



Legislative Hearing on Flash Mob Violence Testimony

August 23, 2011

I am Shelly Yanoff, Executive Director of Public Citizens for Children and Youth, the region's major child advocacy organization. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I come here not in any way to defend bad behavior of youth any more than I want to defend bad behavior of grown ups. That is neither an intention nor a goal. There are laws on the books that deal with criminal behavior and there are additional steps being taken in response to what we have come to call flash mobs. Local governments in London and in Philadelphia and many other places are taking peace- keeping steps.

As a legislative body you ask- what more can be done? What more can a state legislative body do? We have to be very careful when we consider possible steps other than supporting local government. These events which gain notoriety are cyclical. In the early nineties, there were some particularly terrible instances of youth breaking the law and a noted social scientist wrote and lectured about the need to do something about "juvenile predators". And state after state did something – they locked up more kids – for minor crimes for longer periods of time- often with no chance for parole. After a decade of study, the scholar examined the evidence and found that he had been wrong; the places that had passed new more harsh laws with mandatory sentences were not safer and indeed they had more expensive bills for prisons and they had more unemployment. But it was too late. Particularly in a non-expanding economy, people with prison records have a difficult time finding employment. Pennsylvania and Philadelphia have recognized that keeping people in jail for non –violent minor crimes is very expensive. So while we believe it is important that we enforce the law, we don't believe the fault here lies in the absence of law but elsewhere. Stronger and longer sentences, zero tolerance measures have all been studied and found wanting.

So what can we do?

We are here in a city with a Congressional District that has more children who are hungry, who are food deprived, than 434 other Congressional Districts. We are here in a state that has cut education, cut afterschool programs, cut pre-school programs and increased prison expenditures. With unemployment high and fewer summer jobs available than last year, and colleges raising tuitions, we practice problem avoidance rather than prevention. We are here in a country that has experienced major economic problems but somehow has found a way to bail out the bank executives but not the folks whose lives were ruined. At a time when the needs for Pell Grants and community colleges and cities with positive things to offer youth are growing, we see more and more cuts coming.

It's time to change the narrative. There are so many instances of good things happening- there are youth volunteering; there are young people mentoring others, there are afterschool coaches and reading tutors. What can you do to encourage the best side of our and our children's nature? Of course, we would urge that you seriously continue to work to change the state budget. We urge that you do so. We believe that taxes are the price you pay to live in a civilized society and that everyone should pay that price.

We would additionally urge that you create a Pennsylvania Corps similar to AmeriCorps where if youth contribute two years of service they are provided tuition at community or state colleges. We ask that you look into your legislative districts and commit to supporting at least one non-profit annually to create or expand afterschool and weekend positive activities for youth.

We ask that you not only partner with us to stop the bad things from happening but also and more importantly to celebrate and nurture the good things that young adults can do.

Lots of young men and women walking down the streets of the city should make us feel pride not fear. We want to work with you to make that happen

Thank you.