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Thank you very much, and Happy New Year.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:35 a.m. in Room 450 of the Old Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Social Security recipient Pauline Johnson Jones, who introduced the President; President Saddam Hussein of Iraq; Kathleen M. Adams, Assistant Deputy Commissioner for Systems, Social Security Administration; and Delegate Robert A. Underwood of Guam and his wife, Lorraine.

Remarks Announcing the Children Exposed to Violence Initiative

December 29, 1998

Thank you very much, Eric Holder, for your leadership and your obvious intense commitment to this issue. Thank you, Chief, for your good work. When you were describing the initiatives in New Haven involving the Yale Child Study Center, it struck a particularly responsive chord because when I met my wife, over 25 years ago at the law school, she was also working with the Yale Child Study Center. And it's a great institution.

We're delighted to be joined here by leaders of law enforcement and leaders of law enforcement organizations; Montgomery County Council member Marilyn Praisner. And I want to say a special word of welcome to Congressman Bud Cramer of Alabama who has supported the 100,000 police program. We thank you, sir, for your presence here.

This is an important time for us to be making this announcement because the holiday season is always focused on our children, and properly so. I want our children to be at the center of our attention every day, every week, all year long. Today we come here to talk about new actions to help millions of children who are exposed every year to violence either as witnesses or victims.

For many, many of them, it is very difficult to be a child because there is too much violence, too much cruelty, too much incivility. Children experience these things in our society at younger and younger ages. That is why we have worked hard—the Attorney General, the Deputy Attorney General, and others in our administration—to strengthen families, to bring safety and order to our schools, our communities, our streets.

We passed a crime bill with tougher penalties and more prevention. We've enforced zero tolerance for guns in schools expelling more than 6,000 students in 1997 who brought weapons to schools. We've expanded and want to continue to expand after-school programs to keep children off the streets during the after-school hours when juvenile crime soars. We do have—the chief mentioned the 100,000 police program, the community policing program. We've now funded about 91,000 of those 100,000 police. We're ahead of schedule and under budget, and I hope we can keep going.

With these efforts and with the efforts of countless parents and teachers, principals, judges, police officers, and others, real progress is being made, as you have heard. New crime statistics released by the Justice Department this past weekend show that overall crime has dropped to its lowest level in 25 years. Property and violent crime are down more than 20 percent since 1993, the murder rate down by nearly 30 percent. Juvenile crime rates finally have also started to fall. The juvenile murder rate has dropped 17 percent in one year, and juvenile arrest rates are now down 2 years in a row.

These are good signs. We should be pleased; we should be thankful. But we should not be complacent, for these rates are still very, very high—too high for any civilized society to tolerate. And there are still far too many children who are victims of violence; too many being abused and neglected; too many still witnessing serious violence with traumatic effects on them that, as you have already heard, will last a lifetime.

As the First Lady's Zero To Three conference last year showed, children's exposure to violence has tremendous negative consequences for them and for all the rest of us. A child who experiences serious violence is 50 percent—50 percent—more likely to be arrested as a juvenile and nearly 40 percent more likely to be arrested as an adult. If you want to keep the crime rates going down, you have to do more to break the cycle of violence to which children are exposed.

Today we launch a new Child Exposed to Violence Initiative, sponsored by the Justice Department, directed by Deputy Attorney General Holder. The aim of the initiative is to combat violence against children, to prevent children who are exposed to violence from being victimized a second time by the justice system.

As part of the initiative, I announce today four specific actions. First, I'm asking the Justice Department to send legislation to Congress to impose tougher penalties against those who expose children to violence. I believe it's time to send a message through the court that when a man assaults or kills someone in the presence of a child, he has committed not one horrendous act but two; time to ask why a bank robber who unintentionally kills an innocent bystander can be charged with felony murder, but a repeat child abuser who unintentionally kills a child cannot be.

Second, I'm directing the Justice Department to develop and distribute the critical information State and local law enforcement agencies need to do a better job of responding to the needs of children who have been victimized by a crime. Too often children are victimized anew by a criminal justice system that is designed by and for adults. With the help of the Justice Department's new training videos and in-the-field user guides, the first of which we are releasing today, criminal justice agencies all over our Nation can begin to provide children who have been exposed to violence with the healing they need and deserve.

Third, today we announce $10 million in Federal Safe Start grants to 12 cities to develop the kinds of comprehensive responses to children exposed to violence that New Haven has pioneered and that the chief so ably described just a few moments ago. The New Haven experience shows that trained law enforcement officers, paired with child psychologists, can provide the stability and comfort children need to overcome their feelings of fear and chaos that result from exposure to violence.

Fourth, I asked the Justice Department to hold a national summit on children exposed to violence next June, cohosted by the Department of Health and Human Services, local law enforcement agencies, media organizations, elected officials, the National Network of Children's Advocacy Centers, and other groups.

By working together, we have already made significant progress against crime and violence. We have made significant progress to make our children's lives safer. But if you look at the numbers of people who are still involved, the statistics are staggering and unacceptable. So I say, the fact that this progress has been made should give us courage, should give us hope, but should steel our determination to do the much, much greater work that lies ahead.

There is no excuse for us to lose any of our children. And if we keep working and we keep our children at the center of our concerns, we can make the 21st century a much, much safer, better, more wholesome place for them than the last three and a half decades of this century have been.

Thank you very much. Happy New Year.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Melvin H. Wearing, chief of police, New Haven, CT; and Marilyn Praisner, president, Montgomery County Council.

Letter to Congressional Leaders Transmitting a Report on Normal Trade Relations With Former Eastern Bloc States

December 29, 1998

Dear Mr. Speaker: (Dear Mr. President:)

On September 21, 1994, I determined and reported to the Congress that the Russian Federation was not in violation of paragraph (1), (2), or (3) of subsection 402(a) of the Trade Act of 1974, or paragraph (1), (2), or (3) of subsection 409(a) of that Act. On June 3, 1997, I determined and reported to the congress that Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine were not in violation of the same provisions, and I made an identical determination on December 5, 1997, with respect to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. These actions allowed for the continuation of most-favored-nation (MFN) status for these countries and certain other activities without the requirement of an annual waiver.