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REMARKS BY: TOMMY G. THOMPSON, SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
PLACE: To the President's Summit on Missing, Exploited and Runaway Children,
Washington, D.C.
DATE: October 2, 2002

"Building Strong Children"

Good afternoon, and thanks to all of you for attending this conference.

In Washington, there are an abundance of conferences of all types. Many are very important. A few are absolutely essential. This conference is one of those few.

The very term "Missing, Exploited and Runaway Children" breaks my heart, as I know it does all of yours. That feeling of pain is underscored by the report we are issuing today, "The Child Maltreatment 2000" report. The report indicates that nearly 880,000 children were victims of what the report calls "substantiated or indicated maltreatment." That's lawyer's language for abuse.

In simpler terms, 12 children out of every 1,000 are abused in our country every year.

Of those 880,000 children, about two-thirds suffered neglect. They were ill-clothed and ill-housed. They did not receive the medical care they need. A warm meal was a luxury. A bath was a rarity.

About 20 percent were abused physically ... 10 percent were abused sexually ... and about eight percent were abused psychologically.

And then there are cases of child kidnapping and child trafficking ... and of children who run away and then become victims of the streets, lost in a never-ending night of prostitution, drug addiction and violence.

President Bush and I are utterly committed to stopping the profound and unspeakably painful violation of our nation's children. That's why the President has convened this conference, and why I'm so very pleased to be with you today.

Let me affirm that the Department of Health and Human Services is an essential part of our nationwide effort to end child abuse and exploitation. For example, our National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information offers not only hard data but also practical plans for how to prevent child abuse in neighborhoods and communities.

HHS is also home to the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control and the Resource Center on Child Custody and Child Protection. And our Children's Bureau is responsible for assisting states in the delivery of child welfare services - services designed to protect children and strengthen families.

We're distributing nearly one million copies of a publication called the "Parent's Guide to Safety" to all families in Head Start across America. It will give parents and guardians helpful information about protecting their children from abuse, neglect and exploitation.

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We are providing funding to develop a national outreach and educational campaign designed to find and reach out to victims of the international child trafficking here in our country. And through the Children's Justice Act, we've provided \$17 million in grants to states to improve the investigation, prosecution and judicial handling of child abuse and neglect, particularly child sexual abuse, in a manner that limits additional trauma to the child victims.

We're making progress. Our commitment is unwavering. But the need remains great, and we are working hard to meet that need. The reasons are simple but profound: It's the right thing to do ... and, to paraphrase the great American patriot Frederick Douglass, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken adults."

We are here because of our common commitment to build strong children. And it's to that end that I'm so very pleased to welcome the members of this distinguished panel and invite their comments.