

REMARKS

OF

THE HONORABLE KAROL V. MASON
ASSISTANT ATTORNEY GENERAL
OFFICE OF JUSTICE PROGRAMS

AT THE

NATIONAL NETWORK FOR SAFE COMMUNITIES
MAJOR PRACTITIONER PUBLIC CONFERENCE

ON

MONDAY, JUNE 22, 2015
NEW YORK, NY

Thank you very much, Jeremy. I am so pleased to be here at John Jay College, one of our nation's premier institutions for generating criminal justice knowledge. I'm delighted to be in the company of so many esteemed researchers and practitioners, so many innovators and leaders – people like Jeremy Travis and Commissioner Bratton, who have made the safety of our communities their life's work. It is a privilege to be here with you all.

I'm proud to bring both greetings and thanks from our Attorney General, who not only values the critical work that each of you is doing, but depends on your commitment to reducing crime, improving fairness, and strengthening relationships between communities and those who serve and protect them. She, and all of us in the Department of Justice, are grateful for the clarity you are bringing to the President's vision of a safer, more just, and more equitable society.

We know that the approaches you are taking through the National Network for Safe Communities are having a very real, and a very profound, impact on the health and integrity of America's cities. The focused deterrence model on which your efforts are based has proven to be among the most promising strategies for targeting and reducing crime in our most violent cities.

The two exemplars of this model, Operation Ceasefire in Boston and the High Point Drug Market Intervention in North Carolina, received the highest rating – “effective” – in our evidence-based database, CrimeSolutions.gov, on the strength of their success in reducing violence in crime hot spots. The impressive evaluation results in those cities are a testament to the power of pulling levers, bringing predictability to the crime-fighting enterprise, and airing what David Kennedy calls “the moral voice of the community.”

I'm proud of the role my office – the Office of Justice Programs – has played in supporting many like-minded efforts over the years. Back in the late 90s, while Jeremy led our National Institute of Justice, OJP helped carry the focused deterrence model to a number of cities through the Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative, which partnered federal and local agencies and was among the first federal programs to marry research and enforcement.

We've also helped widen the lens by supporting a broader philosophy of swift, certain, and proportionate sanctions that ensures credibility and fairness in the threat of punishment. It is this idea – of efficient and effective enforcement sustained by moral authority – that represents the greatest promise of turning around our most violent communities and ending our wasteful, and harmful, over-reliance on incarceration.

We continue to look for ways to leverage this promising model of crime-fighting. Last September, the National Network was represented at the launch of the Justice Department's Violence Reduction Network. VRN, as we call it, coordinates resources from across the Department, bringing together the U.S. Attorneys' offices and our enforcement units – the FBI, DEA, ATF, and the U.S. Marshals – and making training,

technical assistance, and information resources available from my office, the COPS Office, and the Office on Violence Against Women.

We're targeting cities with violent crime rates that are well above the national average, and we're concentrating resources on the most pressing violence problems at each site. Most of the sites are represented here today. VRN has been in operation for less than a year, but we're already beginning to see substantial progress. The President highlighted some of these accomplishments last month when he visited Camden, New Jersey, one of the five current VRN cities.

The Camden County Police and their partners are doing outstanding work. For example, after a peer exchange with their counterparts in Philadelphia, they began a call-in program, rooted in focused deterrence, aimed at juveniles. This has gotten enthusiastic support from the community, including families of these youth. Another innovative facet of the Camden effort is its DIVRT program, which stands for Digital Imaging Video Retrieval Teams. These teams – which were trained by the FBI – gather surveillance videos from crime scenes, review and edit them, then send them to TV stations and social media channels, essentially creating crime commercials that can be used to help identify suspects.

The cities are working with a single-minded focus on ensuring fairness in their enforcement efforts. At our site in Oakland and Richmond, California, officers received training on fair and impartial policing from Lorie Fridell, a national expert on racially biased law enforcement, and we held a webinar on community engagement in high-crime areas. We co-sponsored a separate event on police legitimacy with the Northern District of California's U.S. Attorney's Office.

Through our Bureau of Justice Assistance's National Training and Technical Assistance Center, we supported a seminar called "Tact, Tactics, and Trust," which builds on the latest scientific research on how to effectively engage with community members and quickly build rapport and trust. And the Chief Assistant District Attorney in Alameda County, Kevin Dunleavy, has started a group in his office to review cases to make sure prosecution decisions are made fairly and without bias.

Our aim through VRN is not to sweep through these neighborhoods, round up suspects, and take them away. Our goal is to help cities build something positive and lasting by enlisting the community and law enforcement as co-producers of public safety.

As everyone here knows, arrests and the threat of arrest will not carry the day. What will is our ability to cultivate faith in the good intentions of our justice system. That faith, as we all know, has been tested. In some places, it has been broken. I believe that nowhere is this fractured faith beyond repair, but we may be running out of chances to make things right.

The script follows a tired formula, one that we can trace back to Watts, Harlem, Detroit, and so many other cities in the 60s. The scenes are all too familiar – of

widespread unrest precipitated by a single violent encounter. As the frustration mounts, it is reasonable – and I believe it may even be healthy – to worry over what the outcome will be. We can't afford reckless optimism – not now, not with so much in the balance.

But neither can we afford pessimism. Too many of you have invested far too much in turning your communities around. As President Obama said in Selma earlier this year, “action requires that we shed our cynicism. For when it comes to the pursuit of justice, we can afford neither complacency nor despair.”

And action in this case begins by confronting some very difficult realities: the reality of stark inequities in our justice system; the reality of families and communities riven by victimization and imprisonment; the reality of young men who choose – often against their own instincts – to live in opposition to the values they've been taught; and, not least, the reality of a long and troubled history of racial antagonism in our country.

James Baldwin wrote about growing up on the tough streets of Harlem: “The moral barriers that I had supposed to exist between me and the dangers of a criminal career,” he said, “were so tenuous as to be nearly nonexistent. I certainly could not discover any principled reason for not becoming a criminal.”

If we believe, as I do, that this attitude remains contemporary among too many of our young men – that in pockets of America, the choice between crime and not-crime seems a false one – then our first responsibility is to make sure there are legitimate opportunities for a meaningful path to achievement and success.

Our President understands the urgency of this issue, which is why last year he launched *My Brother's Keeper* – to give every young person who is willing to work hard and play by the rules the chance to reach his or her full potential. Across the federal government, agencies are working together to give kids the advantages that many of them have never had and to help them succeed. Private foundations have answered the President's call by announcing independent commitments. The new *My Brother's Keeper* Alliance, a consortium of private sector organizations, will support evidence-based interventions aimed at tackling achievement challenges from cradle to career.

The Department of Justice, and the Office of Justice Programs in particular, is playing a central role in this effort – by supporting programs aimed at preventing youth violence, ensuring that young people are treated fairly by the justice system, connecting them with positive influences, and keeping them in school and out of the courts.

One of our biggest challenges is nurturing respect for the law and for those who enforce it. One might ask – and one should ask – why faith in the rule of law is at such a low ebb. It's not because young people delight in committing crimes and relish disorder. It's not that they don't care about their own and others' safety. To echo David Kennedy, nobody wants the chaos and violence we see in the streets of our inner cities.

The problem is that, in some neighborhoods, law enforcement officers are seen less as community servants and guardians of the peace and more as a disinterested and sometimes a menacing presence. Instead of instilling confidence and trust, this can only breed suspicion and resentment.

The blame for this cannot and should not be laid solely at the feet of today's law enforcement professionals, the vast majority of whom operate out of goodwill and a sincere desire to make a positive difference. But the frustration simmering in these communities is very real, and it gets us nowhere when we ignore or deny it.

The fact is, we all grieve over the lost lives – of citizens and of our law enforcement officers – and we all deplore the wanton violence and destruction that we've seen in Ferguson, Baltimore, and elsewhere. There is far more on which we agree than disagree.

But there are differences in experience and perspective, and we must find a way to work through those differences. We must also, frankly, be willing to acknowledge and confront the damage that has been caused by a history of misunderstanding, a history that has played out in the unequal and sometimes abusive treatment of minority groups on the one side and in bold hostility toward law enforcement on the other.

When the President said, "this nation's racial history still casts its long shadow upon us," he was talking specifically about our criminal justice system. Until we are willing to deal with our troubled national past and accept that our justice system is implicated, we will not get very far in bridging divides of trust in our communities.

I see this issue – of racial reconciliation and of building trust between our justice system and those it serves – as one of the defining social issues of our time. In my view, how we handle this moment will determine whether we are able to turn the corner and begin a new path toward civic harmony and understanding. That's why I have made this work a top priority of the Office of Justice Programs, and it's why the Attorney General has identified it as one of her foremost goals.

We're fortunate that this work is already under way in some communities, and we can be encouraged by research showing the tremendous public safety value of trust-building. What we know from experience and from study is that fairness and effectiveness in the enforcement of the law are not mutually exclusive – they're tightly bound together.

Analysis of procedural justice has shown that those who come into contact with the police and other justice system agencies are more likely to accept decisions by the authorities and obey the law in the future if they feel they are treated fairly, even when they are penalized by criminal sanctions. And the communities of which they are part will actively encourage respect for the law.

This means that if we make a sincere effort to strengthen connections between law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve, we can hope to reverse the pattern of distrust and discord that have become too much a part of our nation's civic narrative. We can do this by ensuring fairness in the administration of the law, by working to eliminate bias in our systems of justice, and by addressing past wrongs and historic grievances.

John Jay College is the lead partner in a major effort being led by my office in cooperation with divisions across the Department of Justice. It's called the National Initiative on Building Community Trust and Justice, and its goal is to expand our base of knowledge about what works to improve procedural justice, reduce bias, and promote racial reconciliation. Yale Law School, UCLA's Center for Policing Equity, and the Urban Institute are also part of this effort – and with an advisory body of law enforcement practitioners and community and faith-based leaders, they're bringing their considerable expertise to the task of repairing fractured relationships between citizens and justice system agencies.

The project is tackling a number of issues, from the strained relationships between minority communities and law enforcement, to the interactions between police and domestic violence and sexual assault victims, to addressing the concerns of the LGBTQ community. Currently, six cities are serving as demonstration sites, to test strategies and determine what works to build trust. I'll be joining the Attorney General Wednesday as she visits one of the sites – Birmingham, Alabama – as part of her Community Policing Tour.

We've also launched an online resource center with news about the cities' efforts and research and other information about procedural justice, implicit bias, and racial reconciliation. I encourage you to visit the site at trustandjustice.org. You'll also hear more about the initiative tomorrow from my policy advisor, Katherine Darke Schmitt, and our partners.

I believe this effort represents a major step forward in resolving historic tensions in many of America's communities. Through it, we will build on pioneering work being done in some of the nation's most challenged areas and we will open doors to cooperation and trust that will lead to safer neighborhoods and a justice system that inspires the confidence of those it serves.

I'm under no illusion that this work will be easy, or that we will be able to reach all our goals within the three-year scope we envision for the project. But I do believe that we are capable of making substantial progress, in the near future, toward redefining the relationships between our communities and our criminal justice system.

Many of you are already doing this work. No doubt, you have much to teach us. I hope that you will share the lessons you have learned, and I hope that you will join us as we seek to build a framework for a fair and more effective criminal justice system – one that reflects our highest ideals and principles.

Thank you for all that you do, and I look forward to all the good that we will accomplish together.

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