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Governor John Engler

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Thank you, Don. I appreciate the opportunity to address a group of men and women who have the most difficult job in Michigan.

You not only fight crime but also fight those who believe violent young thugs are not criminals but victims.

My friends, you stand at the critical nexus between justice and those in our society who tear viciously at the very fabric of society -- killing without remorse, taking without regret and lying without regard for anyone but themselves.

You have a tough job, but a job that you do well, given the limits of our present criminal justice system.

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My job, as Michigan's governor is to make the case to the public and to the legislature to reform that system -- reform to give prosecutors, police and judges the tools to make our state a safer place for families and especially, for children.

As prosecutors, you recognize names like Shane Carey, Tiyketis Moss, Willie DeBardelaben and Kermit Haynes -- teen killers you have prosecuted. And you know the families of their victims -- families who believe that these young and violent criminals don't deserve more of a chance than they gave their victims.

You also know that young men like them share something else in common besides their murderous records -- the lack of a father in the home, the lack of a loving, caring family and a lack of basic values.

Indeed, of all the juveniles confined for violent offenses today, fewer than 30 percent grew up with both parents.

These young men who know the mean city streets only too well reach their teen years without knowing the difference between right and wrong, without understanding the importance of hard work, without accepting responsibility for their actions and without cherishing the value of human life.

While your job is prosecuting law breakers, reaching out to at-risk kids before they break the law is the job of parents, schools, churches and indeed, the entire community.

That is why I am working so hard to focus the efforts and resources of government to empower people to solve their own problems.

It means cutting taxes and improving Michigan's business climate to make sure parents have good jobs.

It means reforming welfare, requiring work and reducing illegitimacy so that families are stronger, more responsible and have both parents in the home.

In fact, there is no better tool to stop juvenile crime than the two-parent family.

It means promoting charter schools and more competition among existing schools to improve the quality of education in Michigan -- especially in depressed inner cities.

It means getting rid of the guns and knives in our schools by throwing out the punks who bring them.

And it means tapping the good will and good works of neighborhood churches, synagogues and mosques to rebuild communities street by street and house by house.

These efforts, along with many others, will all help protect Michigan's at-risk children from becoming a risk to other children and from becoming victims of violence.

We must be clear, however, that the label at-risk is not a license to act at will.

Whether a family is poor, middle class, or well off, it is faced with a set of choices and bad choices mean bad outcomes. It's that simple.

For those who accept no responsibility and know no rules, and for those who think their children can do no wrong, we must be prepared. We must be prepared to protect the public from predatory punks.

My friends, our system of juvenile justice is broken, and it's time we joined forces to fix it.

It's time we made responsibility, deterrence, accountability and punishment basic components of Michigan's juvenile justice system.

For example, what many of these punks need is not a social worker but a prison cell.

As Wayne County assistant prosecutor Andrea Solak said recently:

And the juvenile arrest rate for serious, violent crimes has jumped by more than one-third.

"These kids snatch a purse and nothing happens to them. Then they rob a gas station. Then they break into a house. Then they kill someone, and no one has held them accountable for their actions."

She's exactly right and that's exactly what's wrong with the current system. And that lack of accountability has spawned a rising level of violent juvenile crime that threatens to spiral out of control.

While serious, violent crimes committed by adults continue to fall, juvenile violence has exploded.

For example, over the last decade, the murder rate for juveniles has soared by more than 150 percent.

And the juvenile arrest rate for serious, violent crimes has jumped by more than one-third.

What is horrifying is that we have not seen the worst of it. In a cover story called the "Crisis of Public Order" for the Atlantic Monthly, Adam Walinsky details a frightening scenario. He writes:

"We have fled our cities. We have permitted the spread of wastelands ruled by merciless killers.

We have abandoned millions of our fellow citizens to every kind of danger and degraded assault.

And now a demographic surge is about to make everything worse."

That's why I have repeatedly called for significant

As prosecutors, you have experienced first hand the explosion of juvenile violence. And you know only too well what happens to violent teen criminals after they are arrested and convicted -- not much.

Here in Michigan, the shocking fact is that the average teen murderer in the juvenile system is incarcerated for only three years. They are literally getting away with murder.

Why is this so important? In Wayne County nearly 90 percent of the most dangerous and violent young offenders are sentenced as juveniles -- not as adults.

The simple fact is this: The juvenile justice reforms of 1988 have not worked as intended. By any objective measure, they have simply not done the job.

That's why I have repeatedly called for significant changes since becoming governor.

And today, I come before you -- Michigan's prosecutors -- to call for reform again. Our state's law abiding families cannot wait any longer.

Today, I propose a seven-part plan to reform Michigan's juvenile justice system.

You have been provided with a detailed description of this plan, and this morning, I would like to quickly review the highlights.

The foundation of this plan is the basic assumption that a violent criminal is a violent criminal no matter their age.

As Kalamazoo County Prosecutor Jim Gregart has said:

"When someone's pointing a gun at you, it little matters whether the trigger finger belongs to a juvenile or an adult. They can kill you."

In my book, that teenage trigger finger and the teenage offender attached to it are just as guilty and must be held just as responsible as an adult offender.

As former Wayne County assistant prosecutor Mike Reynolds said recently,

"When you're to the point that you're doing an armed robbery on somebody or first degree rape, I say that if you're old enough to do the crime, you're old enough to do the time."

Therefore, the first point of my plan is simply that: Adult crime, adult time. Juveniles who are automatically waived into the adult system should face mandatory sentencing as an adult.

Prosecutors -- our work is cut out for us. Passing this legislation will not be easy. I have proposed this measure repeatedly since taking office back in 1991.

I need you to come to Lansing to testify and to bring victims and their families to tell their sad stories.

I commend the members of this organization, Senator Bill Van Regenmorter and Representative Bev Hammerstron and the House Task Force on Youth Violence for their leadership on this issue. We must work together with them to make "adult crime/adult time" and this entire reform package a reality.

Second, we must streamline the juvenile waiver process to adult court for dangerous and violent offenders.

The current process is confusing and redundant and does not reflect adequate concern for the protection of the public and the seriousness of the offense.

These reforms include lowering the age for automatic waivers from 15 to 14 and expanding the list of automatically waivable offenses.

With regard to capital offenses, the sentencing judge should have the option of letting the offender become eligible for parole after 25 years.

For these 15-year-old convicts, life will truly begin at 40 -- and that's no joke.

Third, I propose a dramatic expansion of sentencing options for judges.

These changes respond to the question: When is a crime not a crime? When you're under 17,

Implementation of this proposal includes opening a youth prison with a minimum of 400 beds to be operated by the Department of Corrections.

With this new alternative, judges will not be forced to choose between adult prison and sentencing to the Department of Social Services.

Other options will include boot camps, home detention with electronic surveillance, and restoring the authority to detain status offenders like truants, curfew violators and runaways.

Fourth, we must enact a series of reforms to create a seamless web between the juvenile and adult systems.

These changes respond to the question: When is a crime not a crime? When you're under 17.

This outrage must stop. A juvenile's bad record must follow him into adulthood. That means no more clean slates and no more violent offenders falling through the cracks to commit more crimes.

I also think that juvenile offenders should be treated like adults when it comes to possessing firearms. To put it simply: No guns for teen felons.

Fifth, we must remove the procedural obstacles that often block effective investigation of juvenile crime.

You work with police and sheriffs every day. You have to prosecute juvenile cases. You know how hard it is to investigate juvenile crimes, collect evidence and obtain statements from young offenders.

Ironically, the current system treats law enforcement like the bad guy. It's time to turn the tables and give law enforcement the tools they need to arrest, prosecute and lock up violent juvenile offenders.

That means allowing police to question and fingerprint juvenile suspects at the police station, DNA profiling of teen rapists, extending fingerprinting requirements for all "reportable offenses" and ending the automatic expungement of fingerprint records where there has been no formal adjudication.

In addition, probate judges ought to be able sign search warrants, reciprocal discovery ought to be required in juvenile court and the authority to hold juvenile line-up ought to be written into law.

Sixth, our public schools must be safe havens.

I am pleased to report that legislation enacted last year to throw out punks who bring guns to school is working. Like test scores or dropout rates, it's time for our

Both the Detroit News and the Lansing State Journal have reported recently that this "bring a gun, you're done" policy is making schools safer. In an

To our critics, I simply say this -- getting tough gets results. City of parents.

To build on this success, we will create and implement a violence-free school zone model certification program. And I encourage you to work with local schools to develop local plans that include the automatic reporting of all incidents of school violence and tough no-trespassing rules.

We will not tolerate violence, but if it does happen, we cannot let it be swept under the rug at our local schools.

Just like test scores or dropout rates, it's time for our schools to improve their scores when it comes to stopping violence.

And seventh, the final part of my plan, an important set of reforms to enhance the responsibility of parents.

I've said it before and I'll say it again: Government cannot and should not be a parent.

Parents must take control of their children. It is often said that a parent is a child's first teacher. The lessons parents teach are critical -- tell the truth, obey the law, follow the rules, go to school.

To reinforce parental responsibility, I propose the following sanctions: creating a civil infraction for the parents of curfew violators, establishing specific contempt proceeding against parents who do not accompany their children to court and allowing the juvenile court to require parents of juvenile offenders to participate in the probation plan for their child.

I also call on you -- Michigan's county prosecutors -- and on city attorneys to lead this fight -- to keep our kids in school during the day and off the streets at night.

Early intervention is the key. With the added support created by the reforms I have outlined today, it's time to enforce truancy and curfew laws that are already on the books. Indeed, cities around the country that have done so are seeing crime rates plummet.

Clearly, the actions I have talked about can't create a family where none exists. They will, however, provide a wake-up call to a parent that serious trouble lies ahead.

If they can't, or won't respond, we must.

The consequences of irresponsibility will be significant as we stand foursquare by those who follow the rules and live by the law.

My friends, that's my plan to combat the rising tide of juvenile violence.

By focusing on responsibility, deterrence, accountability and punishment, we're sending a clear and unmistakable message to teen criminals:

You will be caught, you will be punished, swiftly and severely.

The men and women in this room must understand, however, that this plan is only part of an overall strategy to improve the quality of life for Michigan's families.

We must continue to create jobs, reform welfare and improve our schools and rebuild our cities.

We must battle violent crime on all those fronts all at the same time.

We cannot let another generation of children grow up in a world where authority is scorned, where violence is a way of life and where hope for a better future is all but lost.

Thank you very much.