

CHECKED AGAINST DELIVERY

**SPEECH BY ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR HO PENG KEE, SENIOR
MINISTER OF STATE FOR LAW & HOME AFFAIRS, AT THE
OFFICIAL LAUNCH OF THE YOUTH-CRIME PREVENTION
ROADSHOWS TO EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS ON 22 AUGUST
2003, 3PM AT HENDERSON SECONDARY SCHOOL**

Mrs Yeo Chin Nam, Principal of Henderson Secondary School,

Members of the Inter Ministry Committee on Youth Crime and the National
Crime Prevention Council

Distinguished guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good afternoon,

I am happy to be here at Henderson Secondary School to launch
the series of Youth-Crime Prevention Roadshows.

2 Let me begin with a story.

3 A group of children were playing near two railway tracks, one
still in use, the other not in use. Despite warning signs, only one child decided
to play on the disused track, the rest on the operational track. The others felt
that there was more thrill and fun playing on the operational track as the train
could appear and they would then have the thrill and excitement of jumping off
the tracks and then watch the train go by. They thought that they would never
be in danger.

4 Then the train came. As the group of children scrambled to leave the used track, one of them had his shoe stuck to the railway track. The rest of his friends, afraid of the approaching train, just ran to safety, leaving their poor friend in harm's way. When the train driver saw that the child was stuck, he immediately pulled the emergency brake. The train came to a screeching halt. But it was too late.

5 To all Singapore youths, let me say this. Just like the story, there are two tracks in your lives. One may seem more popular with your peer group but may not be right and the other less popular but right. Only one child made the right decision to play at the unused track, which is less popular but right. The rest however decided on the more popular operational track. Which track and path you choose will lead to different outcomes and consequences. This is especially so when you decide to commit a crime.

6 Sometimes, you make choices to gain popularity within a group, when your friends encourage you to do the hip, cool but wrong things like commit shoptheft, steal or fight. You succumb to the peer pressure because it is fun. It gives you a sense of belonging, gambling that you will not get caught. Please remember, each decision you make comes with consequences. Each track you choose has different outcomes. The child lost his life on the operational track. For those of you who choose to commit crime, you may lose your future, self-esteem or freedom.

7 Life is about choices and decisions. Some of these are tough decisions that you need to make. We can paste up warning signs, provide guidance and advice. However, only you can make that choice, the right choice. Remember that what's right isn't always popular and what's popular isn't always right.

Recent Challenges for the IMYC and its Partners

8 Let me now share with you some hard data so that you can better understand my concerns. Then, working together, we can improve the problem of youth involvement in crime.

9 Delinquency prevention is an important mission for the Inter-Ministry Committee on Youth Crime (IMYC). Its members include Ministry of Community Development and Sports, Ministry of Education, Singapore Police Force, the Subordinate Courts, the Prisons Department, the National Council of Social Service and the National Youth Council. Formed in 1995, the IMYC has been relentless in its efforts to tackle youth crime. Its efforts have borne fruit. This is reflected in the decline in the number of youth offenders and crime cases involving youths between 1999-2001.

10 I am concerned that youth arrests, that is, those above 7 and below 20 years old, in the first six months of 2003 increased by 18% to 2200 offenders, as compared to about 1900 youths arrested in the same period last year. Youth arrests had earlier increased by about 50% from about 2700 youths arrested in 2001 to 4100 youths last year.

11 Records, since 1997, have also shown that the commission of three types of crimes are common among youths. These are Shop Theft, Simple Theft and Rioting.

12 In the first half of 2003, youths arrested for these three offences comprised 59% of total youth arrests. This means nearly 6 out of every 10 youth offenders were arrested for these three offences.

13 Police records have also shown that the majority of youths arrested by Police for these three offences were students. For the first half of

2003, student offenders comprised 63% of all youth offenders arrested for these three offences

14 Finally, most youth offenders who commit Shop Theft, Theft and Rioting were 'first time offenders', in other words, these offenders were arrested by the Police for the first time. We know this from the observation (based on sample study of these 3 offences) that, for the first half of 2003 'first timer offenders' comprised 77% of all youth offenders arrested for these three offences. There is therefore a flow of youths going into crime, a phenomenon which can and should be stemmed.

IMYC's Strategy to the Challenge

15 Given the prevalence of student and 'first-timer' involvement in youth crime, there is an urgent need for preventive intervention be carried out 'upstream'. By 'upstream', I mean, at the stage even before the youth comes into contact with Police and the criminal justice system. Hence, the IMYC has formulated and positioned its strategy to directly address the top 3 youth crimes, bearing in mind the profiles of student and first-timer involvement.

16 Translating IMYC's strategy into action, the Singapore Police Force in collaboration with its IMYC partners and the National Crime Prevention Council have developed a Youth Crime Prevention Roadshow plan. A series of roadshows will reach out to students in the Secondary schools, Junior Colleges (JCs) & Centralised Institutes (CIs), Vocational Training Centres (VTC), Institutes of Technical Education (ITE), and Polytechnics.

17 The key objective of these roadshows is to raise awareness and promote reflection among students, parents and school staff on several key messages, ranging from the consequences and motivations of committing crime to the sources of help available to youths to stay away from crime. The key

messages seek to empower students to make the right choices by thinking of the future rather than the short term. In addition, there are also tips for parents to better communicate with their teens. The approach advocated is for parental supervision to take a less confrontational but still concerned approach when dealing with teenagers.

18 From July to November 2003, Neighbourhood Police Centres island wide will engage education institutions within their respective jurisdictions to work with schools to run the roadshows. In each engagement, customised roadshow programmes that factor in individual needs of the school will be drawn up and implemented jointly by the Police, school and its partners. I am confident that all schools will participate actively in and lend their full support to these roadshows.

19 Through the Youth-Crime Prevention Roadshow plan, the IMYC provides the overarching leadership in setting the framework and strategy at the national level for localised initiatives to be formulated and put into action by its network of dedicated youth development stakeholders.

The Road Ahead: Working together

20 As much as the IMYC and its partners can play their part, let me once again say that youth crime is a product of many interrelated social factors and cannot be tackled by the government and community-based agencies alone. Parental supervision is a key piece to the jigsaw puzzle. Speaking from my own experience as a father of 3, I know that leaving our children to their own devices without being actively involved in their lives, can cause some to go down the wrong path. As parents, we must and can do more to protect them from crime. It is on this note that I would like to urge parents to join hands

with the IMYC and its partners to tackle youth crime. Our past successes do not guarantee future successes.

21 Finally, my thanks to Henderson Secondary School, its community partners and Bukit Merah West Neighbourhood Police Centre for organising this event, which launches our key preventive measure for 2003, the Youth-Crime Prevention Roadshows.

Thank you.