

**Written Testimony**

**Submitted by**

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**Before the**

**United States House of Representatives  
House Committee on the Judiciary  
Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance  
Regarding**

**“Victims of Violent Crime in the District of Columbia”**

**October 12, 2023**

Chairman Biggs, ranking member Jackson Lee, and members of the Crime and Federal Government Surveillance Subcommittee, I am Thomas Abt, Founding Director of the [Center for the Study and Practice of Violence Reduction](#) (VRC), located at the University of Maryland, College Park. The VRC’s mission is simple: we seek to save lives by stopping violence, using science. We gather the most rigorous research on violence and then make it available in accessible, easy-to-use formats. We also provide practical instruction to federal, state, and especially local leaders on how to choose, apply, and align the right combination of anti-violence strategies for their jurisdiction. Everything we do at the VRC is guided by three principles: scientific rigor, real-world relevance, and political and financial independence.

I also serve as a Senior Fellow at the [Council on Criminal Justice](#) (CCJ), an nonpartisan organization that seeks to advance understanding of the criminal justice policy choices facing the nation.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today on “Victims of Violent Crime in the District of Columbia.” The issue is both personally and professionally important to me. I was exposed to violence while teaching at Roosevelt High School here in the District where one of my students was shot and killed. I fought crime in courtrooms in New York City while working as a local prosecutor. I helped start anti-violence initiatives as a senior government official at the U.S. Department of Justice and for the State of New York. Most recently, I have carefully studied the issue of violent crime both at the University of Maryland and the Harvard Kennedy School. Finally, as a District resident, I care deeply about what happens here in Washington, D.C.

Violent crime in the United States should not be a partisan issue. In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, violence surged around the nation. It rose in urban, suburban, and rural areas. It rose in red states and in blue ones. It rose in cities run by Republicans and in those led by Democrats.

Recently, rates of violent crime across the country started to decline. Again, they are decreasing in both red and blue jurisdictions alike.

According to a [recent report](#) from CCJ, homicide rates in major cities declined by nine percent in the first half of 2023 as compared to the same period in the previous year. Gun assaults fell by six percent. That said, homicides and gun assaults were still 24 and 39 percent higher than during the same period in 2019, before the pandemic began. Given the continuing urgency of violence in America, we owe it to the public to put politics aside and focus on solutions.

While violence is falling in most cities around country, that is unfortunately not the case here in the District. As of this past Tuesday, violent crime is up 40 percent, homicide has increased 38 percent, and robberies rose 70 percent as compared with the same time last year, and these figures are up 30 percent, 70 percent, and 62 percent respectively since 2019, before the pandemic began. Crime rates for these offenses are falling in the past 30 days, but no one is or should be satisfied with that.

Why is crime rising in Washington DC while falling nationally? We need to acknowledge that this is a complicated question that is hard to answer with certainty. Crime trends are notoriously hard to understand, and even harder to predict.

Nationally, our best answer is that violence surged due to the pandemic, unrest following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, and a massive surge in legal gun sales. As we get farther from those factors, violence across the country seems to be slowing.

Locally, we need to understand that Washington DC is unique. The Metropolitan Police Department is one of more than 20 law enforcement agencies operating in the jurisdiction. Prosecution is split between the United States Attorney's Office and the Office of the Attorney General; pre-trial and parole supervision is conducted by federal agencies; and correctional responsibilities are split between federal and local agencies. Judges in the District are appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate. There is no other jurisdiction in the nation that is jointly administered in this way.

If there is one thing I know after more than 25 years in the field, it is this: reducing crime and violence is a team sport. If individual players do not play well together, the team will not succeed. Collaboration is key. Collaborating is hard in any jurisdiction, but it is especially hard here in the District due to its unusual local/federal structure.

That is no excuse. The District can and should do better in communicating and collaborating across systems and agencies. The District can and should improve in its implementation and execution of anti-violence strategies. It is not easy, however, and Congress can help the city in a number of concrete ways. I will mention just a few here.

- Every criminal justice system requires the sharing of information to function. Here in the District, however, the Privacy Act of 1974 prohibits federal agencies from disclosing critical information to local agencies related to pretrial supervision, incarceration, community supervision, probation, and parole, hindering if not halting effective

collaboration. Congress could amend the Privacy Act to enable federal agencies to share identifiable information with the relevant local agencies.

- By the start of 2024, the District's crime lab will have been without accreditation for nearly three years. This is a major institutional challenge and one key explanation for relatively low charging rates. The city needs and deserves a first-rate crime lab. Congress could support accreditation by appropriating funding for the lab and for external testing in the interim.
- The District is currently struggling with numerous judicial vacancies, impairing the speedy administration of justice. Congress could pass the District of Columbia Courts Judicial Vacancy Reduction Act and apply a 60-day congressional review period to D.C. judicial nominees and remove the requirement that the Senate to hold hearings and vote on these nominations.

None of these actions are likely to garner headlines, but they would make a significant difference in terms of safety for District residents. They are all nonpartisan changes that members of both parties should be able to reach agreement on. There are many more measures like them.

More broadly, just over one year and a half ago, when national rates of violent crime were at their peak, I [urged this committee](#) to put aside political partisanship and support six billion dollars in federal funding for evidence-informed, anti-violence strategies, carried out by local community-based organizations and law enforcement agencies, among others. That funding and those strategies are still sorely needed today, in the District and around the nation.

Then, as now, we must remember that with violent crime it is about solving a deadly serious problem, not winning an abstract argument. It is about emphasizing evidence over ideology. It is about bringing people together, not pulling them apart.

Thank you.