

THE POST'S VIEW

Opinion D.C.'s crime bill could make the city more dangerous



By the [Editorial Board](#)

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Washington could become a more dangerous city if the D.C. Council votes Tuesday, as currently planned, to override Mayor Muriel E. Bowser's veto of a bill that decreases punishments for violent crimes such as carjackings, home invasion burglaries, robberies and even homicides. The far-reaching rewrite of the criminal code will further tie the hands of police and prosecutors while overwhelming courts. With the capital city awash in handguns, the measure would also scale back penalties for convicted felons illegally carrying firearms, as well as for using them to commit crimes.

The bill eliminates life sentences and gets rid of mandatory minimums for every crime but first-degree murder. The maximum penalty for someone convicted of a violent felony while using a gun to commit more violence would drop to four years from 15 years. This is not an evidence-based approach to public safety. The data is clear that firearms offenders recidivate at higher rates and more quickly than those who committed crimes without guns.

Maximum sentences are seldom pursued under the status quo, if ever. But limiting them so drastically will deprive prosecutors of needed discretion. U.S. Attorney for D.C. Matthew M. Graves has warned that language in the 450-page omnibus will make it harder to charge repeat offenders for unlawful gun possession.

Proponents of the bill say African Americans are disproportionately convicted of violent crimes and couch their arguments in terms of equity. African Americans are also disproportionately victims of these same crimes.

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Ms. Bowser (D) says she agrees with 95 percent of the bill, and there's certainly a lot to commend, such as bringing more consistency to penalties and replacing archaic language. But more improvements are needed. One of Ms. Bowser's worries is that the law will overwhelm the already overstressed Superior Court by giving defendants charged with any misdemeanor that carries jail time the right to a jury trial. It will also leave dangerous people on the streets as they await trial.

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The law wouldn't take effect until October 2025, and proponents say nearly three years is plenty of time to prepare for an influx of new cases. But the chief judges and the mayor disagree and argue that resource constraints — including judicial vacancies that need to be filled by the president and Senate — remain beyond their control.

Ms. Bowser told the Editorial Board that council members are privately expressing “second thoughts” about weakening penalties for violent crime and asking her to propose a bill that could let them clean up their work. The mayor suggested some common-sense tweaks in her veto message, such as increasing the maximum penalty for carrying a dangerous weapon from two years to four. Council member Brooke Pinto (D-Ward 2) introduced a sensible amendment that would have addressed some of the mayor's concerns, but it was voted down 10-3, before the bill passed unanimously in November. Nevertheless, Ms. Pinto plans to support the override because she says she doesn't want to “unravel years of careful and thoughtful work.” That doesn't seem like a great way to govern. Why not fix what's wrong before upending the criminal code?