

Kamala Harris

California Attorney General

Larry Cohen, UNITY co-chair and Prevention Institute executive director, interviewed Attorney General Kamala Harris for a UNITY webinar in February 2010 when Harris was District Attorney for the City and County of San Francisco. Harris discussed her “Smart on Crime” approach and how it relates to preventing violence. These excerpts are from their conversation.

...on prevention

LARRY COHEN: At Prevention Institute, we work to prevent violence before it occurs, and as San Francisco District Attorney, your job is to fight crime. What is the connection between prosecution and prevention?

KAMALA HARRIS: There is no question that when I’m presented with a file involving a crime there needs to be a prosecution. But we’re talking about a system with inefficiencies, and when we are not achieving our goals then we must think about the design a little differently. In that way, prevention is a very smart way to create public safety.

Law enforcement has a direct and profound impact on the most vulnerable among us. It has as a job responsibility to be a voice for the voiceless, and getting them a voice is a process that also gives them dignity. I formulate policy based on what I have seen in the last 20 years as a courtroom prosecutor, which is that we have revolving cycles and doors that have to be closed. Prevention has everything to do with law enforcement. The line prosecutor must respond to a particular criminal case, but there must also be the collective response to the crime problem. And that reaction is different.

...on the public health approach

LC: You once said, “The link between education and smart crime-fighting that we are talking about now it all boils down to the public health model. It tells us the best way to deal with an epidemic is prevention.” I really like that.



Kamala D. Harris was elected the Attorney General for California in November 2010. Previously, she served as the two-term District Attorney for San Francisco and was the first African American woman in California to hold the office. Harris is the author of *Smart on Crime: A Career Prosecutor’s Plan to Make Us Safer*. Harris has applied nearly 20 years of experience as a prosecutor to fight violent crime and minimize repeat offenses. At the District Attorney’s Office, her leadership prompted an increase in felony conviction rates, as well as expanded services to victims of crime and their families. Harris also served as California co-chair of Barack Obama’s presidential campaign. Born in Oakland, California, Harris is a graduate of Howard University and UC Hastings College of the Law.

Can you say a little bit more about the value you see in the public health approach?

KH: The public health model, which is proven and tested and true, tells us that when we're dealing with, for example, a health epidemic, the smartest, most efficient and effective way to address it will be to prevent the illness—the flu, H1N1—at the front end. So let's inoculate. If we're too late for that and the sniffles start, well, let's deal with the sniffles now. But if we're addressing the epidemic in the emergency room, we're too late. It's too costly and it just is not the smart way to address it.

Let's think of crime as an epidemic. [UNITY Co-Chair] Deborah Prothrow-Stith really talked a lot about this. Crime should be understood as something we can prevent if we focus on the early indicators. And it doesn't take a rocket scientist or a genius to predict who's going to end up being a victim of crime or a perpetrator of crime.

...on smart strategies

LC: You've instituted some innovative approaches as a district attorney. Let's talk about some of them. Can you say a little more about Back on Track and why that program worked?

KH: Back on Track is a re-entry unit I created that is one of the only re-entry units in the DA's office in the country. In California we release 120,000 prisoners a year, and within three years of their release 70 percent of them re-offend or recidivate. It is the highest rate in the country. It costs us \$10,000 every time I prosecute a felony. It costs us \$35,000 a year to house someone in the county jail. It costs \$51,000 a year to house someone in the state prison. My re-entry initiative Back on Track costs less than \$5,000 per participant, and we have reduced the re-offense rate for that population from 54 percent to less than 10 percent.

I started off focusing on the 18- to 24-year-old first-time, low-level, non-violent drug sales offender. In this population we have people that are as complex as you and I, and we cannot see people just through a plate glass window. We need to see them through the prism of life.

We have invested billions of dollars in colleges and universities knowing that this is a stage of life during which we mold and shape and direct our young people into becoming productive adults. I reached out to my friends in the business community, the chamber of commerce, the labor community, and our non-profit folks. We addressed the fact that most of these young people need GEDs and to be enrolled in city college. We enrolled them in the labor apprentices programs for carpenters and plumbers.

Then we addressed the fact that a lot of these first-time offenders are parents who have a natural desire to parent their children but not necessarily the skills.

“We cannot simply react to crime after it occurs as the most effective method for reducing crime. We have to not only react, but invest in preventing crime before it occurs.”

—KAMALA D. HARRIS,
CALIFORNIA ATTORNEY GENERAL

We brought in parenting support and nonprofits to address that need. A lot of them have bad credit which is a [barrier] to any one of us being able to be productive, so we helped them clear up their credit and learn how to pay their taxes. We brought in the Department of Child Support because a lot of the young men are fathers who are not living with mom and kid; they are not paying child support.

This is being smart on crime. We need to recognize that when you change the life of one person you invariably will have an impact on the community that surrounds that individual and in particular the children who will be raised by them.

LC: I want to turn now to school truancy, another very specific issue you've been involved in. Why are you concerned with this issue as the city's chief prosecutor?

KH: A few years ago, we had a rash of homicides in San Francisco. It was the most we had in about a decade and it was an issue for all of us in city leadership. I asked one of my staff members to do an assessment of homicide victims under the age of 25, and the data showed that 94 percent of them were high school dropouts. I talked with the superintendent of schools and she shared with me that 5,500 of the children in the San Francisco school system had been designated as habitually and chronically truant. And of the 5,500, 2,400 are elementary school students. That's ridiculous!

I decided I was going to start prosecuting parents for truancy, which was a little controversial. I sent a letter to every parent in the San Francisco public school system, and I outlined the very direct connection between the elementary school truant, the high school dropout, the victim of crime, and the perpetrator of crime.

We found cases like the woman who by herself was raising her three children, holding down two jobs, and homeless. She just needed some help. But by shining this light on our public safety, on the fact that her kids were not in school, we were able to address that. We got her into existing services, her children's attendance improved, and we dismissed the charges. Overall we have reduced truancy in San Francisco for K-8 students by 33 percent since we started this initiative. You'd like to think that we are being effective as a society in understanding that children are the children of the community, not just those people. But that's not always the case.

...on collaboration

LC: I want to ask you about cross-sector, interdisciplinary collaboration. You mentioned bringing in different partners; can you talk a little bit about the values and the challenges of cross-sector collaboration overall?

KH: Collaboration is imperative, and there are a number of reasons why, including diminishing resources. We need to collaborate so we can be most

BACK ON TRACK RE-ENTRY INITIATIVE

In 2006, the San Francisco District Attorney's Office pioneered a re-entry initiative called Back on Track to reduce recidivism among non-violent offenders. Back on Track combines accountability with opportunity to ensure that first-time non-violent drug offenders are held accountable and become self-sufficient. In Back on Track, offenders plead guilty and commit to strict court supervision while they complete an intensive personal responsibility program. They get trained for a job, go back to school, get current with child support, enroll in parenting classes, and become positive contributors in their communities. Less than 10 percent of Back on Track graduates have re-offended compared to a 54 percent recidivism rate statewide for the same population of offenders. Back on Track has achieved this success at a fraction of the cost of traditional corrections approaches.

efficient in the distribution of limited resources. Invariably the folks around the table are all focused on this population, but they're coming at it from different perspectives and not talking with each other, which creates at best confusion, but in the worst case, it creates redundancies and a lack of effectiveness.

Cross-sector collaboration does not happen naturally. As an elected person, I have power not only in terms of the statutory responsibility of the office I hold, but also the power as an elected and as a leader to convene. I can call people up and they all pretty much take my call. I can reach out to business leaders who are not only as focused on the success of their business, but also consider themselves to be leaders in the community. I make calls to these various folks and say, "Hey, would you come down to my office for an hour and a half meeting? Sit around my conference table. I want to talk to you about some thoughts I have and get your input." And invariably the people who are at the table have not had conversations with each other, and just the fact that you're having that meeting helps the plan you create to move forward.

LC: What advice would you give to other cities about moving forward?

KH: Collaboration is key. None of these initiatives would work or would have been possible without strong partnerships between my office and other law enforcement agencies. A collaborative approach breaks down silos. We really have a lot more work to do around understanding that the people we're dealing with—the domestic violence victim or the child assault victim—they exist in a larger context. We need to recognize the reality of their lives and approach them from that perspective if we're really going to have any impact.

LC: We all have work to do. We all are going to do it. Thank you for your role, your leadership, and your work to shift paradigms.

KH: I'd like to thank you, Larry, and the whole group, for what you're doing. UNITY is exactly what it says it is. It's about bringing folks together, and truly I think collaboration is the way we are going to confront some of these big challenges. The convening is what you're doing to bring everybody together and that's powerful. Thank you.

Urban Networks to Increase Thriving Youth (UNITY) builds support for effective, sustainable efforts to prevent violence before it occurs so that urban youth can thrive in safe environments with supportive relationships and opportunities for success. A Prevention Institute initiative, UNITY is funded by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as part of the CDC's national youth violence prevention initiative, Striving to Reduce Youth Violence Everywhere (STRIVE), and in part by The California Wellness Foundation (TCWF). Created in 1992 as an independent, private foundation, TCWF's mission is to improve the health of the people of California by making grants for health promotion, wellness, education, and disease prevention programs.

For more information on UNITY: www.preventioninstitute.org/unity

GETTING KIDS BACK IN SCHOOL

Around 5,000 San Francisco students are habitually or chronically truant each year. Shockingly, over 40 percent are in elementary school. The links between truancy and crime are clear. Kids who are repeatedly absent from school are more than four times as likely to be arrested for a crime. Two-thirds of California prison inmates are high school drop outs and so are nearly 95 percent of all homicide victims in San Francisco under the age of 25. The District Attorney's Office partnered with the San Francisco Unified School District to reduce truancy. The District Attorney's Office sends out letters to parents at the beginning of the school year, holds mediations with parents during the school year, and prosecutes when attendance doesn't improve in a specialized truancy court that combines courts monitoring with family services. Overall truancy among K-8 students has dropped by 33 percent.