

KEYNOTE SPEECH BY ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR

HO PENG KEE, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE

**(LAW AND HOME AFFAIRS) AT THE ASEAN SEMINAR ON URBAN
YOUTH WORK II, ON 19 MARCH 2002, 9.35 AM AT BALLROOM 3,
ORCHARD HOTEL SINGAPORE**

Your Excellencies

from the Embassies of ASEAN countries and Japan

Your Excellency Professor Dr Ruben C. Umaly

Executive Director of ASEAN Foundation

Delegates from ASEAN

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning

First, let me warmly welcome all our delegates and friends from ASEAN countries to Singapore. The Inter-Ministry Committee on Youth Crime (IMYC) is delighted to organise this ASEAN Seminar on Urban Youth Work II here.

2 The topic of urban youth work is a relevant one for ASEAN today as countries in the ASEAN develop economically and socially. According to the

Second ASEAN State of the Environment Report for year 2000, ASEAN has three mega-cities with population approaching 10 million people – Bangkok, Jakarta and Metro Manila. In all ASEAN countries, except Vietnam, the percentage of urban population has risen between 1996 to 2000. The Report projects that ASEAN's urban population will continue to accelerate.

3 Singapore's 4.1 million population is listed in the ASEAN Report as a 100-percent urbanised country. With rapid modernization, Singapore has been monitoring its trends in juvenile delinquency closely. In 1994, we were concerned that even though the absolute numbers were small, there was a rising trend of juveniles arrested. For example, the number of juveniles arrested doubled from 1980 to 1990. This increased further by 74.4% in 1994 when 2102 juveniles were arrested. This upward trend contrasted starkly with a drop in national crime rate.

4 The Inter-Ministry Committee on Youth Crime (or IMYC for short) was therefore formed in 1995 to look at inter-agency coordination to reduce juvenile delinquency and youth crime in Singapore. The IMYC, which I have chaired since, comprises of high-level representatives from major stakeholders such as the Ministry of Community Development and Sports, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Home Affairs, National Council of Social Service, Prisons Department, Singapore Police Force, Subordinate Courts, as well as academics in youth work. The National Youth Council serves as the secretariat to support the IMYC.

5 Since the formation of the IMYC in 1995, the numbers of youths (these are young people aged from 7 to below 20 years) arrested in Singapore have steadily declined. In particular, the decline over the past 3 years have been consistent. Comparing the figures for the years 1999, 2000 and 2001, the number of youths arrested dropped further from 3,446 to 2,986 to 2,474, a decline of 13% from 1999 to 2000, and a further decline of 17% from 2000 to 2001.

6 However, the recent spate of violent offences committed by some youths appears to paint a different picture. For example, in December 2001, a 15-year old boy was assaulted with hammers and a knife by a gang of 14 youths aged 14 to 19 years. Just two weeks ago, a 20-year old national serviceman was beaten up by four youths near Orchard MRT station.

7 But even though these acts shock us and capture public attention due to their graphic nature, it would be wrong to conclude that there is a rising trend in violent behaviour in our youths. Quantitatively, this is not borne out. Our latest analysis reveals that the number of youths arrested for offences with public order implications have all dropped between the years 2000 and 2001. These include unlawful assembly (down 40%), rioting (down 30%), serious hurt (down 55%) and possession of offensive weapons (down 37%). We should view such reported cases in perspective – that they are compelling indeed useful stories to tell. They remind us that many young people need help to control their anger; to ward off negative peer influences, to instil self-confidence and a sense of purpose and cut off bad behaviour such as gambling, drinking and smoking. Hence, let me repeat what I

have said many times before, which is that, every crime committed by our youths is one crime too many.

8 IMYC agencies will therefore press on resolutely with their efforts to prevent youth crimes. For example, we will continue to closely monitor youth trends. To win this war on youth crime, we must ourselves be aggressive and take a pre-emptive effort to combat problems before they become serious social ills.

9 This seminar is part of this strategy. Speakers from Australia and Hong Kong will share their approaches and programmes to address this phenomenon. Our ASEAN delegates will also be able to share their experiences. In this way, we learn from each other.

10 On its part, over the years, IMYC agencies have implemented many innovative and cutting edge programmes. But we do not sit on our laurels. Instead, we monitor developments for possible new problems. One such development is any possible negative impact of the computer on our young. One such development is any possible negative impact of the computer on our young. IMYC launched Project Crush to address this concern.

11 Project CRuSH (Cyberspace Risks and where you can Seek Help) is a series of roadshows to about 30 secondary schools to raise awareness among youths on the risks of using the Internet and to encourage safe surfing. These roadshows will be followed by a six-week e-mentoring programme in selected schools where youths are trained to become Internet mentors and provide peer guidance and

support to their friends surfing through cyberspace. Project CRuSH was launched in September 2001 by the IMYC and is spearheaded by TOUCH Youth Services. To date, 16,000 students from 18 schools have participated in the roadshows. About 1,500 students have been trained as e-mentors under Project CRuSH.

12 This project will be enhanced to help our young people, besides inculcating safe surfing habits, to also handle other potential problems such as compulsive LAN gaming and being influenced by violent computer games.

13 All in all, IMYC co-ordinates over 15 programmes to combat juvenile delinquency and youth crime. The key thrusts of these programmes are prevention and rehabilitation. Let me highlight a few key programmes.

14 Under our prevention strategy, the Ministry of Education provides teacher-counsellors and with the support of the National Council of Social Services, provides school-based social work to impart lifeskills development and counselling for our students. The training includes instilling conflict resolution and management skills in our youths. On their part, the Subordinate Courts and the Ministry of Education have, since 1997, have been training secondary school student leaders to mediate disputes among their peers under the Peer Mediation Programme. Police gives focussed talks in schools. Prisons conducts prison tours for students. Hence, everyone chips in.

15 Under our rehabilitation strategy, the Ministry Of Community Development And Sports and the National Youth Council spearhead two six-month rehabilitative

programmes for youths caught for petty offences (such as theft) and street-corner gang activities which are called the Guidance Programme (GP) and the Streetwise Programme (SWP) respectively. These are two key programmes that provide counselling to our youths and impart them with life-skills for them to develop in a positive manner.

16 Project Bridge is another IMYC initiative to reach out to youths-at-risk. In June 2000, the then Sembawang-Hong Kah Community Development Council (CDC), YMCA Singapore and the National Youth Council launched Project Bridge, a youth centre to reach out to those at risk or who had left school prematurely. The Centre works closely with schools in the community. Programmes at Project Bridge include counselling, referrals for job attachments or training and encouraging social, leadership and personal development in the youths. Another such centre will be opened in June this year to serve the eastern part of Singapore.

17 If you want to know more about IMYC's efforts in tackling youth delinquency and crime, I would recommend a new book, *Fighting Youth Crime: Success and Failures of the Two Little Dragons* jointly written by Dr Alfred Choi, an Associate Professor from School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore and Dr Wing Lo, Associate Professor from the Department of Applied Social Studies, City University of Hong Kong. This book is a useful resource for anyone interested in an overview of and analysis on

the youth crime situation in Singapore and Hong Kong. I congratulate Dr Choi and Dr Lo, who are here today, on the launch of their book.

18 The war on youth crime cannot be fought alone. Besides IMYC partners, we must also involve the community, civic and youth organisations, voluntary welfare organisations, parents and even youths themselves. The IMYC supports this process through various mechanisms. We provide seed funding for meaningful projects for at-risk youths and training grants for youth workers. We publish manuals for parents on juvenile delinquency and parenting teenagers in the Internet age.

19 Today, we have also lined up a host of speakers and facilitators who have a good knowledge of the youth work scene in Singapore. They will provide a deeper understanding of the issues in their respective areas of work. I thank our experienced speakers and facilitators from Australia, Hong Kong, Ministry Of Community Development And Sports, Subordinate Courts, Ang Mio Kio Family Service Centre and academics from the National University of Singapore.

20 I also thank the Japan ASEAN Solidarity Fund for the sponsorship of this seminar and the ASEAN Foundation for securing the funds.

21 On this note, I wish all participants a fruitful seminar ahead and to all our overseas guests, I wish you a pleasant stay in Singapore. May all of us learn precious lessons from each other to apply in our local contexts so that our youths will have brighter futures ahead.