

# Reno talks tough on crime in Winston-Salem

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Attorney General Janet Reno announced Tuesday that Winston-Salem is one of five cities participating nationally in the Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative, which will develop a new model for comprehensive, problem-solving approaches to reducing significant local crime problems.

Reno attended a roundtable discussion at LEAP Academy, located at Ashley Middle School, where she spoke with local partners about the work being done by the Winston-Salem initiative.

The attorney general also visited Salem Gardens, where the Weed and Seed Program is housed. Loretta Copeland Biggs, assistant U.S. attorney, coordinates the crime prevention effort which seeks to "weed out the major criminal element with aggressive law enforcement techniques and then seed the community with positive programs and other assistance so that the community is no longer so vulnerable to crime."

Students from Hall Woodward Elementary School who are involved in the Weed and Seed Program greeted Reno with a plaque and a poster for her contribution and support of the program.

"We need to approach crime in a careful and analytical way," Reno said. "We need research that will allow us to forecast problems before they become overwhelming. Police will not solve the problem of violence by themselves. Schools cannot teach by themselves. It is so exciting how people in Winston-Salem, social workers, policemen, school personnel, the faith community, Wake Forest, Winston-Salem State and others are coming together. Winston-Salem can serve as the model for the country."

"Winston-Salem is tackling one of the toughest crime problems we face in this country, the problem of juvenile violence. But to be truly effective in reducing juvenile violence, all of our experi-

ence has shown that we must follow a comprehensive approach of enforcement, intervention and prevention."

Reno said the key to success is to balance prevention with intervention in the early stages of a child's life so that in later years, children have not come to accept violence as a way of life. Reno called for prevention programs to target those ages 15-18, especially during the after-school hours. She pointed to various programs in Winston-Salem that encourage youths to trust police officers.

"We can use the example you have forged in Winston-Salem," she said. "We can impact youth violence if we form partnerships through grants and technical assistance. You have a state that cares, and I hope we can expand this partnership."

Reno said Winston-Salem is a great example of a partnership. Local partners in the two-year initiative include the Winston-Salem Police Department, Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools, Office of Juvenile Justice, Department of Community Corrections, Forsyth County Sheriff's Department, Forsyth District Attorney's Office, CenterPoint Human Services, Department of Social Services and Wake Forest University.

Currently there is no funding for the initiative as research is being done on what is needed.

"There are limited federal dollars, but a community such as this with excellent cohesive relations will get more return on the dollars when people work together," Reno said.

The Winston-Salem SACSIS is focusing on juvenile violence, with teams of law-enforcement, social service and school system practitioners joined by researchers from Wake Forest University. Through extensive analysis of the juvenile violence picture here, the teams will work with community members to design and implement specific enforcement, intervention and prevention strategies suggested by the research.

Local practitioners representing the project partners shared

their findings during the roundtable discussion. A five-member research team from Wake Forest University and a researcher from Winston-Salem State University Sylvia Oberle, began the discussion by recounting the story of David, a six-year-old who became a victim of crime while trying to protect his aunt from being raped. This began a downward spiral for David, propelling him into shoplifting, the use of handguns, robbery and drug dealing by the time he was 14. Changing the outcome for youths like David is the focus of the Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative in Winston-Salem, an intensive analysis and response to the problem of youth violence.

During the last five years, violent crime arrest rates for youths under 18 in Forsyth County have generally been higher than both state and national levels, and each year more than half of all young offenders in Forsyth County were arrested for violent crimes.

For many of these young people, the path to violent behavior began when they became victims of crime themselves, often at a very early age. In a statistical analysis of 300 juveniles under 18 with most frequent police contact, 97 percent had been victims of crime. Of those, 26 percent were victimized before the age of five. An additional 25 percent of the victimization occurred between the ages of five and seven.

Willie H. Pearson Jr., a professor of sociology at WFU, is head of the five-person research team from the university. Pearson's report dealt with their conducting of an incident report that identified focus groups and various zones of Winston-Salem. The team evaluated 154 incidents revealed the need to evaluate key personnel, presence of firearms and spot locations in the city.

Pearson's team noted that many of the preteens are in the early stages of offending; however, by the time they reach the ages of 16-17, their violations are more advanced. Many of the young offenders commit acts with which



Attorney General Janet Reno addresses the students from Hall Woodward Elementary School who are involved in the Weed and Seed Program.

harsher such as drug selling and drug taking.

"Many of these students have been suspended from regular and alternative schools' and are now on the streets," Pearson said.

There is a disproportionate number of minority and poor children involved in these offenses.

Of the 154 incidents studied, 61 of them involved weapons.

"The public schools zero tolerance campaign has greatly reduced the number of weapons in schools," Pearson said.

He added that, many of David, carry weapons for protection. Firearms are more accessible in certain parts of the of the city, he said.

after-school hours. Also areas near businesses that have public pay phones are often used by drug dealers for their trade.

Regarding focus groups, the research team called for cultural sensitivity training for practitioners. They seek to cure the lack of cooperation between agencies. Realizing that many of the families are intact, run by hardworking parents who often work multiple jobs, the team sees the need to provide more after-school care due to the limited time these parents have with their children. Research shows that it is after school that much of the crime is committed.

According to statistics, less than five percent of the offenders are violent, chronic violators of the law. David West of the Office of Juvenile Justice concurred with this idea stating that the Class A and B felons among youths are

very low. For this reason, Sylvia Oberle, SACSIS coordinator, stresses the "redirection of these kids" through the partnership network. Michael McCoy, assistant chief of police, discussed some of the monitoring efforts the police department uses to intervene and fill the gap between the ages of 16-17 into adulthood. The monitoring continues on into adulthood as an intervention strategy, curtailing repeat offenses.

Pearson said he was pleased to sit at the table with such a diverse group of representatives. "Typically, researchers are not seated at the table with practitioners while trends are being analyzed and strategies are being discussed and developed," he said. "This type of community-based, working partnership, is an exciting new direction for the academic community."

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