



January 3, 2013

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
Vice President of the United States
Old Executive Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20501

Dear Mr. Vice President,

The Sentencing Project is a long-time advocate for fair and effective criminal and juvenile justice policies that keep our communities safe and strong. Along with the rest of the nation, we were shocked and deeply troubled by the recent tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut. This incident invites us to reflect and take meaningful action to improve our national policies around gun control, access to mental health services for at-risk youth, and support for violence prevention and intervention programs in our nation's schools and communities. At the same time, we urge caution against adopting policies that could worsen conditions for youth and families, support an unhealthy presence of police in schools, and lead to unnecessary involvement in the justice system for youth.

As your task force considers various proposals from a diverse array of stakeholders, it is critical to be mindful that schools continue to be extraordinarily safe places for children. More than 98% of youth homicides do not occur in schools; in the 2009-2010 school year there was approximately one homicide or suicide of school-age youth at school per 2.7 million.¹ Violence in schools has been dropping steadily for the past 20 years since its peak in 1993, along with violent crime generally.

Placing Armed Security Guards Has Been Demonstrated to be a Counterproductive Strategy

Multiple research studies show that placing armed police in schools actually places youth in greater physical danger. A 2011 study found that schools with either armed or unarmed security guards experienced greater rates of violence than similarly situated schools without security guards.²

Students who attend schools armed with on-site law enforcement are also in greater danger of unnecessary involvement in the juvenile justice system through the criminalization of behaviors traditionally resolved through standard school discipline policies. In one study using data collected in 2,270 U.S. schools from the NCES's national School Survey on Crime and Safety, researchers used various demographic factors to measure whether schools that typically rely on police for security tend to report offenses to the police more than those that do not. They found that schools using off-duty law enforcement officers report offenses to the police at a significantly higher rate than those not using such officers. Moreover, the minority composition of the school and the percentage of students identified as low-income were significant drivers in elevated percentage of offenses reported to the police.³

¹ Robers, S., Zhang, J., Truman, J., Snyder, T.D. (2011). *Indicators of School Crime and Safety, 2011*. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics: Washington, D.C.

² Jennings, W. G.; Khey, D. N.; Maskaly, J.; & Donner, C. (2011). *Evaluating the Relationship between Law Enforcement and School Security Measures and Violent Crime in Schools*. *Journal of Police Negotiations* 11(2): 109-124.

³ Torres, M. & Stefkovich, J. A. (2009). *Demographics and Police Involvement: Implications for Student Civil Liberties and Just Leadership*. *Education Administration Quarterly* 45(3): 450-473.

Proposals that include increased police presence in schools disproportionately affect youth of color and are now known to drive the school-to-prison pipeline, a concern recently considered by Senator Durbin in a congressional hearing on the matter that drew experts together to discuss the increasingly troubling relationship between school misbehavior and juvenile justice involvement.

While certainly tragic, incidents like the Newtown tragedy are very unusual. However, violence in communities marked by poverty, unemployment, and limited access to supportive resources is common and affects youth in profound ways. In Chicago, 319 students were shot over the course of the 2011-2012 school year and 24 of them died. In order to truly and effectively address violence we must target resources to support evidence-based strategies to these areas.

We offer the following evidence-based recommendations:

1. Pass the Youth PROMISE Act

An effective policy to reduce youth violence through strengthening communities is the Youth PROMISE Act, which aims to reduce violence in communities with a high concentration of youth at risk of school disengagement, social disconnection and delinquent behavior. The legislation calls for targeted federal investments to support empirically based prevention and intervention strategies, such as family strengthening programs, academic and school supports, positive youth development and other evidence based interventions such as those among the “Blueprints for Violence Prevention.”

2. Reauthorize the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP)

A second necessary federal action we recommend is to reauthorize the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP). Now more than five years overdue for reauthorization, proposed revisions to the law are designed to increase evidence-based screening and assessment for youth who come into contact with the courts, as well as to improve family and community supports and services for mental health and behavioral health. These and other reforms contained within the law aim to reach youth and families who are isolated and disconnected from supportive environments and critical systems of care. The JJDP ensures federal support for a comprehensive range of evidence-based state and local delinquency prevention and intervention strategies, including those aimed at preventing weapons possession and use by youth.

3. Appoint a Permanent OJJDP Administrator

Third, the federal agency for juvenile justice has been operating without a permanent administrator for more than four years. The OJJDP is the only agency within the U.S. Department of Justice without an administrator, despite many calls for one from various child-serving and advocacy communities. Now more than ever, federal leadership is required to ensure that youth are protected against unnecessary involvement in the juvenile justice system and, when they do need to enter the system, that they are given the chance to improve their lives and get back on the right track rather than have their lives forever marred by their experience.

We are encouraged that the Administration is taking this seriously and hopeful that officials will seek meaningful reforms that rely on sound research rather than panic-driven ideas. It is very unfortunate that the tragedy in Newtown allowed for this important dialogue to take place. As you consider policy proposals to address these issues, please call on us as a resource and an advocate for sensible responses to violence and the needs of at-risk youth.

Sincerely,



Marc Mauer, Executive Director