

Remarks by the President at the NAACP Conference

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The White House

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THE PRESIDENT: Hello, NAACP! (Applause.) Ah, it's good to be back. (Applause.) How you all doing today? (Applause.) You doing fine?

AUDIENCE: Yes!

THE PRESIDENT: You look fine. (Applause.) All right, everybody have a seat. I got some stuff to say. (Applause.) I've got some stuff to say.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: We love you!

THE PRESIDENT: I love you back. You know that. (Applause.)

So, see, now, whenever people have, like, little signs, you all got to write it bigger, because I'm getting old now. (Laughter.) And I like that picture of me. That's very nice. Thank you. (Applause.)

Let's get something out of the way up front. I am not singing today.

AUDIENCE: Awww --

THE PRESIDENT: Not singing. Although I will say your board sang to me as I came in for the photograph. (Laughter.) So I know there's some good voices in the auditorium.

Let me also say what everybody knows but doesn't always want to say out loud -- you all would rather have Michelle here. (Laughter.) I understand. I don't blame you. But I will do my best to fill her shoes. (Laughter.) And she sends everybody her love. And Malia and Sasha say hi, as well. (Applause.)

I want to thank your chair, Roslyn Brock. I want to thank your president, Cornell Brooks. I want to thank your Governor, Tom Wolf, who's doing outstanding work and was here. (Applause.) The Mayor of Philadelphia, Michael Nutter, who's been a great friend and ally. (Applause.) Governor Dan Malloy of Connecticut, who's here today. (Applause.) And some outstanding members of Congress who are here. I want to just say thank you to all of you for your love, for your support, but most importantly, for the work that you are doing in your communities all across the country every single day. (Applause.)

It's not always received with a lot of fanfare. Sometimes it's lonely work; sometimes it's hard work; sometimes it's frustrating work. But it's necessary work. And it builds on a tradition of this organization that reshaped the nation.

For 106 years, the NAACP has worked to close the gaps between the words of our founding that we are all created equal, endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights -- those words try to match those with the realities that we live each and every day.

In your first century, this organization stood up to lynching and Jim Crow and segregation; helped to shepherd a Civil Rights Act and a Voting Rights Act. I would not be here, and so many others would not be here, without the NAACP. (Applause.)

In your second century, we've worked together to give more of our children a shot at a quality education; to help more families rise up out of poverty; to protect future generations from environmental damage; to create fair housing; to help more workers find the purpose of a good job. And together, we've made real progress -- including a My Brother's Keeper initiative to give more young people a fair shot in life; including the passage of a law that declares health care is not a privilege for the few, but a right for all of us. (Applause.)

We made progress, but our work is not done. By just about every measure, the life chances for black and Hispanic youth still lag far behind those of their white peers. Our kids, America's children, so often are isolated, without hope, less likely to graduate from high school, less likely to earn a college degree, less likely to be employed, less likely to have health insurance, less likely to own a home.

Part of this is a legacy of hundreds of years of slavery and segregation, and structural inequalities that compounded over generations. (Applause.) It did not happen by accident. (Applause.) Partly it's a result of continuing, if sometimes more subtle, bigotry -- whether in who gets called back for a job interview, or who gets suspended from school, or what neighborhood you are able to rent an apartment in -- which, by the way, is why our recent initiative to strengthen the awareness and effectiveness of fair housing laws is so important. (Applause.) So we can't be satisfied or not satisfied until the opportunity gap is closed for everybody in America. Everybody.

But today, I want to focus on one aspect of American life that remains particularly skewed by race and by wealth, a source of inequity that has ripple effects on families and on communities and ultimately on our nation -- and that is our criminal justice system. (Applause.)

Now, this is not a new topic. I know sometimes folks discover these things like they just happened. There's a long history of inequity in the criminal justice system in America. When I was in the state legislature in Illinois, we worked to make sure that we had videotaping of interrogations because there were some problems there. We set up racial profiling laws to prevent the kind of bias in traffic stops that too many people experience. Since my first campaign, I've talked about how, in too many cases, our criminal justice system ends up being a pipeline from underfunded, inadequate schools to overcrowded jails. (Applause.)

What has changed, though, is that, in recent years the eyes of more Americans have been opened to this truth. Partly because of cameras, partly because of tragedy, partly because the statistics cannot be ignored, we can't close our eyes anymore. And the good news -- and this is truly good news -- is that good people of all political persuasions are starting to think we need to do something about this.

So let's look at the statistics. The United States is home to 5 percent of the world's population, but 25 percent of the world's prisoners. Think about that. Our incarceration rate is four times higher than China's. We keep more people behind bars than the top 35 European countries combined. And it hasn't always been the case -- this huge explosion in incarceration rates. In 1980, there were 500,000 people behind bars in America -- half a million people in 1980. I was in college in 1980. Many of you were not born in 1980 -- that's okay. (Laughter.) I remember 1980 -- 500,000. Today there are 2.2 million. It has quadrupled since 1980. Our prison population has doubled in the last two decades alone.

Now, we need to be honest. There are a lot of folks who belong in prison. (Applause.) If we're going to deal with this problem and the inequities involved then we also have to speak honestly. There are some folks who need to be in jail. They may have had terrible things happen to them in their lives. We hold out the hope for redemption, but they've done some bad things.

Murderers, predators, rapists, gang leaders, drug kingpins -- we need some of those folks behind bars. Our communities are safer, thanks to brave police officers and hardworking prosecutors who put those violent criminals in jail. (Applause.)

And the studies show that up to a certain point, tougher prosecutors and stiffer sentences for these violent offenders contributed to the decline in violent crime over the last few decades. Although the science also indicates that you get a point of diminishing returns. But it is important for us to recognize that violence in our communities is serious and that historically, in fact, the African American community oftentimes was under-policed rather than over-policed. Folks were very interested in containing the African American community so it couldn't leave segregated areas, but within those areas there wasn't enough police presence.

But here's the thing: Over the last few decades, we've also locked up more and more nonviolent drug offenders than ever before, for longer than ever before. (Applause.) And that is the real reason our prison population is so high. In far too many cases, the punishment simply does not fit the crime. (Applause.) If you're a low-level drug dealer, or you violate your parole, you owe some debt to society. You have to be held accountable and make amends. But you don't owe 20 years. You don't owe a life sentence. (Applause.) That's disproportionate to the price that should be paid.

And by the way, the taxpayers are picking up the tab for that price. (Applause.) Every year, we spend \$80 billion to keep folks incarcerated -- \$80 billion. Now, just to put that in perspective, for \$80 billion, we could have universal preschool for every 3-year-old and 4-year-old in America. (Applause.) That's what \$80 billion buys. (Applause.) For \$80 billion, we could double the salary of every high school teacher in America. (Applause.) For \$80 billion, we could finance new roads and new bridges and new airports, job training programs, research and development. (Applause.) We're about to get in a big budget debate in Washington -- what I couldn't do with \$80 billion. (Laughter.) It's a lot of money. For what we spend to keep everyone locked up for one year, we could eliminate tuition at every single one of our public colleges and universities. (Applause.)

As Republican Senator and presidential candidate Rand Paul has said -- (laughter) -- no, and to his credit, he's been consistent on this issue -- imprisoning large numbers of nonviolent drug offenders for long periods of time, "costs the taxpayers money, without making them any safer."

Roughly one-third of the Justice Department's budget now goes toward incarceration -- one-third. And there are outstanding public servants at our Justice Department, starting with our outstanding Attorney General, Loretta Lynch -- (applause) -- and we've got some great prosecutors here today -- and they do outstanding work -- so many of them. But every dollar they have to spend keeping nonviolent drug offenders in prison is a dollar they can't spend going after drug kingpins, or tracking down terrorists, or hiring more police and giving them the resources that would allow them to do a more effective job community policing.

And then, of course, there are costs that can't be measured in dollars and cents. Because the statistics on who gets incarcerated show that by a wide margin, it disproportionately impacts communities of color. African Americans and Latinos make up 30 percent of our population; they make up 60 percent of

our inmates. About one in every 35 African American men, one in every 88 Latino men is serving time right now. Among white men, that number is one in 214.

The bottom line is that in too many places, black boys and black men, Latino boys and Latino men experience being treated differently under the law. (Applause.)

And I want to be clear -- this is not just anecdote. This is not just barbershop talk. A growing body of research shows that people of color are more likely to be stopped, frisked, questioned, charged, detained. African Americans are more likely to be arrested. They are more likely to be sentenced to more time for the same crime. (Applause.) And one of the consequences of this is, around one million fathers are behind bars. Around one in nine African American kids has a parent in prison.

What is that doing to our communities? What's that doing to those children? Our nation is being robbed of men and women who could be workers and taxpayers, could be more actively involved in their children's lives, could be role models, could be community leaders, and right now they're locked up for a non-violent offense.

So our criminal justice system isn't as smart as it should be. It's not keeping us as safe as it should be. It is not as fair as it should be. Mass incarceration makes our country worse off, and we need to do something about it. (Applause.)

But here's the good news.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: All right, good news.

THE PRESIDENT: Good news. Don't get me preaching now. (Laughter.) I am feeling more hopeful today because even now, when, let's face it, it seems like Republicans and Democrats cannot agree on anything -- (laughter) -- a lot of them agree on this. In fact, today, back in Washington, Republican senators from Utah and Texas are joining Democratic senators from New Jersey and Rhode Island to talk about how Congress can pass meaningful criminal justice reform this year. (Applause.) That's good news. That is good news. Good news.

That doesn't happen very often. And it's not just senators. This is a cause that's bringing people in both houses of Congress together. It's created some unlikely bedfellows. You've got Van Jones and Newt Gingrich. (Laughter.) You've got Americans for Tax Reform and the ACLU. You've got the NAACP and the Koch brothers. (Laughter.) No, you've got to give them credit. You've got to call it like you see it. (Laughter.) There are states from Texas and South Carolina to California and Connecticut who have acted to reduce their prison populations over the last five years and seen their crime rates fall. (Applause.) That's good news.

My administration has taken steps on our own to reduce our federal prison population. So I signed a bill reducing the 100-1 sentencing disparity between crack and powder cocaine. (Applause.) I've commuted the sentences of dozens of people sentenced under old drug laws that we now recognize were unfair, and yesterday I announced that I'm commuting dozens more. (Applause.)

Under the leadership of Attorney General Eric Holder -- now continued by Loretta Lynch -- federal prosecutors got what he called "Smart on Crime," which is refocusing efforts on the worst offenders, pursuing mandatory minimum sentences 20 percent less often than they did the year before. The idea is you don't always have to charge the max. To be a good prosecutor, you need to be

proportionate. And it turns out that we're solving just as many cases and there are just as many plea bargains, and it's working. It's just that we've eliminated some of the excess.

And recently, something extraordinary happened. For the first time in 40 years, America's crime rate and incarceration rate both went down at the same time. That happened last year. (Applause.)

So there's some momentum building for reform. There's evidence mounting for why we need reform. Now I want to spend the rest of my time just laying out some basic principles, some simple ideas for what reform should look like, because we're just at the beginning of this process and we need to make sure that we stay with it. And I'm going to focus on what happens in three places -- in the community, in the courtroom, and in the cell block.

So I want to begin with the community because I believe crime is like any other epidemic -- the best time to stop it is before it even starts. (Applause.) And I'm going to go ahead and say what I've said a hundred times before or a thousand times before, and what you've heard me say before, if we make investments early in our children, we will reduce the need to incarcerate those kids. (Applause.)

So one study found that for every dollar we invest in pre-K, we save at least twice that down the road in reduced crime. Getting a teenager a job for the summer costs a fraction of what it costs to lock him up for 15 years. (Applause.) Investing in our communities makes sense. It saves taxpayer money if we are consistent about it, and if we recognize that every child deserve opportunity -- not just some, not just our own. (Applause.)

What doesn't make sense is treating entire neighborhoods as little more than danger zones where we just surround them. We ask police to go in there and do the tough job of trying to contain the hopelessness when we are not willing to make the investments to help lift those communities out of hopelessness. (Applause.) That's not just a police problem; that's a societal problem. (Applause.)

Places like West Philly, or West Baltimore, or Ferguson, Missouri -- they're part of America, too. They're not separate. (Applause.) They're part of America like anywhere else. The kids there are American kids, just like your kids and my kids. So we've got to make sure boys and girls in those communities are loved and cherished and supported and nurtured and invested in. (Applause.) And we have to have the same standards for those children as we have for our own children.

If you are a parent, you know that there are times where boys and girls are going to act out in school. And the question is, are we letting principals and parents deal with one set of kids and we call the police on another set of kids. That's not the right thing to do. (Applause.)

We've got to make sure our juvenile justice system remembers that kids are different. Don't just tag them as future criminals. Reach out to them as future citizens. (Applause.)

And even as we recognize that police officers do one of the toughest, bravest jobs around -- (applause) - and as we do everything in our power to keep those police officers safe on the job -- I've talked about this -- we have to restore trust between our police and some of the communities where they serve. (Applause.) And a good place to start is making sure communities around the country adopt the recommendations from the task force I set up -- that included law enforcement, but also included young people from New York and from Ferguson, and they were able to arrive at a consensus around things like better training, better data collection -- to make sure that policing is more effective and more accountable, but is also more unbiased. (Applause.)

So these are steps in the community that will lead to fewer folks being arrested in the first place. Now, they won't eliminate crime entirely. There's going to be crime. That's why the second place we need to change is in the courtroom. (Applause.)

For nonviolent drug crimes, we need to lower long mandatory minimum sentences -- or get rid of them entirely. (Applause.) Give judges some discretion around nonviolent crimes so that, potentially, we can steer a young person who has made a mistake in a better direction.

We should pass a sentencing reform bill through Congress this year. (Applause.) We need to ask prosecutors to use their discretion to seek the best punishment, the one that's going to be most effective, instead of just the longest punishment. We should invest in alternatives to prison, like drug courts and treatment and probation programs -- (applause) -- which ultimately can save taxpayers thousands of dollars per defendant each year.

Now, even if we're locking up fewer people, even if we are reforming sentencing guidelines, as I've said before, some criminals still deserve to go to jail. And as Republican Senator John Cornyn has reminded us, "virtually all of the people incarcerated in our prisons will eventually someday be released." And that's why the third place we need to reform is in the cell block.

So on Thursday, I will be the first sitting President to visit a federal prison. (Applause.) And I'm going to shine a spotlight on this issue, because while the people in our prisons have made some mistakes -- and sometimes big mistakes -- they are also Americans, and we have to make sure that as they do their time and pay back their debt to society that we are increasing the possibility that they can turn their lives around. (Applause.)

That doesn't mean that we will turn everybody's life around. That doesn't mean there aren't some hard cases. But it does mean that we want to be in a position in which if somebody in the midst of imprisonment recognizes the error of their ways, is in the process of reflecting about where they've been and where they should be going, we've got to make sure that they're in a position to make the turn.

And that's why we should not tolerate conditions in prison that have no place in any civilized country. (Applause.) We should not be tolerating overcrowding in prison. We should not be tolerating gang activity in prison. We should not be tolerating rape in prison. And we shouldn't be making jokes about it in our popular culture. That's no joke. These things are unacceptable. (Applause.)

What's more, I've asked my Attorney General to start a review of the overuse of solitary confinement across American prisons. (Applause.) The social science shows that an environment like that is often more likely to make inmates more alienated, more hostile, potentially more violent. Do we really think it makes sense to lock so many people alone in tiny cells for 23 hours a day, sometimes for months or even years at a time? That is not going to make us safer. That's not going to make us stronger. And if those individuals are ultimately released, how are they ever going to adapt? It's not smart.

Our prisons should be a place where we can train people for skills that can help them find a job, not train them to become more hardened criminals. (Applause.)

Look, I don't want to pretend like this is all easy. But some places are doing better than others. Montgomery County, Maryland put a job training center inside the prison walls -- (applause) --

to give folks a head start in thinking about what might you do otherwise than committing crime. That's a good idea.

Here's another good idea -- one with bipartisan support in Congress: Let's reward prisoners with reduced sentences if they complete programs that make them less likely to commit a repeat offense. (Applause.) Let's invest in innovative new approaches to link former prisoners with employers and help them stay on track. Let's follow the growing number of our states and cities and private companies who have decided to "Ban the Box" on job applications -- (applause) -- so that former prisoners who have done their time and are now trying to get straight with society have a decent shot in a job interview. (Applause.) And if folks have served their time, and they've reentered society, they should be able to vote. (Applause.)

Communities that give our young people every shot at success; courts that are tough but fair; prisons that recognize eventually the majority will be released and so seek to prepare these returning citizens to grab that second chance -- that's where we need to build.

But I want to add this. We can't ask our police, or our prosecutors, or our prison guards, or our judges to bear the entire burden of containing and controlling problems that the rest of us are not facing up to and willing to do something about. (Applause.)

So, yes, we have to stand up to those who are determined to slash investments in our communities at any cost -- cutting preschool programs, cutting job-training programs, cutting affordable housing programs, cutting community policing programs. That's shortsighted. Those investments make this country strong. (Applause.) We've got to invest in opportunity more than ever.

An African American man born roughly 25 years ago has just a one-in-two chance of being employed today. More than one in three African American children are growing up in poverty. When America's unemployment rate was 9.5 percent, when I first came into office, as it was going up, we properly recognized this is a crisis. Right now, the unemployment rate among African Americans is 9.5 percent. What should we call that? It is a crisis. And we have to be just as concerned about continuing to lift up job opportunities for these young people. (Applause.)

So today, I've been talking about the criminal justice system, but we have to recognize that it's not something we can view in isolation. Any system that allows us to turn a blind eye to hopelessness and despair, that's not a justice system, it is an injustice system. (Applause.) But that is an extension and a reflection of some broader decisions that we're making as a society. And that has to change. That has to change.

What the marchers on Washington knew, what the marchers in Selma knew, what folks like Julian Bond knew, what the marchers in this room still know, is that justice is not only the absence of oppression, it is the presence of opportunity. (Applause.)

Justice is giving every child a shot at a great education no matter what zip code they're born into. Justice is giving everyone willing to work hard the chance at a good job with good wages, no matter what their name is, what their skin color is, where they live.

Fifty years after the Voting Rights Act, justice is protecting that right for every American. (Applause.) Justice is living up to the common creed that says, I am my brother's keeper and my sister's keeper. Justice is making sure every young person knows they are special and they are important and that their lives matter -- not because they heard it in a hashtag, but because of the love

they feel every single day -- (applause) -- not just love from their parents, not just love from their neighborhood, but love from police, love from politicians. (Applause.) Love from somebody who lives on the other side of the country, but says, that young person is still important to me. (Applause.) That's what justice is. (Applause.)

And in the American tradition and in the immigrant tradition of remaking ourselves, in the Christian tradition that says none of us is without sin and all of us need redemption, justice and redemption go hand in hand. (Applause.)

Right before I came out here, I met with four former prisoners, four ex-offenders. Two of them were African American, one of them was Latino, one of them was white. All of them had amazing stories. One of them dropped out of school when he was a young kid. Now he's making film about his experience in the prison system.

One of them served 10 years in prison, then got a job at Five Guys -- which is a tasty burger -- (laughter) - - and they gave him an opportunity, and he rose up and became a general manager there, and now is doing anti-violence work here in the community. (Applause.)

One of them, the young Latino man, he came out of prison and was given an opportunity to get trained on green jobs that are helping the environment but also gave him a marketable skill. And he talked about how the way he's staying out of trouble is he just keeps on thinking about his two daughters. And I could relate to that, because you don't want to disappoint your daughters. (Applause.) You don't want to disappoint those baby girls. And so he says, I go to work and I come home, and I grab that little baby and get a kiss, and that's keeping me focused.

And then one of them, Jeff Copeland, was arrested six times before his 38th birthday. He was drinking, using drugs, racked up DUI after DUI, sentence after sentence. And he admits that the sentences he was getting for DUI weren't reflective of all the trouble he was causing, could have been worse. And Jeff spent so much time jogging in place in his cell that inmates nicknamed him "The Running Man." And he was literally going nowhere, running in place.

And then, somehow, Jeff started examining his life. And he said, "This isn't me." So he decided to hold himself accountable. He quit drinking. He went to AA. Met a recruiter from the re-entry program at the Community College of Philadelphia, enrolled in classes once he was released -- made sure to show up every day. Graduated summa cum laude -- (applause) -- with a 3.95 GPA. And this fall he'll graduate from Temple University with a major in criminal justice and a minor in social work. (Applause.) And he volunteers helping former inmates get their lives back on track.

And "it's sort of a cliché," he says, "but we can do anything." (Applause.) And just two years ago, "The Running Man" ran his first marathon -- because he's going somewhere now. (Applause.) "You never look at crossing the finishing line," he says of his journey, "you attack it by putting one mile after the other. It takes steps." It takes steps. That's true for individuals. It's true for our nation.

Sometimes I get in debates about how to think about progress or the lack of progress when it comes to issues of race and inequality in America. And there are times where people say, "Oh, the President, he's too optimistic." Or "he's not talking enough about how bad things are." Oh, let me tell you something, I see what happens. My heart breaks when I see families who are impacted. I spend time with those families and feel their grief. I see those young men on street corners and eventually in prisons, and I think to myself, they could be me; that the main difference between me and them is I had a more

forgiving environment so that when I slipped up, when I made a mistake, I had a second chance. And they've got no margin for error. (Applause.)

I know -- I know -- how hard things are for a lot of folks. But I also know that it takes steps. And if we have the courage to take that first step, then we take a second step. And if we have the courage to take the second step then suddenly we've taken 10 steps. The next thing you know, you've taken 100 steps. And that's true not just for us as individuals, but that is true for us as a nation.

We are not perfect, but we have the capacity to be more perfect. Mile after mile; step after step. And they pile up one after the other and pretty soon that finish line starts getting into sight, and we are not where we were. We're in a better place because we had the courage to move forward. (Applause.) So we cannot ignore the problems that we have, but we can't stop running the race. (Applause.) That's how you win the race. That's how you fix a broken system. That's how you change a country.

The NAACP understands that. (Applause.) Think about the race that you have run. Think about the race ahead. If we keep taking steps toward a more perfect union, and close the gaps between who we are and who we want to be, America will move forward. There's nothing we can't do.

Thank you. God bless you. God bless the United States of America. (Applause.)

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4:40 P.M. EDT