

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Executive Office of Mayor Muriel Bowser



Joint Public Oversight Roundtable
on
Gun Violence Prevention and Reduction Initiatives in the District

Testimony of
Chris Geldart
Deputy Mayor for Public Safety & Justice

Before the
Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety
The Honorable Charles Allen, Chairperson

And

Committee on Housing & Executive Administration
The Honorable Anita Bonds, Chairperson
Council of the District of Columbia

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John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20004
9:30 am

Good morning Chairpersons Allen and Bonds, members, and staff of the Committees on the Judiciary and Public Safety and Housing and Executive Administration. I am Chris Geldart, Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice. I am joined by Chief of the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD), Robert Contee, Director of the Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement(ONSE), Delbert McFadden, and Director of the Office of Gun Violence Prevention, Linda Harllee-Harper. I am here today to provide testimony on current functioning of the public safety and justice ecosystem and the District’s strategies to address gun violence in our city.

National Trends in Gun Violence Mirror Local Trends

At both a local and national level, we are experiencing a sharp increase in homicides. Preliminary data from the FBI about crime in 2020 indicates a 25 percent increase in homicides nationwide from 2019.¹ In a survey by the Major Cities Chiefs Association, 57 of the 66 responding jurisdictions across the United States reported significant increases in homicides in 2020 as compared with 2019, a trend which continues in 2021. While it is too early to definitively state the root causes of the nationwide uptick, experts point to the Covid-19 pandemic’s disruptions and added stress to everyday life, and an overall increase in the number of guns purchased, as contributing factors.

While the District is often perceived through a national lens, it is important to view what is happening in our city through a local lens. We often hear the term “surge” attributed to the violence, but the reality is more complicated. All gun violence is unacceptable. Compared to the same time last year, the District has witnessed an overall reduction in violent crime with fewer gunshot wound victims, but their injuries have proven more fatal. However, despite these reductions we know there are blocks of our city in which residents face an unacceptable level of sustained gun violence. For context for today’s discussion, here is a snapshot of where we are with gun violence today compared to previous years.

¹ The final analysis will be released in September 2021. The F.B.I. did not receive data from several cities with known big increases in murder like New York, Chicago, and New Orleans, but cities of all sizes reported increases of greater than 20 percent.



- As of July 25, 2021, there were a total of 361 incidents with gunshot wound victims. This is up from 297 at this time in 2019, but down from 376 in 2020.
- As of July 25, 2021, MPD has recovered 1,191 guns which are just slightly down from 1,211 in 2020.
- In July 2020, there were 29 homicides; as of July 25, 2021, there were 19 homicides.
- Year-to-date, in 2021, we've had 112 homicides, up from 108 at this time in 2020.

Again, we are not satisfied with these numbers; even one homicide or violent crime in our city is too many. We will address direct our specific Executive Branch efforts to address gun violence, but we cannot speak about gun violence prevention and reduction without discussing the entire public safety and justice ecosystem. Every part is critical to improving public safety. A critical part of that ecosystem is judicial processing of cases, and currently there are significant challenges.

Impact of the Diminished Functioning of the Public Safety and Justice Ecosystem

Currently, several of our federal partners in the public safety and justice ecosystem are not operating at full capacity creating a significant lag in case processing. While this has a number of impacts, the two most notable are:

- (1) An exponentially increasing backlog of pending criminal cases; and
- (2) An increasing length of stay for both defendants awaiting trial in the community under the supervision of Pretrial Services (PSA) and those detained at the Department of Corrections (DOC).

The significant reduction in case processing has resulted in a near doubling of the backlog of pending criminal cases. In January 2020, there were 5,707 criminal cases pending in DC Superior Court. As of June 2021, there are 10,199 criminal cases pending. It is our understanding



that to address this backlog, the DC Superior Court is currently prioritizing scheduling trials for Felony-1 cases, the most serious felonies, of which there were 495 cases pending at the end of 2020. However, it is unclear, based upon current diminished operations, if or when all other types of criminal cases will be heard. The full functioning of all parts of our system is critical to ensuring that there is accountability for wrongdoers and to victims. Failure to move cases forward is justice delayed for victims, defendants, and all District of Columbia residents.

Additionally, the length of stay for defendants under PSA supervision is 134% longer and supervision caseloads are nearly double pre-COVID levels. And for individuals who are both in the community and those who are already detained, there is a 102% increase in cases where people have been arrested and are still awaiting formal charges through the indictment process. Finally, the average length of stay for defendants in DOC custody has increased from 178 days in 2019 to 260 days in 2021.

We recognize the critical role that all partners in our public safety and justice ecosystem play and will continue to work with our federal partners to give them the support they need to resume full operations as soon as possible, including continuing to offer pop-up vaccination clinics, rapid testing, and full access to our public health officials at the DC Health for consultation and advice.

District Efforts at Curbing Gun Violence

I will now discuss our comprehensive efforts across the Executive Branch to reduce and prevent gun violence. We recognize that it takes a whole of government approach and a partnership between law enforcement, service-delivery agencies, justice partners, and our communities and residents to have a significant impact on reducing violence.

Office of Neighborhood and Safety Engagement (ONSE)

We know that gun violence prevention is as important as intervention. Our ONSE Violence Intervention Initiative (VII) works to stop gun violence before it occurs. The VII seeks to reduce violence in twenty-two priority communities across Wards 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 by establishing a



strong presence in communities with high levels of violence and by partnering with residents, other District agencies, and community-based organizations to reduce violence by building relationships with individuals and families most at risk of being directly affected by violence. Over the last year, ONSE has worked to:

- **Stabilize communities immediately following a shooting to prevent retaliation and begin healing:** In 2021, ONSE and its community-based partners have triaged 68 incidents. Triaging involves connecting with tiered clients to determine involvement and evaluate their safety, addressing rumors related to the incident that could lead to retaliation, measuring the “community climate” to determine likelihood of retaliation, scanning social media to look for problematic responses that could fuel tension, identifying appropriate healing activities for the communities involved, and developing a plan of action for tiered clients or other individuals in harm’s way.
- **Negotiating ceasefires and mediations:** Year-to-date, ONSE has brokered four ceasefires and two mediations. In 2020, ONSE helped broker nine ceasefires and one mediation. Director McFadden can speak more about the active mediation ONSE has worked incredibly hard to broker and bring peace to two communities that have been feuding for close to 20 years.
- **Build relationships with individuals at risk of being involved in gun violence:** Violence Interrupters are responsible for maintaining regular contact with individuals on their caseloads. In 2021, ONSE contractors have had close to 5,700 touches with tiered clients. Of those, 3,700 touches have been in-person. 38 tiered individuals and their collateral sources accounted for those contacts. We know that the lack of in-person service delivery last year had a significant impact on crime and we believe that in-person contact is a vital component to gun violence prevention.
- **Create better outcomes for individuals at risk of being involved in gun violence to break the cycle of violence:** ONSE, through their violence intervention community-based partners, are intensely focused on addressing tiered clients’ most urgent needs and



personal goals, such as preparing individuals for employment, getting an ID, signing up for services and benefits, and peacemaking.

Building Blocks DC

The Building Blocks DC (BBDC) Initiative takes a whole government, public health approach to gun violence prevention. Since its inception in February 2021, BBDC has engaged person and/or place-based services in a total of 41 blocks, in 15 unique communities. BBDC staff have been also completed Neighborhood Action Planning Meetings within neighborhoods in Historic Anacostia, Kenilworth, Paradise, and Mayfair. Director Harper is here to take questions and discuss further some of the service delivery from BBDC.

In addition to the work of ONSE and BBDC, the Executive has made a number of investments across the whole of government aimed at gun violence prevention and reduction. These include:

- Funding for a mobile crisis outreach team at Department of Behavioral Health.
- Expansion of the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services' Credible Messenger Initiative.
- Funding for wraparound services for victims of violence through Office of Victim Services and Justice Grant's hospital-based intervention programs.
- Funding for trauma and violence prevention research and training by the Howard Center for Excellence with a focus on the causes, consequences, and prevention of violence with a focus on urban violence in African American community.

Fiscal Year 2022 Investments Towards Violence Prevention

In Fiscal Year 2022 (FY22) we've proposed a substantial budgetary investment to build upon, accelerate, and expand our efforts. Some examples of these investments include:

- Violence Prevention:
 - \$7.8M for 52 additional violence interrupters and \$400K for six additional Credible Messengers



- \$4.5M for DC Pathways to serve an additional 100 individuals at risk of gun violence and \$4.6M to provide more wrap-around support.
- Person-Based Services:
 - \$1.9M to expand trauma-informed mental health services
 - \$4.4M for temporary safe housing and relocation assistance
 - \$11.4M to support returning citizens with financial assistance through community-based organizations, financial coaching, and peer navigators as they transition back into the community
- Place-Based Services:
 - \$1.5M for community investment grants to carry out neighborhood action plans in focus neighborhoods
 - \$1.9M expanded recreation opportunities, with extended hours for rec centers.
- Dedicated Employee Opportunities:
 - \$5.6M to create 110 dedicated employment opportunities through the Department of Public Works for individuals at risk of gun violence
 - \$4.5M for Project Empowerment to serve 150 Building Blocks participants, extend subsidized employment from six to 12 months, and provide more wrap-around support.
- Building sustainability at MPD
 - \$6.8M for DBH, DDOT, and DPW to respond to non-emergency 911 calls for mental health distress, minor traffic crashes, and parking complaints
 - \$3.4M to add 100 new slots for MPD's cadet program (totaling 200 slots)
- Youth Safety
 - \$13.8M for youth safety initiatives, including an expansion of Safe Passage, out-of-school activities for youth, and enhanced training for school resource officers



We believe these investments will allow us to fund long term strategies that have proven effective in reducing gun violence.

We also recognize the critical role that law enforcement plays in gun violence prevention and reduction. Chief Contee will speak about specific ways that MPD has been working to reduce violence in our city.

Council Support of the Executive's Efforts to Strengthen our Metropolitan Police Department

It takes every branch of government to create safe streets and neighborhoods for District residents across all eight wards. That includes the legislative branch.

Without question, MPD is a vital part of our efforts to reduce all crime in our city. We hear from District residents who ask for MPD to be present in their neighborhoods. We need a fully staffed force to be able to meet the numerous demands that the safety and security of our city require. In order to meet those demands, Mayor Bowser has authorized the use of overtime, but this is not a long term, sustainable solution. Because of budgetary constraints in FY21, MPD was not able to maintain a pipeline of new recruits as it normally would. We have resumed recruiting and we are confident that we can improve the strength of our force with additional budgetary resources. To support the hiring of additional officers, the Mayor is sending an \$11 million supplemental budget request to the Council this week to allow for the hiring and training of 20 additional officers in FY21 and 150 additional officers in FY22. This funding will support the immediate recruitment, hiring, and training of new officers; senior police officers who are retired and well-trained specialty officers, such as detectives, who can return to the force without penalty to their retirement; and rehires.

With the collaboration of all of the partners in our public safety and justice ecosystem we believe in the ability of our city to make progress in reducing and preventing gun violence and keeping residents across all eight wards safe.

