

**ADDRESS BY MR ABDULLAH TARMUGI, ACTING MINISTER
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE
FOR HOME AFFAIRS AT THE SEMINAR ON NETWORKING YOUTH
SERVICES ON SATURDAY 25 NOVEMBER 1995 9.00 AM, CENTRE FOR
PERFORMING ARTS, ANGLO-CHINESE SCHOOL (INDEPENDENT)
121, DOVER ROAD**

Professor Ho Peng Kee

Parliamentary Secretary for Law and for Home Affairs

and Deputy Chairman of the National Youth Council

Friends

On the 2nd of March this year, four teenagers broke into a bookshop at a secondary school in Hougang. They stole cash, batteries, computer diskettes and pens worth a total of \$2,588. They appeared before the District Judge Ibrahim Burhan in May and one of the boys asked for sentence to be delayed as he was due to sit for his mid-year exams. His request was granted. The boy came back three months later for sentencing, along with the results of his mid-year exams. For his mid-year exams he scored 4 distinctions. For his court appearance he got 12 months' probation. But he was lucky. He could have gotten at least two years' jail. He was quoted in The New Paper as saying, "I knew what I was doing was bad. But I did not realize it was a serious offence. I felt I have hurt my parents. I will make it up to them by studying harder." One the bad company which he mixed

with, he said, “I am not going to mix with them anymore.” I hope he sticks to these resolutions.

2 Our juvenile delinquency rates have risen over the past few years; in sharp contrast to the overall crime rate, which has been coming down. Whilst the absolute figures are relatively low by international standards, the trend is nevertheless worrying. Studies¹ both in Singapore and overseas, show that the juvenile recidivism rate is high. The probability of a juvenile delinquent becoming an adult criminal is therefore significant. We must therefore tackle the problem before it grows and raise our overall crime statistics in future.

3 I am therefore very happy to see the five Government agencies dealing with youth matters coming together, I believe for the very first time, to organize this seminar on Networking Youth Services. But I am even more delighted that so many of you have signed up for this seminar, prompting the organizers to expand the number of workshop sessions to cope with the overwhelming response.

4. If the case which I mentioned earlier is representative of the majority of the juvenile cases which we have, then we stand some chance of turning the situation around. The teenager realised the gravity of his offence and made a vow to change for the better. He had succumbed to negative peer influence, but it showed that the fundamental values of respect for parents, of distinguishing between right and wrong and respect for the rule of law still prevailed.

¹ For example, the study by the Statistics and Planning Unit of the Subordinate Courts published in the July 1995 edition of the Subordinate Courts Research Bulletin and the Choi and Chan study.

5. Singapore youths are in a period of transition. The generation of youth aged below 30 has not experienced the struggles of achieving nationhood. Smaller, nuclear dual career families, global media influences, more divorces and negative peer pressure all serve to undermine the discipline, work ethic and moral values of our youth.

6. However, preventive and developmental youth work is not easy. The target group is amorphous and not well defined. Well meaning efforts may be counter-productive if the youth rebel against them. The work is painstaking and never-ending. For every youth that we manage to steer out of trouble, there will be others on the verge of getting into trouble. But we stand a better chance if Government, civic and voluntary youth agencies, the schools, the police, the social workers, the media and parents work in partnership to nip the problem in the bud.

7. As you discuss the scope for enhancing the networking amongst the youth service agencies, and the scope for improving the programmes to help youths turn over a new leaf, I would like to put forward three points for you to consider:

a. Firstly, I think we must accept that the world has changed. Video arcades, computer games, Magic cards, rollerblading and other new fangled toys are here to stay. We cannot ban them altogether, and it is not necessarily the case that all youths who frequent these establishments or

indulge in these past-times turn to crime. We must therefore come up with new, creative and innovative programmes to reach out to the youths and instil in them the values which will immunise them against negative influences;

b. Secondly, the problems facing youth are multi-faceted and multiple in nature. More often than not, a teenager who gets into trouble has not just one problem. Many have multiple problems, be it an alcoholic father, wayward friends, pressure to keep up with others, difficulty in coping with schoolwork and so on. Hence, the programmes to reach out to these youths need to take into account these multiple problems and be properly coordinated; and

c. Thirdly, remedial measures need to involve the family. However well-intentioned and attractive, institutional care should not in the final analysis seek to replace the family. The family may have seemingly intractable problems and not be able to provide a conducive environment for rehabilitation; but nothing can ever take its place. We must aim to improve the family environment, and not displace it.

8. The recently announced recommendations of the Inter-Ministry Committee on Dysfunctional families, juvenile delinquency and drug abuse fall into three main areas;

- a. Help for families in trouble;
- b. Preventive and remedial programmes for youth;
- c. Programmes to reduce and fight drug abuse.

9. The implementation details of these programmes will be worked out. As most of you present at this seminar are practitioners in the field of youth work, I would like to take this opportunity to briefly share with you the programmes in the pipeline to prevent youth from straying into undesirable behaviour. These are;

- a. Before and After School Care (BASC) services;
- b. Counselling services and pastoral care in schools;
- c. Youth services and outreach programmes provided by the National Youth Council in conjunction with voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs);
- d. Remedial-and probation services for offenders; and
- e. Rehabilitation for young drug offenders

10. The amount of money required for these programmes is only one aspect of the issue. The more important and crucial factor is whether we can jointly mount innovative and effective programmes to meet the challenges posed by changing social, family and peer influences affecting our youth. I hope that through seminars such as this, we will be able to come up with new programmes and schemes to help us turn the tide. Government will help and support you with the necessary resources. I am confident that if we put in a concerted-effort and work in partnership we can achieve our common goal of providing a better and brighter future for future generations of Singaporeans:

11. The success of today's Seminar depends very much on your active participation and contributions. I hope we will come up with innovative and effective programmes to help us turn the tide. Government will help and support you with the necessary resources. I am confident that if we put in a concerted effort and work in partnership, we can achieve our common goal of providing a better and- brighter future for our young Singaporeans.

12. In conclusion I congratulate the NYC for organising this seminar. I hope participants will benefit from it. I wish you every success.