

SPEECH BY MR WONG KAN SENG, MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS AND DEPUTY CHAIRMAN (PEOPLES' ASSOCIATION) AT THE 1996 SEMINAR ON REDUCING JUVENILE DELINQUENCY ORGANISED BY THE INTER-MINISTRY COMMITTEE ON JUVENILE DELINQUENCY ON SATURDAY 30 NOVEMBER 1996 AT 9.00 AM AT SUNTEC CITY AUDITORIUM (3RD FLOOR)

A very good morning to all of you, I am very happy to see so many of you here this morning - school principals and teachers, volunteers and youth workers from the VWOs, police officers, lawyers and concerned citizens. That so many of you have signed up for today's seminar augurs well for the programmes and policies which are being put in place to reduce juvenile delinquency in Singapore.

Review of the JD situation

2 In contrast to decreasing overall crime rates, juvenile delinquency rose in the first half of the 1990s. The number of juveniles arrested doubled from 1,205 in 1990 to 2,589 in 1995. Shoplifting and simple theft accounted for 55% or slightly more than half of the juvenile offences in 1995. In addition to the increase in absolute numbers, the changing nature of juvenile crimes is also a cause for concern. More juveniles are getting involved in more serious crimes such as rioting, extortion, vandalism and causing hurt with weapons. More students are involved in crimes and in street corner gangs. The number of girls committing

offences has also risen. Juvenile delinquents are also getting younger, with the majority aged 14 to 15.

3 I am highlighting this problem now, not because juvenile delinquency has gone out of control, as in some other countries, but because the Government wants to nip the problem in the bud before it gets worse. We want to find solutions to this problem now.

Reasons for Juvenile Delinquency

4 Before we do that we must try to understand what are some underlying root causes of juvenile delinquency. These are:

a. Lack of parental supervision and discipline

Broken families, absent fathers and family squabbles lead to tension between the teenager and his family and a lack of belonging and identity; this leads to teenagers turning away from their families, and identifying more with street corner gangs and bad company.

b. Negative media and peer influences

Youths are today exposed to all types of external influences, such as violence in the media, magazines, hanging out in billiard saloons, video arcades and mixing with bad company. These erode the moral and good values which the schools and parents try to inculcate in our youths.

c. Low self-esteem and lack of self-discipline

The profile of delinquents shows that many are under achievers, have low self-esteem and lack self-discipline and social responsibility. Turning to shoplifting and street corner gangs is one way of expressing their control over the external environment.

5 Some of today's juvenile delinquents may become tomorrow's adult criminals. If the rise in juvenile delinquency and its underlying root causes are not tackled in time, then it may be a matter of time before our overall crime rates shoot up. The moment we accept that young persons commit crimes because society is at fault, as some people do in other countries and the moment being in a street gang, indulging in teenage sex, committing truancy, vandalism and casual shoplifting are seen as "macho" things to do and a rite of passage to adulthood, we are in for big trouble. We will go down the road of no return when delinquent behaviour becomes something of a heroic thing to do. The extra effort to put in place a system which minimises juvenile delinquency is therefore a worthwhile investment.

6. But we cannot turn back the clock. Dual career parents have become a norm. Two out of every three couples between the ages of 20 and 30 are now dual career couples. Smaller, nuclear families have virtually replaced the extended family. We

are an open society, and we cannot afford to cut ourselves off from external influences. The Internet, with all its good, bad and ugly aspects, is here to stay.

7 We cannot hope to go back to the days of chalk and blackboard and rote learning where teenagers accept without question the teacher's or parent's words. Youths of today are more sophisticated, better informed and more street-smart. Tried and tested methods which have worked in the past may have to be modified to suit present day circumstances.

8 The challenge facing us in the next millennium is how to come up with innovative and effective programmes and responses which are relevant to the 21st Century youth.

Government's Response / Partnership effort to tackle Juvenile Delinquency

9 The Prime Minister in his 1994 National Day Rally speech expressed concern that eroding traditional and moral values in our society had led to an increase in social problems such as dysfunctional families, juvenile delinquency and drug abuse. The Government then formed an Inter-Ministry Committee (IMC) on Dysfunctional Families, Juvenile Delinquency and Drug Abuse, chaired by the Minister of Community Development, Mr Abdullah Tarmugi, to devise broad strategies to tackle these issues. Following the recommendations of this IMC, an Inter-Ministry Committee on Juvenile Delinquency (IMJD) chaired by Senior

Parliamentary Secretary for Law and Home Affairs Associate Professor Ho Peng Kee was formed to work out specific measures to deal with the juvenile delinquency problem.

10 Recognising that juvenile delinquency is a multi-faceted problem, the IMJD has taken a multi-pronged approach involving multiple agencies to address the challenge. The IMJD has adopted a three-pronged approach involving prevention, enforcement and rehabilitation, with the National Youth Council taking the lead in prevention in partnership with the Ministry of Education, the Police In enforcement, and the Ministry of Community Development in rehabilitation and aftercare. These lead agencies will coordinate with other relevant organisations, such as the judiciary and VWOs, on programmes and plans in the component for which they are responsible for, and to ensure that they are implemented smoothly.

11 Following the recommendations of the IMC and the formation of the IMJD, various measures have been put in place to address the juvenile delinquency problem in the past couple of years. These include boot camps and Family Conferencing organised by the juvenile court, more constructive and interesting activities for youths organised by the NYC, enhanced crime prevention education in schools and greater co-ordination amongst Schools, Police and VWOs.

12 I am pleased to see that these measures have yielded some positive results. The juvenile crime rates for this year have so far been encouraging. The total number of youths arrested for juvenile offences in the first 10 months was 1,753, a decline of 20%, compared to 2,187 for the first 10 months of 1995. The biggest drop was in shoplifting and other minor crimes. Over the same period, the number of students arrested for juvenile crime also decreased from 1,905 to 1,491.

13 These are indeed encouraging signs, but they should not lead us to be complacent. We must press on to further reduce juvenile crime rates. This is a continuing process which we should never let up on. The underlying factors such as lack of family support, negative external influences and lack of self-esteem and discipline amongst some youth are not factors which can be changed overnight. Much more can be and should be done to help our youths spend their formative years in a constructive way, and to help those youths who have strayed, to return to the right path. I am sure there are more new strategies and programmes which the Government and the VWOs can work together hand-in-hand to put in place to further improve the juvenile delinquency situation.

14 Today, the IMJD will present in greater detail a package of new and enhanced measures, such as Before and After School Care and the revamped Police Caution and Guidance Programme, to tackle juvenile delinquency. Other programmes at the planning stage include a strengthened School-Police liaison to

better monitor delinquent behaviour and appointment of teachers involved in managing discipline as Honorary Voluntary Special Constabulary officers. The Police and Central Narcotics Bureau are also working hand in hand on the production of joint lecture kit and videos to deliver messages on crime prevention, secret societies and drug abuse.

15 The measures which were introduced over the past couple of years and those which we will be introducing in the months to come are not stop-gap measures. They are designed with the aim of tackling the underlying causes of juvenile delinquency and social problems amongst youth, so that we can get to the heart of these problems, instead of tackling the symptoms alone. They are designed to be comprehensive and integrative so that the various youth-work agencies support each other's efforts, instead of working at cross purposes.

16 Most importantly, they all take into account the central and pivotal role played by the family. At the core of this partnership to keep youth from crime is the family. The family must participate in the new programmes, such as the boot camp, the guidance programme and family conferencing if these programmes are to work.

17 At the same time, we do recognise that many delinquents come from dysfunctional families, and that these families need help. The family today faces

new circumstances and situations. It is not possible, nor is it desirable to adopt a macro, block-buster approach to family-community relationships. Each family and teenager is different and the approach has to be tailored individually. Your individual and collective efforts are therefore central to helping these families regain control of their own destiny and integrate into the community.

Conclusion

18 I am sure that during the course of today's Seminar, you will think of more new and innovative ideas or have suggestions to improve upon the programmes presented. The Government or IMJD does not have all the answers. I believe you have some of the answers. You can make a difference to the success of these programmes. We all are parents, or will be parents or uncles or aunties of teenagers. To make Singapore our best home in the 21st century, we must act in concert to deal with this problem now, so that we can be free from worries that the teenagers we know will become juvenile delinquents.

19 I wish you all a fruitful and enjoyable Seminar.