

Statement to the U.S. House of Representatives' Committee on House Administration

Full Committee Hearing On: "Safety on Capitol Hill: DC Crime's Impact on Congressional Operations and Visitors."

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Considerations for those concerned about public safety in Washington, D.C., and other cities

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About the Author

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Through the Manhattan Institute, and in other outlets, Mr. Mangual has authored and coauthored numerous policy papers, as well as more than one hundred essays and columns on topics related to policing, crime, and incarceration, among others. His work has been featured in a wide array of publications, including the *Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*. He has testified on many prior occasions before committees of both houses of Congress, state legislatures, and the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

Rafael holds a B.A. from the City University of New York's Baruch College and a J.D. from DePaul University's College of Law in Chicago, IL. In 2022, he was elected a member of the Council on Criminal Justice, and also serves on the New York State Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

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Statement

Chairman Steil, Ranking Member Morelle, and all other members of this distinguished body, I'd like to begin by thanking you for the opportunity to offer remarks on an important topic.

To put it bluntly, our nation's capital is very much in the midst of a crime and disorder crisis. In 2023, a year in which the latest FBI estimates suggest the nation saw homicides decline 13% and violent crime decline nearly 6%¹, Washington D.C. saw homicides spike 35% and violent crime increase 39%.² For historical context, D.C.'s 2023 homicide total was the highest it's been in 26 years.³ Robberies and car thefts in the District were up a whopping 67% and 82%, respectively in 2023,⁴ while carjackings nearly doubled, even after half a decade of year-over-year increases.⁵

These numbers are even more concerning than they might seem at first glance, because robberies, carjackings, and assaults are occurring at such high numbers despite the fact that D.C. has, like other cities⁶, seen a marked shift in what criminologists call "Routine Activities."⁷ In short, foot traffic, in-office work, and public transit ridership in D.C. are all down significantly, which has reduced the number of opportunities for offenses to take place (because there are fewer targets in public spaces). In other words, what the official crime statistics don't capture is the increase in the rate at which opportunities for crime are actually converted into victimizations.

According to an analysis of cell phone data done by the University of Toronto, foot traffic in downtown Washington D.C. as of last spring was just 70% of what it was pre-pandemic.⁸ Data published by the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority shows that on weekdays, rail ridership in November of 2023 was just 55% of what it was in November of 2019.⁹ And just last week, the *Washington Post* reported that "Office attendance is at 48 percent of pre-pandemic levels, as a preponderance of federal workers still work from home," and "More than 20 percent of downtown storefronts and offices are vacant..."¹⁰ All of this means that the crime increases seen in the District reflect an *even larger* increase in the risk of victimization. This phenomenon was recently illustrated by research published last fall in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, which found that activity-adjusted crime rates (i.e., crime rates that accounted for the amount of time potential victims spent outside) showed that, in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago "People in public spaces were 15 to 30% more likely to be robbed or

¹ <https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/quarterly>

² <https://mpdc.dc.gov/page/district-crime-data-glance>

³ <https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/passionate-about-reducing-crime-dc-police-chief-speaks-on-crime-drop-amid-officer-shortage/3570469/#:~:text=D.C.%20had%2074%20homicides%20in,the%20latest%20crime%20enforcement%20programs.>

⁴ <https://mpdc.dc.gov/page/district-crime-data-glance>

⁵ <https://www.axios.com/local/washington-dc/2024/01/04/carjacking-rings-arrests-2023#>

⁶ <https://www.vitalcitynyc.org/articles/what-crime-stats-fail-to-show>

⁷ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/routine-activity-theory>

⁸ <https://www.axios.com/local/washington-dc/2023/05/18/downtown-dc-foot-traffic-data>

⁹ <https://www.wmata.com/initiatives/ridership-portal/upload/November-2023-Ridership-Snapshot.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2024/03/15/downtown-dc-bowser-crime-offices-vacancy/>

assaulted” in 2020, even though the number of robbery and assault offenses recorded in those cities decreased.¹¹

The increase in victimization risk is, on its own, sufficient cause for urgency when it comes to combatting crime here in Washington; but it’s worth noting that the economic and broader societal impacts of rising crime and disorder are unlikely to be positive. Research establishes that violent crime can impact housing prices,¹² economic mobility,¹³ and even standardized test performance.¹⁴ Then there’s the potential effect of crime and perceptions of public safety on tourism, which should be particularly concerning for Washington, D.C.

All of this raises two questions: What might explain the recent crime spike, and what can be done about it? The answer to the first question suggests the answer to the second.

Like so many of the other American cities that have seen crime spike in recent years, D.C. has fallen short in two important ways.

First is the dwindling number of experienced police officers on the street. Last spring, the now-former D.C. Metro Police Chief Robert J. Contee, III reported to the D.C. Council that the department was down some 450 officers compared to 2020, bringing it to its lowest staffing level in half a century.¹⁵ This is likely not unrelated to the sharp decline in arrests throughout the city—a measure that has remained low after falling off a cliff midway through 2020.¹⁶ Strong causal analyses show that the addition of new officers will likely reduce homicides—particularly in the city’s most troubled enclaves,¹⁷ and D.C. knows first-hand, just how effective police surges can be on crime, as it was home to one of the most well-known studies on the effect of additional police presence on crime.¹⁸

Second is the fact that serious violent crime in Washington is driven disproportionately by chronic offenders with extensive criminal histories (suggesting that not enough has been done to incapacitate those who repeatedly offend). A 2021 report published by the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform reported that “Approximately 86 percent of homicide victims and suspects were known to the criminal justice system prior to the incident,” and that “most victims and suspects with prior criminal offenses had been arrested about 11 times for about 13 different

¹¹ <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2208598119>

¹² See, e.g., https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2012/06/violent_crime.pdf, and http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1995795.

¹³ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S009411901730058X>.

¹⁴ https://furmancenter.org/files/Working_Paper_03-13.pdf

¹⁵ <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/2582066/district-of-crime-what-happened-to-washingtons-shrinking-police-force/>

¹⁶ https://dcrimefacts.substack.com/p/bouncing-back-from-rock-bottom?utm_source=post-email-title&publication_id=1467106&post_id=141338126&utm_campaign=email-post-title&isFreemail=true&r=chcu&utm_medium=email

¹⁷ <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aeri.20200792>

¹⁸ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/426877>

offenses by the time of the homicide.”¹⁹ That measure was in line with what Chief Contee related to reporters in March of last year that homicide offenders in D.C. had 11 prior arrests,²⁰ which is in line with measures from other cities.²¹

The repeat offender problem certainly hasn’t been helped by the decline in the share of felony and misdemeanor arrests charged by the U.S. Attorney’s Office. Total cases charged by the office hit a 20-year low in 2022, though recent reporting from the *Washington Post* shows that more cases were filed by U.S. Attorney Graves in 2023. Still, there is much ground to make up on that front.

The reality is that D.C. has not been immune from the general national trend toward depolicing and decarceration. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that the city has also seen public safety deteriorate since more dramatically moving in that direction. Now is the time to pause and recalibrate. The recent passage of the new omnibus crime bill by the D.C. Council last week is a good first step. But the city is far from out of the woods, even if recent year-to-date crime numbers show declines on some crime measures. If the city is to achieve a true turnaround on the public safety front, it is going to have to address the gaps in policing and prosecution that have allowed too many chronic offenders to walk the streets of our nation’s capital with too few officers to respond to and prevent the sorts of offenses that have been plaguing D.C. residents and visitors for far too long.

Thank you, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

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https://cjcc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/cjcc/release_content/attachments/DC%20Gun%20Violence%20Problem%20Analysis%20Summary%20Report.pdf

²⁰ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/05/05/dc-crime-contee-murder-victims/>

²¹ See, e.g., <https://manhattan.institute/article/hardening-the-system-three-commonsense-measures-to-help-keep-crime-at-bay> (noting that: homicide suspects in Oakland, CA had an average of 10 prior arrests; and that shooting and homicide suspects in Chicago had an average of 12 prior arrests.)