

*National Task Force Calls Childhood Exposure to Violence a National Crisis*

Calling for a massive overhaul of the nation's approach to exposure to violence, the Attorney General's National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence has issued what United States Attorney General Eric H. Holder, Jr. describes as "a wake-up call and warning bell for all of us."

The Task Force held four public hearings (Baltimore, Albuquerque, Miami, and Detroit) and three "listening sessions" (Anchorage, Oakland, and Joint Base Lewis-McChord outside Tacoma, Washington) during which members heard personal testimony from survivors of violence, young people, social service providers, medical personnel, researchers, and advocates, among others.

The Task Force's report, "Defending Childhood: Protect, Health, Thrive," finds that exposure to violence is a national crisis that affects approximately two out of every three children in the U.S. The task force, co-chaired by Robert Listenbee, Jr., Chief of the Juvenile Unit of the Defender Association of Philadelphia, and Joe Torre, Chairman of the Joe Torre Safe at Home Foundation and Major League Baseball's Executive Vice President for Baseball Operation, makes 56 recommendations divided into six areas: ending the epidemic of children exposed to violence, identifying children exposed to violence, treatment and healing of exposure to violence, creating safe and nurturing homes, community involvement, and "rethinking our juvenile justice system."

The Task Force notes that by the time children come into contact with the juvenile justice system, they have almost always been exposed to several types of traumatic violence over a period of many years. For example, the Task Force cites a study conducted at a juvenile detention center in Cook County, Illinois, where 90 percent of the youth reported past exposure to traumatic violence. This included being threatened with weapons (58 percent) and being physically assaulted (35 percent). According to an article last year by Julian D. Ford, John Chapman, Daniel F. Connor and Keith R. Cruise, "**Complex Trauma and Aggression in Secure Juvenile Justice settings,**" youth in detention were three times as likely as those in a national sample to have been exposed to multiple types of violence and traumatic events.

The relationship between exposure to violence and involvement in the justice system is no coincidence, according to the Task Force report. When young people experience prolonged or repeated violence, their bodies and brains adapt by becoming focused on survival. This dramatically reduces their ability to delay impulses and gratification to a degree even beyond that of normal adolescents. Youth who are trying to protect themselves from more violence, or who do not know how to deal with the violence they already have already experienced, may engage in delinquent or criminal behavior as a way to gain a sense of control in their chaotic lives and to cope with the emotional turmoil and barriers to security and success that violence creates. Traumatic violence, in particular, can delay or derail brain development, leaving even the most resilient and intelligent child or adolescent with a severely diminished capacity to inhibit strong impulses, to delay gratification, and to anticipate and evaluate risks.

The Task Force recommends that the justice system incorporate trauma-informed care into decision-making responses for children throughout the system and abandon juvenile justice correctional practices that further traumatize children. The report also focuses on the needs of special populations, including LGBTQ youth, girls, and racial and ethnic minority youth.

The report looks closely at schools, finding that “too many vulnerable children who have been exposed to violence are unnecessarily removed from schools through school discipline and referrals to the juvenile justice system.” It goes on to quote a finding by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention that “without the structure and supervision that school provides, truants and dropouts often turn to delinquent or criminal behavior.”

The Task Force concludes that existing programs are “insufficient” to reduce the ultimate involvement of at-risk students in the juvenile justice system, in large part because they do not teach students or school personnel how to create a “trauma-informed school environment.” The report urges that schools provide practical skills to enable youth and school personnel to recognize, prevent, and/or manage stress reactions instead of automatically suspending disruptive youth or referring them to the juvenile justice system. The report encourages schools to develop and implement innovative approaches to identify and help students who are at risk for dropping out, academic failure, behavioral problems, substance abuse, gang involvement, and depression that could lead to thoughts of suicide.

For a copy of the full report, go to <http://www.justice.gov/defendingchildhood/cev-rpt-full.pdf>