

Testimony of
Sylvester Johnson

Police Commissioner
City of Philadelphia
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Before the Judiciary Committee Regarding Mentoring and Community Based Solutions to
Delinquency and Youth Violence
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Good morning Senator Specter and other members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. My name is Sylvester Johnson and I am the Police Commissioner here in Philadelphia.

First, thank you for inviting me to this hearing on delinquency and youth violence. As you can tell by this panel, this subject is critically important to the City as a whole. As a government, we must come together to protect our children from violence, but just as important from resorting to violence. There is no higher duty for me personally and for all of government. So I thank you for allowing me to be a part of these proceedings.

At the beginning, let me state clearly, I believe that law enforcement should be the last step in protecting our children. I say this because by the time a child comes to the attention of the police, the damage may already be done. I strongly believe we need to address the social failures that cause children to resort to crime and violence. We need to address the factors that create such hopelessness and lack of respect in our children.

Obviously, I don't have all the answers, but what I do know is that many children who become victims, criminals or both come from broken homes. Sometimes there are no parents at all, the parents are in jail or they're addicted to drugs. Is it any surprise that these children turn to violence and crime themselves?

Everyone agrees we need to target those children at risk of becoming victims or killers and the YVRP is an outstanding partnership among government agencies that does just that. In fact, John Delaney from the District Attorney's Office was a founding partner of that program and I commend him for all his hard work. But regrettably, we found that violent offenders were getting younger and younger. The YVRP was originally designed to target at risk-children from ages 14 to 24, but we have children as young as 9 and 10 becoming victims and killers as well. So, the YVRP has spun off another similar program called the Adolescent Violence Reduction Program (AVRP) to reach those at risk as young as 8 years old.

Let me state clearly, I fully believe in and support these programs. They save lives - plain and simple! But I must state, the children in these programs have been targeted because they have already been involved with the police or been victims. What we truly need is less children

targeted for intervention! We need to work together as a community to give our children the love, compassion, support and guidance every child craves. This will take strong leaders in government who are willing to invest in programs that will not provide immediate results.

The problem with our children did not occur overnight, nor will the solution. We need to explore innovative ways to instill the hope and self worth into our children that will last a lifetime. Historically, this was the role of the family, but the family, as we know it, no longer exists for far too many of our children. So, we must explore alternatives that will provide the nurturing environment every child requires. I believe the social failures at this point in a child's life are where the violence and delinquency begins.

As I said at the beginning, there is no higher duty for government than protecting our children, but I believe law enforcement should be the last line of defense. The first line of defense is finding a way to create a caring and supportive environment for each and every child in Philadelphia.

Thank you.