

Testimony of
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Some Principles about Violence Prevention
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Communities Prevent and Respond to Violence Crime"

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I am pleased to be here alongside law enforcement representatives from communities around the country. While I personally do not work the streets like these men, I do reside and work in Boston, a city that has grappled with a disturbing increase in gun violence and homicide, especially related to youth and gang activity.

Misery loves company, they say. And for whatever consolation it is supposed to be--and I'm not sure there is any--Boston has lots of miserable company, based on crime reports from many American cities.

Smart crime fighting involves a balanced blend of enforcement (from community policing to identifying illegal gun markets), treatment modalities (from drug rehab on demand to community corrections and post-incarceration services) as well as general and targeted crime prevention (from family support to summer jobs for high-risk youth). Regrettably, the prevention approach has at times been disparaged as "worthless" and as "soft on crime." Yet, this cynical perspective reflects gross misunderstanding of the process and goals of prevention, and a selective examination of outcomes. Simply put: Prevention programs can work; good prevention programs that are well-implement do work.

Too often, prevention initiatives are funded and implemented on a shoestring, and a rather short shoe-string with a brief window of opportunity to show results. This is a recipe for failure and provides additional fodder for skeptics. Besides the matter of funding adequacy, there are five fundamental principles of crime and violence prevention that are critical to a successful investment.

1. No program is successful all the time or for all individuals. No matter what the initiative, there will be failures--those who commit crimes or recidivate despite our best efforts to prevent it. Rather than focusing on the failures (as the media tends to do in its "good news is no news, bad news is big news" posture), the goal should be a reasonable reduction in offending rates. In light

of the enormous social and administrative costs associated with each criminal act, even modest gains are worthwhile.

2. Prevention should have an emphasis on the prefix "pre." While it is unwise and inappropriate to "give up" on even a seemingly hardened offender, the greatest opportunity for positive impact comes with a focus on children--those who are young and impressionable and will be impressed with what a teacher, preacher or some other authority figure has to say. It is well-known that early prevention--during grade school if not earlier--can carry the greatest and most lasting impact before a youngster is seduced by gangs, drugs and crime. For that matter, we must recognize that children are often drawn to gangs for many positive reasons--camaraderie, respect, status, excitement, and protection. Our challenge is to identify and provide alternative means for youngsters to derive the same types of personal fulfillment in programs that foster positive youth development.

3. Patience is more than a virtue, it is a requirement. Prevention is not a short-term strategy. Rather, it involves a continued effort, undaunted by setbacks. Unfortunately, many prevention programs are given short windows in which to show progress, and are often terminated before the final results are in. What is needed is foundational support that extends well beyond election cycles.

4. Prevention should take a multi-faceted approach. Understandably, there is much temptation to target gang activity as perhaps the most visible and immediate threat to public safety. The proposed "Gang Abatement and Prevention Act of 2007" surely appears to represent a strong and balanced starting point. Yet there are many other points of intervention for successful crime reduction programming. For example, several proven and promising strategies are directed at at-risk families with young children. Rather than assail struggling underage single mothers for their lack of parenting effectiveness, many programs (like nurse home visitation) assist them in raising children who are less likely to become juvenile offenders. In addition, many school-based initiatives effectively and efficiently enhance the well-being of large numbers of children. Behavioral skills training at the elementary school level (such as Boston's Lesson One Foundation), anti-bullying curricula for middle school students (such as the Olweus bullying prevention program) that recognize the link between bullying and later offending, peer-mediation and mentoring programs in high school, and after-school programs targeted at the "prime time for juvenile crime" all have payoffs far greater than the investment.

5. Prevention is significantly cost-effective. Virtually all assessments of crime prevention confirm the adage that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of prison time. It is, however, a political reality that sound investments in crime prevention can take years to reap the benefits. For example, the Perry pre-school program experiment implemented in Ypsilanti, Michigan translated into a 17-to-1 rate of return on investment, yet it wasn't until years later when the preschoolers matured that their significantly lower involvement in crime, alcohol and drug abuse was observed. It takes a bold leader to earmark funds today for tomorrow's success that his/her successor will derive.

The recent upturn in youth violence was anticipated years ago. Even while rates of crime were falling in the 1990s, criminologists warned about the potential for another wave of youth and gang violence ahead, a not-so-perfect storm combining an upward trend in the at-risk youth

population with a downward trend in spending on social and educational programs to support youth.

Furthermore, we should not be surprised if the concomitant increase in the number of at-risk youth--especially black and Latino children living in urban neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage and with less than adequate supervision--combined with budget cuts for youth programs, translates into more increases in gang and gun violence. We're already seeing the early signs.

The good news--or at least the encouraging word--is that the crime problem is not out of control, at least by contrast to the early 1990s when the nation's murder rate was almost twice what it is today. It is not surprising that a small bounce back would occur after the glory years of the late 1990s. But let this small upturn serve as a thunderous wake up call that crime prevention, police funding, and gun control need to be priorities once again.

At this juncture, we must, of course, look toward immediate solutions for controlling the high level of gang activity and easy access to illegal firearms--approaches that heavily depend on police personnel, intelligence and deployment. At the same time, however, we must maintain a long-range view toward the future. The choice is ours: pay for the programs now or pray for the victims later.