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**SPEECH BY MR WONG KAN SENG,
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ON "JUVENILE DELINQUENCY :
A CHALLENGE FOR YOUTH"
AT THE CHINESE HIGH SCHOOL DRAMA CENTRE
ON MONDAY, 8 JULY 1996 AT 8.30 AM**

Juvenile delinquency has recently been the subject of much public attention. It was raised by Members of Parliament (MPs) during the Budget Debate. The Singapore Teachers' Union published the findings of a survey on school discipline. The Courts have also announced various measures to deal with young offenders. In the wake of this heightened interest, the media highlighted several incidents involving youths involved in brawls. With such widespread interest in the subject, it is appropriate that your Seminar today should be on this issue.

Why is there renewed interest in juvenile delinquency? Has there been a dramatic deterioration in the situation? Can we solve the problem? I see the current interest as a natural development in any responsible society that is concerned with social trends in a modern and changing world. Singapore has been successful in ensuring the well-being of its people, and those in need of assistance. It is logical for us now to focus on problems such as juvenile delinquency that may potentially affect the well-being of our families and society as a whole.

Juvenile delinquency is not a new phenomenon. It has been with us all along manifesting itself in different forms in the past. Some people regard juvenile delinquency as a passing phase of the young. If this was true, I would not be so concerned. The fact is that juvenile delinquency and how families and society deal with it affects the character of our youth, our families and society.

Current Situation

Let me first give you some facts and figures on the juvenile delinquency situation in Singapore. The number of young offenders arrested has doubled from 1,205 in 1990 to 2,589 last year. The first five months of this year saw an increase in the number of offences committed by juveniles against persons of 13 per cent compared to the same period last year, from 82 cases to 93 cases. In terms of juvenile students involved in crimes, the statistics also show an increasing trend, from about 1,500 in 1993 to about 2,250 in 1995. This is significant as, in the six-year period, the number of youths and crime rates in Singapore have fallen. The 1995 Singapore Teachers' Union (STU) report highlighted the worsening problem of discipline in schools. Teachers interviewed in the STU survey have cited the most frequent 12 behaviour problems as follows - late for school, not doing work, not bringing books to class, inattention, use of foul language/swearing, rudeness to teachers, truancy, disruption of classes, stealing, minor vandalism, smoking and bullying.

Lifestyle Factor

We cannot dismiss juvenile delinquency as youthful exuberance that will subside with time. On the contrary, juvenile delinquency, if not properly handled, will undermine character-building and the well-being of the whole community.

Let us now examine some of the factors that contribute to the delinquency problem in Singapore today. Firstly, the number of married women who work has increased from 29.8 per cent in 1980 to 45.6 per cent in 1990. Working parents have less time to spend with their children. This makes it difficult for sound values to be imparted. The mere physical presence alone is not enough; there must also be "emotional presence" so that children feel a sense of family. A strong emotional attachment to their parents will make children less susceptible to negative peer influence. Secondly, our young today are more exposed to external influences. Some of them are bad influences. Singapore is an open society. It is also a major communication centre. We simply cannot be insular in our outlook. Thirdly, the young today have a far better life than those 20 or 30 years ago. Some may even say that the young today are a pampered lot. Many are spared having to do household chores and having to look after younger siblings. The absence of responsibilities, the reluctance of parents to discipline their children and an inclination towards permissive forms of raising children have also contributed in sowing the seeds of delinquency. Pampering children with expensive presents instead of spending time to guide them is not the way to bring up children. It is worse if parents still pander to their children's wishes instead of disciplining them after they have done wrong. For example, one of my officers at the Reformative Training Centre (RTC) recounted a tale of a teenager who was released from the RTC in November 1995. He was in RTC for 19 months for robbery and theft of motor vehicle. On the day of his release, his parents (both doing business) were waiting outside the gate in a big car, and had brought along designer clothes and expensive shoes for the boy. I was told that the outfitting of the teenager must have cost the parents several hundred dollars.

What youths can do to help

Now that we have an idea of the possible causes of juvenile delinquency, what should we do about it? Whose responsibility is it to do something about the problem? The answer is clear. Juvenile delinquency must be addressed as a community problem. What is required is a concerted and co-ordinated effort involving youths, parents, social service organisations, the Government and law enforcement agencies.

Youths and student leaders like yourselves can help. Student leaders should be good role models. Juvenile delinquency is also a result of negative peer influence. You can counter this with positive peer influence. You can positively influence your friends, in ways that your parents and teachers cannot. This Youth help Youth approach has found concrete expression in many forms, including the BP Mentoring Scheme involving more than 300 mentors from the tertiary institutions and Junior Colleges and a Youth Crime CD-Rom produced with inputs from Temasek Polytechnic students. Much has been done. More can be done. At a national level, the National Youth Council's (NYC) Youth Development Fund provides funds to youths who organise projects to galvanise youths on worthy causes such as helping the less fortunate and promoting a healthy lifestyle. NYC also recently launched a Youth Research Fund to encourage research on topics relevant to youths.

As youth leaders, you should level your shoulders to the effort by the Government, courts, law enforcement agencies, voluntary organisations, counsellors and others who work at preventing juvenile delinquency and rehabilitating juvenile delinquents. You can reach out to friends who are in trouble and exert positive peer influence. You speak their language. You

understand their fears, frustrations and aspirations. You will succeed in communicating with them where others will not.

Parents

Parents have a role, too. An important role, in fact. They cannot relegate the responsibility of raising their children to maids and teachers. With more dual-income families, parents have less time for their children. Parents have to make up in quality time what they lack in quantity. However, they must resist the temptation of over-indulging their children. Children, must from young, be taught the difference between a "need" and a "want". Pandering to the many "wants" of children may well be the start of the slippery slope to juvenile delinquency.

There is a tendency among working parents to be reluctant to discipline their children. There is a fear that discipline will curb their free spirit and creativity. This view is unwise and unfounded. Children must learn from young that it is not always possible to have their way. This is especially so in a compact densely-populated and fast-paced society like Singapore. Life would become intolerable if we all lived life without any restraints.

Inter-Agency Efforts

The Government, too, is concerned about juvenile delinquency and has a number of programmes to address the problem. The Inter-Ministry Committee on Dysfunctional Families, Juvenile Delinquency and Drug Abuse in its report made several recommendations relating to juvenile delinquency. These recommendations are currently being implemented and expanded on by several follow-up Committees. These include an Inter-Ministry Committee on Juvenile

Delinquency (IMJD) chaired by the Senior Parliamentary Secretary of my Ministry, the Ministry of Home Affairs. The IMJD has adopted a three-pronged approach to tackle the problem:

- (a) Firstly, prevention. Prevention is better than cure. If we can influence our youths from even thinking about committing crimes in the first place, that is a crucial first step. The IMJC is considering prevention programmes such as stepping up crime prevention education in schools, tackling school discipline, expanding the role of the Pastoral Care and Career Guidance programme, more before-and-after school care, better networking amongst youth service agencies, better training for teachers and youth workers, more parent education programmes, mentoring schemes, peer support groups and early identification of high-risk students.
- (b) Secondly, enforcement. Enforcement is needed to detect early delinquent behaviour and bring the wayward youth back to the correct path before the delinquency becomes a habit. The programmes being looked into in this prong include a more effective Police cautioning system, a central database of young offenders and better referral procedures amongst the schools, Police, youth services agencies and the Courts.
- (c) Thirdly, rehabilitation. Even after a young person has committed a crime, all is not lost. If there is a good rehabilitation programme, most young offenders will realise the folly of their ways and change for the better. Several new programmes have been introduced recently; measures such as boot camps, family conferencing and peer group advisors. Other measures being considered include

Community Service Orders, periodic and weekend detention orders and a new Boys Complex.

The Ministry of Community Development (MCD) has also set up a working group to look into the area of family life, targetting in particular, the promotion of good parenting and family life. In addition, MCD's Child Welfare Service as well as social service agencies like family service centres provide advice to parents who encounter specific problems in managing their children. MCD is also trying to expand its pool of volunteers to serve as 'big brothers' or 'big sisters' to young offenders. The Ministry of Education, among other programmes, has an Inter-Ministry Committee on Managing Discipline in Schools and Technical Institutes. The work of all these Committees and Working Groups are overseen by a Ministerial Steering Committee comprising several Ministers, chaired by the Minister for Community Development.

The courts have also introduced measures to tackle juvenile delinquency, going beyond traditional forms of punishment such as probation (institutional orders). These alternative approaches include family conferencing which is a counselling session that involves the youth, his or her family members, the victims and others like the probation officer. For juveniles who have not committed offences but are deemed to be beyond parental control, the Court conducts Family Care Conferencing involving a similar grouping of relevant people in appropriate cases. "Boot camp" is another feature being introduced for the serious juvenile offenders. In suitable cases, it will provide a residential programme designed to instill discipline and respect for authority and their parents by way of a "short, sharp, shock" treatment. Another special feature of the "boot camp" is that parents are expected to participate actively in the counselling sessions and even help in organising and supervising such activities.

The Police are also making special efforts to tackle juvenile delinquency as part of crime prevention. Their public education programmes are aimed at helping to nurture law abiding young citizens. For example, the Neighbourhood Police Posts (NPPs) are now more closely linked to schools to monitor delinquent and gang activities. The Police conduct regular talks in schools to encourage good behaviour and respect for the law.

Drugs is also another area of concern. The Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB) has a programme to educate youths on the danger of drug abuse. There is concern that young people in their quest for 'fun', will turn to drugs. The use of Ecstasy pills in discos, so that they can have energy to dance the night away, is a case in point. Both the CNB and Ministry of Education are working closely to monitor the drug abuse situation involving students as part of its preventive drug education efforts.

The Role of Student Leaders

As student leaders, you have an important and pivotal role to play in helping fellow students stay away from crime. For a start, you will need to be good role models and not commit any offences yourselves. You can help your teachers maintain discipline in school through a friendly approach.

But over and above this, you can start programmes and activities to help your fellow students, especially those from disadvantaged homes or those who may succumb to the influence of bad company. Some of the programmes you can start include:

- (a) Spreading the word on crime prevention and the consequences of committing crimes. You can work with your teachers to organise

visits to the courts, prisons or drug rehabilitation centres. You can do these through the student union or crime prevention clubs.

- (b) Form peer support or mentoring groups. The older students in a school can help younger students with schoolwork, coping with peer pressure to put on designer clothes, or even with personal or boy-girl relationship problems.
- (c) Help organise parent-teacher-student get-togethers. These will establish better channels of communication between parents, teachers and students. As students yourselves, you know the problems faced by fellow students and can help to persuade students who face problems at home to make the extra effort to get their parents to attend parenting courses organised by the school.

Conclusion

A futurist known for his books on discovering, pioneering and writing the new paradigms of success, Dr Joel Arthur Barker, has declared that "you can and should shape your own future; because if you don't, someone else surely will". The young must contribute to the building up of the resilience of our social fabric. You have heard that the family is our basic building block. Similarly without a strong and durable social fabric, we will not be able to sustain the economic growth and affluence we have enjoyed for so long.

We know that there is rapid social change all around us; it would be futile to try to stop this change. We can learn to face such change so that we will benefit from it and not be adversely affected by it. If change can be likened to the onrush of floodwaters, then our ability to cope with such change may be

compared to the building of strong embankments to channel the floodwaters to where they will best serve us and our country.

With determination, will and your involvement as student leaders, we can and we will succeed.

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