

ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO ADDRESS TO THE NATIONAL CRIME  
PREVENTION COUNCIL

Location: Ramada Renaissance Techworld, 999 Ninth St. NW

Time: 11:30 a.m.

April 29, 1993

The editor of the report is Steve Ginsburg. Tim Ahmann, Eric Beech, Melissa Bland, Will Dunham, Peter Ramjug and Paul Schomer assisted in editing this report.

This transcript is provided by News Transcripts, Inc.

ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO: Thank you very much. I would like to tell you two stories today because I think they directly affect the issues you consider today in this forum. I took office 15 years ago this spring. I wanted to focus on what could be done to prevent crime and I tried to establish a juvenile division that was stable, that represented excellence, and that focused on children. But I came to learn very quickly that focusing on a 16-year-old who had three prior adjudications for delinquency and had come from the most difficult of circumstances, that such an effort would never be successful for all of the kids similarly situated.

And so I started looking at dropout prevention, and I realized that anyone who focuses on dropout prevention in the middle schools, that that's too little too late. And I moved backwards, and finally doctors took me in hand as the crack epidemic hit Miami in 1985 and took me to the neonatal unit and started teaching me about children and child development and their ultimate impact on human beings throughout their life.

And they showed me a baby lying in a bassinet now for six weeks

before we had begun to determine where we might put such babies, these crack babies, a baby lying there for six weeks, not held or talked to except when changed or fed, a baby beginning to look more like a little animal sometimes than a human being. And across that unit was a child severely crippled through birth defects, with tubes coming out of everywhere, but with both parents there as often as they possibly could be talking to that child, holding that child to the extent that they could and loving that child with all their heart and soul.

And that baby was being to respond and smile and react and respond. And I've learned an awful lot about what prevention is all about. And I think it is imperative that we join together in understanding that it is not one particular discipline, it's not one particular effort, it's not a juvenile justice effort or a child welfare effort or a crime prevention effort or an early intervention effort. It is a continuum of human life that we must look at and affect in the most appropriate manner possible.

And I would like to join you and I would like to challenge ourselves to try to develop a national agenda for children that will ultimately have more impact on crime than any other single initiative that we could undertake, more impact on crime than all the prisons that we could ever build.

Beginning with a commitment to do something about teen pregnancy, to make sure that our parents are old enough, wise enough, and financially able enough to take care of their children.

And you say, what is the response of the community? Let me tell you of the response that I have seen in my community. About a year and a half ago, I spoke to a high school class in the inner city in the auditorium, in a huge auditorium filled with students. The next week it was a middle school, also in the inner city.

I collected child support in Dade County, and they wrote a rap song about me, so the kids knew about it and they started asking me questions about child support. What happens if she wastes the money? What happens if he doesn't pay? And I answered the questions.

But I said, the ultimate issue is you don't have children until you're old enough, wise enough and financially able enough to take care of them.

And those two auditoriums, just coincidentally but a week apart, broke into just rousing, storming applause and stamping of feet. Children want it more than anybody else in the world.

And then we've got to understand what doctors are telling us and we've got to understand that crime prevention is not a police function, not a social work function, not a prosecutor function. It is everybody's function because the doctors taught me that the single most important medical provision that can be made for a human being's future is to provide prenatal care for that mother, that for every dollar spent for prenatal care, we can save three dollars down the road for health care defects associated with the absence of it, that that can do more to give a human being a chance at a strong, constructive, healthy human

life.

And so we've got to dedicate ourselves to making sure that every woman in America has prenatal care. We've got to understand that the ages of zero to three are the most formative years of a person's life, the time they learn the concept of reward and punishment and develop a conscience, and that 50 percent of all learned human response is learned in the first year of life.

So as we focus on crime prevention, let us look at that whole picture and understand that it becomes imperative to afford medical care, to afford appropriate child care and edu-care during those first three years of life, to make sure that that child has a good and fighting chance to succeed and to grow as a strong adult with self-respect, with a feeling of purpose.

There is something terribly wrong with a nation that says to a person of 70 years of age, you can have an operation that extends your life expectancy for three years, but that we turn to a child, a child of a person, a working poor person who makes too much money to be eligible for Medicaid, but doesn't have insurance benefits, and that child is not eligible for basic preventative medical care. Something is terribly wrong that we have to change.

And as we watch the child progress, we've got to make sure that every child has appropriate edu-care. It is extraordinarily frustrating to walk through a housing development and ask why a four-year-old child isn't in some program as they wander around unsupervised, uncared for, nobody really looking to see whether

they'll run into traffic, and be told that the mother isn't working, that she's not looking for work and that she hasn't abused and neglected her child bad enough to make her or him eligible for child care. Child care at that age is as important as any care we provide children in K through 12.

We've got to look to our educational programs and focus on doing what we can to stem violence in the schools. Schools can do extraordinary things given the chance, teachers can do remarkable things if we eliminate the paperwork that sometimes binds them and give them a chance to really teach in our schools.

But there are programs throughout America now that are working and working effectively in terms of teaching children how to resolve conflicts peacefully and without violence.

The DARE program has worked in schools in terms of drug prevention. We can do the same with violence prevention in our schools.

We've got to look at families in terms of violence and understand when that child sees the father hit the mother and sees acceptance of it, that that becomes part of his way of life and he comes to accept it as a part of a way of life. We've got to look for the signs of family violence, teachers have got to report it.

Emergency room physicians have got to understand that it is epidemic in America and understand its ultimate implication, and the family doctor, the one who helps stitch up the black eye, the one that sends that lady home without following up, without referring her to counseling, without treating domestic

violence and family violence as one of the great health epidemics in America, has missed the boat and is not treating the basic ills of that patient and that family.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO (continuing): We've got to focus at the time on truancy prevention. It frustrates me no end to see a child truant 15 days in the first 45 days of the third grade and have nobody respond. The police officer picks the kid up, takes him to the school, calls the mother, the mother doesn't show, the school puts the kid on the bus and sends him home.

Every sign of trouble is there again and again and again, and we ignore it.

We're not going to change all those children similarly situated when they put the gun up beside the tourist's head at 14 years old or stop somebody in a driveway and threaten them with a knife, but we can start to change them when they're truant.

We have got to look to our afternoons after school and the evening hours. The Carnegie Foundation has come up with a marvelous report on opportunities and risks of the non-school hours. Look at how we deploy the resources of America. If we deployed our police officers, our probation officers, our juvenile counselors and so many people into constructive after school and evening programs, think of what we would save in terms of the dollars spent for prisons, spent for prosecution, spent for police officers investigating cases to find out who committed the crime. We have got to make that impact.

We have got to look at family and what it means and look at so many instances of the mother struggling to get breakfast on the table, get to work on time, get home through rush hour traffic, get dinner on the table, the children bathed, the homework done.

People collapse into bed without quality time to read stories to the children. Saturdays they run errands, Sundays they go to church or sleep late, Sunday night they start getting ready for school again the next day.

We have got to somehow or another turn America's focus back to making the family first in terms of work hours, in terms of flex-time, in terms of giving both parents time to be with their children. What's wrong with an 8 to 2 workday that permits both parents to leave work to pick up their children to eliminate the need for costly daycare and give their parents quality time with their children? These are the things that we have to think about for America's future.

We've got to look at what we're doing. One of the best social services that can be delivered, one of the best crime prevention services that can be delivered is to give people an opportunity to earn a living wage. But look at how we have our system structured now. To graduate from high school, you may need a language, you may need something else, but you don't have to have a school that can enable you to learn a living wage. And so you drift around, you have no sense of purpose.

Communities should be planning with the educational program in the community, with the Department of Labor, with employment

offices, with summer job programs, planning by beginning with a seventh grade, understanding that seventh grader's aptitudes and interests, matching summer job programs with those aptitudes and interests, matching the work experience with the school experience, planning for ages 12 to 18, so that that child knows that if he works through what's planned, he can come out with a skill that can enable him to learn a living wage.

Let us give our youngsters as they grow up the opportunity to serve. I look around at the Civilian Conservation Corps monuments which dot this nation, monuments built by young men to serve the public during the Depression. And my mother tells me stories about people her age who she knew and what they did and how proud they were of it. And then I remember World War II, when my aunt was an Army nurse and went off to north Africa behind Patton's army. I can remember the day that she went and I was so proud and the day that she came home and I was so proud.

And my other aunt went off as a Women's Army service pilot to tow targets and ferry bombers, and she made a contribution.

Our young people want to make a contribution, they want to be somebody, they want to belong, they want to be respected, they want to be a part of something. And we've got to restitch the fabric of society around them, around their families, enable their families to provide the care because again and again, it is clear to everyone that the best provider of all is the strong and healthy family.

How do we get to that national agenda? I will tell you the second

story. Two years ago, the governor of Florida came into office and he wanted to look at how the social service delivery system should be revised. He knew my feelings on the subject and he asked me to go look at it, to study it and to make recommendations that could try to design a program that could address the issues that I've described today.

Beginning in January of 1991, I held nine public hearings throughout Florida with a social service task force, from Pensacola to Miami by way of Belle Glade. In Miami, we went from 9:00 in the morning till 10:45 at night. I went to the bathroom once. Everybody spoke for 10 minutes. Each person spoke with 10 minutes of chockful ideas. We didn't break for lunch or dinner, and those hearings were some of the most incredible hearings that I have ever participated in in terms of the dynamic human energy that is available throughout the communities of America.

And in my limited time in Washington, talking to people who come from the communities, that strength is there throughout America. For too long now, we have had states telling communities what to do, and more importantly, we've had the federal government telling communities what to do or telling communities that they would help them if the communities would design a program that fit the federal regulations even if they had turned the square hole into the round hole to fit what the federal government wanted.

The time has come for a new partnership where communities join together and have a voice in their destiny, whether it be in law

enforcement, whether it be in education, social services, or crime. But communities have got to understand that they've got to pull the threads together.

As I went through Florida, it looked like the state was building an interstate down one direction, the government was building a superhighway in another direction, there was no ingress and egress to either one, and the school system built a little country road under the other, and there was no ingress or egress and they never talked to each other and they never coordinated.

It is imperative that we understand that the time has come for people to break down the barriers that exist between their disciplines, that people have got to break down the barriers that exist within communities, between different groups and join together to stitch a new fabric of community that will support families, use our limited resources in the wisest way possible, and get the best out of the federal government that we can get.

That means that Washington has got to listen to what we do here, and instead of one agency looking at what it does, instead of the Department of Justice just looking at a Weed and Seed program or a juvenile justice program, the Department of Justice has got to reach out to the Department of Health and Human Services and to the Department of Education and to the Department of Labor and to the Housing and Urban Development and form a partnership in Washington where we restitch the fabrics together.

But we can't tell communities what to do. We've got to reach out

and design new and creative means of forming links between communities in Washington so that we can work together in a common design that utilizes every federal dollar as wisely as we can, consistent with community needs.

The time for grants where we throw blobs of money at people and say, go and God be with you, is gone because the 80s are gone and unlimited monies are gone, and the time has come to see, let's take what dollars we have, let's break down the barriers that exist between these dollars and get people working together, and then let's see how we can use these dollars as wisely as we can with supplements here, there, filling in this place, challenging this community, leveraging this money out of private foundations.

It is one of the most exciting times I know of in American history because we have a challenge that is rare. For so long, America reacted to crises: to a Depression, to a world war, and America has always risen to the challenge as valiantly as any nation ever could.

We've got to rise to the challenge of maintaining a peaceful society, of reducing crime, of rebuilding our economy, of preventing the spread of war throughout this land and throughout--I mean, throughout the world, and we've got to do it without the crisis. I think that's one of the great challenges we face, but I have never seen such energy in the communities of America. That's where the laboratories are now, that's where the excitement is.

In the 30s, the excitement was in Washington. In the 90s, the excitement is throughout America.

The Reuter Transcript Report  
Attorney General Reno/Crime  
April 29, 1993  
REUTER