to methods to ensure that all children exposed to violence are properly identified, screened, and assessed.

We also focus several of our recommendations on expanding the use of trauma-informed care to help heal the emotional scars of our youngest victims.

Based on the task force's findings, OJJDP is already asking our grantees to introduce trauma-informed strategies and to emphasize positive youth development in their programs.

These trauma-informed strategies are so important because we know that kids who are victims often become perpetrators. In fact, the vast majority of children who enter the juvenile justice system have been exposed to violence.

In one OJJDP-sponsored study that interviewed juvenile detainees in the Chicago area, we found:

- Ninety-three percent of participants had been exposed to one or more traumas.
- Eleven percent of the participating youth met diagnostic criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the past year.
- More than half of the participants with PTSD reported witnessing violence as the precipitating trauma (*PTSD, Trauma, and Comorbid Psychiatric Disorders in Detained Youth*, OJJDP Bulletin).

Addressing their trauma BEFORE these kids enter the system has the potential to break the cycle of victimization and violence.

That's why Defending Childhood also includes support for 8 demonstration sites across the country.

These sites are developing and testing community-wide, cross-sector models to combat children's exposure to violence.

National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention:

To specifically address youth violence, the Departments of Justice and Education created the Forum on Youth Violence Prevention in 2011.

The Forum is a network of cities and federal agencies focused on building local capacity to reduce youth and gang violence.

Originally launched in six cities, it has now expanded to include 10 cities – one of which is Philadelphia. The cities are creating comprehensive violence prevention plans that use multi-disciplinary resources from federal, corporate, and nonprofit partners, as well neighborhood and faith-based organizations.

This is a great model for how to address gangs—as well as many of the other issues that plague our urban landscapes.

We have to plan, not guess. We have to eliminate programs that don't work and combine our resources to fund the ones that do. And we have to work together, not just near each other.

This kind of true collaboration works. An independent, interim assessment of the Forum already indicated positive results.

Supportive School Discipline:

The Departments of Justice and Education are also working together to keep kids in school—and out of the justice system.

Fewer than 70 percent of all public school students in the nation graduate from high school with a regular diploma.

This low rate becomes even more pronounced when disaggregated by race, with average rates of high school completion for males from disadvantaged minority groups consistently falling at or below the 50 percent mark.

While high school graduation rates are alarmingly low, suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement authorities—mainly for discretionary, code of conduct violations—have risen precipitously since 1974.

The research findings are stark: ninety-seven percent of students who were suspended or expelled were being disciplined for discretionary or nonviolent behaviors such as code-of conduct violations; minority youth and children with disabilities were disciplined more harshly for similar or less serious infractions than were their peers; African-American students had a thirty one percent higher likelihood of a school discretionary action, compared to white and Hispanic students; nearly three-quarters of the students who qualified for special education services were suspended or expelled at least once; when a student was suspended or expelled, his or her likelihood of being involved in the juvenile justice system the subsequent year increased significantly.

Through the Supportive School Discipline Initiative, we seek to help states and localities avoid harsh discipline policies – policies that put troubled kids out in the streets or into the juvenile justice system.

We've launched a webinar series aimed at increasing awareness and providing practical examples of effective discipline policies. We are also developing policy and legal guidance to help schools improve their understanding of and compliance with civil rights laws.

This, and other efforts we are undertaking at the federal level, as well as the efforts we are supporting at the state and local level, in collaboration with federal colleagues, philanthropies and others, are continuing to elevate the issues surrounding the school-to-prison pipeline.

These efforts are catalyzing actions and policies to ensure that all children receive the quality education to which they are entitled and the opportunity to succeed that they deserve.

Community-Based Violence Prevention Program:

OJJDP provides grants for existing violence prevention programs and strategies that are known to be effective under the Community-Based Violence Prevention Program.

Last year, we awarded approximately \$1.5 million each to four cities—including Philadelphia—to continue and expand these programs.

We are also sponsoring field-initiated research in this area. This effort will help us increase information about the effectiveness and cost efficiency of existing programs and assess promising new approaches.

Mentoring:

Beyond programs that directly address violence and trauma, OJJDP supports an array of youth development efforts. Prevention, after all, is the key to long-term success. One of the best methods of reaching at-risk kids is through quality mentoring programs.

OJJDP provided more than \$68 million to national and local organizations to support youth mentoring activities last year.

Through a partnership with the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, we focus many of our efforts on children living in disadvantaged communities.

Last year, these Clubs mentored more than 30,000 youth. Using federal funds, they were also able to launch new programs and enhance existing ones.

One such enhancement included an effort to identify and recruit minority male mentors in 10 different organizations.

We know that finding mentors who are the same race or ethnicity as their mentees is important in the effort to build strong, trusting relationships.

Mentors who understand—and have overcome—the challenges that young men are facing can help them make positive decisions.

Reentry:

For those who have already entered our justice system, we need to work harder to make their exits smoother and to close the revolving door.

OJJDP is part of the Attorney General’s Federal Interagency Reentry Council. This council brings together diverse federal agencies to address recidivism, victimization, and the enormous costs— and terrible results —of incarceration.

Last year, we released several fact sheets to dispel some myths surrounding juvenile reentry—including misperceptions about the limited access to juvenile records.

Conclusion:

We need to support and expand programs that provide safe places for boys to become men—whether that’s a local mentoring program or part of a national effort to reduce children’s exposure to violence.

As demonstrated by the mix of people on this panel, helping young African-American men heal from trauma is not just a public safety issue: it is a public health issue.

This epidemic is costing us a fortune—and—more importantly—it has the potential to wipe out a whole generation of future leaders.

We have to work together to help our sons get stronger, healthier and more resilient – to inoculate them from violence and stem this epidemic.

OJJDP is grateful to have partners like all of you in our efforts to protect our children and help them heal.

Thank you for letting me be a part of this discussion.