

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY MAYOR FOR PUBLIC SAFETY AND JUSTICE**



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

Testimony of
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Committee on the Judiciary
U.S. House of Representatives

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Good morning, Chair Biggs, Ranking Member Jackson Lee, and members of the Subcommittee. I am Lindsey Appiah. I serve as the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice for the District of Columbia, a position I was nominated to by Mayor Muriel Bowser and confirmed by the Council of the District of Columbia. Serving the residents and visitors of the District in this capacity is the honor of my life.

By way of background, I have served for over 11 years in District government, all of which have been in public safety and justice, including as General Counsel and Interim Director of the DC Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services, the District's juvenile justice agency.

I want to acknowledge the witnesses who are sharing their perspectives and experiences at today's hearing, including Ms. Richards and Mr. Pemberton, who serve in agencies under my supervision. On behalf of the Mayor and the 700,000 residents of the District of Columbia, I express gratitude for their service and appreciate that they are able to be here to share information on challenges we are facing in the District. Percents and numbers provide critical context; however, we can never lose sight that each statistic on a website or read during a hearing is more than a number. The reality is there are no victimless crimes. We recognize the harm and trauma many have experienced, acknowledge our responsibility to respond soberly and urgently, and vow to work tirelessly to make our city safe, stronger, and a place of collective flourishing.

As Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice, I provide direction, guidance, support, and coordination to the District's twelve public safety agencies and the DC National Guard to develop and lead cross-cluster, interagency public safety initiatives to improve the quality of life in the

District's neighborhoods. The twelve agencies of the Public Safety and Justice cluster include: Department of Corrections, Department of Forensic Sciences, Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services, Fire and Emergency Management Services, Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency, Mayor's Office on Returning Citizens Affairs, Metropolitan Police Department, Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, Office of Human Rights, Office of Unified Communications, Office of Victims Services and Justice Grants, and Safer Stronger DC Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement.

The missions of these agencies are dynamic and complex. Each plays a critical role in the overall health and functioning of our public safety and justice ecosystem. We call our system an ecosystem because an ecosystem is a complex, interconnected system that is dependent upon each part for its health and optimal functioning. Our interdependent system is centered around prevention, intervention/enforcement, accountability, and rehabilitation.

Prevention includes those non-law enforcement programs, services and strategies aimed at decreasing the incidence of individuals committing violent crime, and in reducing the community conditions that lead to high rates of violent crime in communities in our city. It encompasses our work on providing coordinated delivery of wraparound services and connecting our residents and their communities to care. This category includes but is not limited to the work of DYRS Credible Messengers who provide transformative mentoring for at-risk youth, ONSV Violence Interrupters working to prevent crew-based gun violence, FEMS' Hands on Heart CPR Program, and OVSJG managing grants for victims ranging from domestic violence to sexual assault.

Intervention and enforcement are primarily law enforcement strategies led by MPD. MPD currently has the lowest force strength that it has had since before 1999. Mayor Bowser has long maintained that MPD needs 4,000 officers. With increases in crimes involving guns and the types of criminal activity present in our city, we need a force that is strong and agile, with adequate staffing resources. We are making investments to ensure that MPD can recruit and retain officers while also making investments in technology that will enhance our ability to efficiently and effectively solve cases and bring much needed and deserved justice for all victims in our city.

Prevention programs intend to strengthen, empower, and engage people to keep them safe and healthy BEFORE they engage in risky behavior. These efforts include approaches aimed at reducing factors associated with at-risk, problematic behaviors, and strengthening protective factors. They can be directed toward youth and young adults generally, or more specifically directed towards at-risk populations within the community. Intervention programs, on the other hand, target individuals ALREADY engaged in at-risk behavior, including gang or antisocial group membership.

Accountability includes the criminal justice system. Holding people appropriately accountable for their behavior is critical to future deterrence. Currently, the District's criminal justice system is functioning at a diminished capacity. The DC Superior Court currently has eleven judicial vacancies. While case processing is improving, it is still slower than pre-pandemic and the courts must contend with the backlog. Our role in accountability is ensuring the strength of systems that support the timely, fair, and equitable processes and outcomes for victims and perpetrators. An

accountability example includes rebuilding the Department of Forensic Sciences and its ability to process evidence.

Rehabilitation includes those strategies aimed at helping restore the individual that has committed harm, and the community that has been harmed, so that they no longer find themselves in the perpetual loop of criminal activity. This category includes providing reentry services to returning citizens through the Mayor's Office of Returning Citizens' Affairs, which provides comprehensive case management and supportive services.

Our ecosystem has many pain and pressure points. Gun violence has a devastating impact for the victims and their families, but also more broadly by eroding our sense of public safety. Reducing gun violence is one of the Bowser Administration's highest priorities. The District has invested significant resources into a multipronged public safety approach that invests in law enforcement, prevention efforts, youth programming, rehabilitation, and re-entry.

Another complexity is the uniqueness of the District's criminal justice system structure: one that is a mix of local, federal, and independent agencies, most of which are not under the authority of the Mayor. Once MPD makes arrests, most adult cases are prosecuted by the U.S. Attorney for the District (USAO), whose office is part of the United States Department of Justice. Youth offenders are prosecuted by our locally elected Attorney General. DC's Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services is a local agency responsible for detained youth, but many youth offenders and most adult offenders are supervised by federal agencies. The DC Jail is local, but a majority of our residents

who are serving time are at federal facilities across the country. Our judges are also appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate.

We need all of our colleagues in these agencies to match the commitment in the District government to not just to combat crime, but to approach our work with the belief that we can prevent the next crime, prevent someone else from becoming a victim. From Mayor Bowser to every dedicated employee in District government, we are simply committed to working with our community and government partners every day to make the city safer. Mayor Bowser is putting every necessary resource towards public safety and turning these trends around.

Mayor Bowser has also maintained that we must have a policy environment that supports appropriate accountability. In the District, we are leaders in systemic reform; this is certainly true in the criminal justice space, where we lead in pushing the bounds of what is possible to achieve equal justice for all under the law. We can and should be proud of our progress. But we must not be so proud that we are unwilling to critically evaluate our reforms and adjust when unintended consequences are leading to harmful outcomes for those we serve. While we are a city that often leads the nation in instituting forward thinking reforms, we must never lose sight that we are first and foremost a local city and that our solutions must be tailored to the specific realities that we face.

In May, Mayor Bowser sent to the Council for introduction the Safer Stronger Amendment Act of 2023, which is a set of commonsense policy proposals aimed at providing additional tools across our system to combat crime, including against some of the most vulnerable in our city, increase

systemic accountability and transparency, consider the community in critical criminal justice processes, and uplift the voices and experiences of victims across all parts of a case. Additionally, we have proposed several new offenses and penalty enhancements, including for gun offenses, strangulation, crimes against vulnerable populations, and those committed against those in safe spaces, like on transit and in our recreation facilities. There are far too many illegal guns and those willing to use them. There is an unacceptable increase in violence in safe spaces – on Metro trains and buses, our recreation centers, and during rideshares. Domestic violence has also increased significantly in the past few years since the pandemic. We must act to have tools in our system to address these realities. Recognizing this, in July, the DC Council passed the Prioritizing Public Safety Emergency Amendment Act, which incorporates several provisions from the Safer Stronger bill. We look forward to continuing to advance policy proposals that will reduce crime and make our city safer and to Congress supporting our local legislation put before it to those ends.

But we know that more must be done as even one victim is too many in our city. While we are working across District government to reverse the increases we've seen in crime, we know there is much more to be done. I echo what the Mayor testified in May- our public safety agencies, here in DC and across the country, also need the support of our Congress. Access to firearms is both a regional and federal problem. We have illegal guns flowing into DC from other states. We need federal law enforcement assistance to enforce existing firearms trafficking laws to stem the interstate flow of illegal guns and hold perpetrators accountable. We also need Congress to fully fund our federal partners in the DC criminal justice system. Right now, there are bills in the House to cut funding to agencies and our court system. Those cuts are the last thing our system – which

is already strained by vacancies and backlogs – needs right now. We ask that Congress support the District by seeing to these essential functions carried out by the federal government.

We ask Congress to help us return District residents from Bureau of Prison facilities to the DC Department of Corrections to complete the last 6 months of their sentences. Research strongly supports that successful reintegration and lack of recidivism is tied to effective transition including reestablishing connections to family and community.

Finally, we know that coordination across our system is vital to achieving positive public safety outcomes. One challenge has been information sharing. While many states experience issues with information sharing, the District's challenges are exacerbated by the local/federal nature of our system which I described earlier in my testimony. We ask Congress to carve out an exception to the Privacy Act that would allow federal criminal justice system stakeholders to share information with District partners. Currently, the prohibitions of the Privacy Act make it difficult for us to effectively implement evidence-based, targeted interventions which we know are successful in preventing violent crime.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify at today's hearing.