



THE UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF MAYORS

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Written Testimony of

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Committee on the Judiciary
U.S. House of Representatives

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Good afternoon. I'm Doug Palmer, Mayor of Trenton, New Jersey and President of The United States Conference of Mayors. I have been Mayor of Trenton since July 1990, and became President of The U.S. Conference of Mayors in December of 2006.

I want to thank my good friend Chairman Scott for calling today's hearing on issues related to crime in America's cities, as well as Ranking Member Forbes, and the entire Subcommittee.

This hearing is being held in the shadow of the April 16 tragedy at Virginia Tech University, where more than 30 people lost their lives, and many more are still suffering with injuries.

I want to express my personal sympathy for the victims, and the parents, families, teachers and friends of those killed or injured in this terrible attack. And I want to especially express my support to both Chairman Scott and Ranking Member Forbes, who both represent the Commonwealth of Virginia.

As this tragedy continues to demonstrate, gun violence and crime know no geographic boundaries. Whether at Columbine High School, or the Amish schoolhouse, or Virginia Tech University, or in cities across the nation every day, crime and violence are increasing.

How do I know this is a life and death matter?

In my own city, just over a year ago, seven-year-old Tajhanique Lee was out in the neighborhood riding her bike on a Friday evening. Unbeknownst to her, she rode right into a gang war, a reckless crossfire. And even though she was not the target, this beautiful little girl was shot through the mouth, the bullet going through both of her cheeks. Miraculously, she lived.

As our country and our people united to address the reality of terrorism after the attacks of 9/11, we must unite now to address the reality of gun violence and crime which continues to ravage our cities, suburbs and rural areas alike.

We must act now to prevent acts of violence and provide positive alternatives and help to those in need.

To be very honest, I am angry.

I am angry that after Columbine, Congress would not act to close the gun-show loophole, which allows criminals and others to buy guns without a background check.

I am angry that the assault weapon ban was allowed to expire.

I am angry that Congress has limited the ability of local law enforcement to trace illegal crime guns through the Tiahrt Amendment.

And I am angry that positive law enforcement partnership programs like COPS and the local block grant have been eviscerated.

We simply have to act now, and the nation's mayors are ready, willing, and able to stand with this Subcommittee and everyone in Congress who wants our help in moving forward a positive law enforcement and prevention agenda.

Mayors know that our first responsibility must be public safety. Only when our cities are safe can we focus on other priorities such as public education, job creation, and affordable housing. That's why one of the top priorities in our new *Mayor's 10-Point Plan on Strong Cities, Strong Families for a Strong America* is support for anti-crime programs.

In the 1990's, mayors and police chiefs put extensive effort into increasing public safety. And as we all know, there were dramatic results. Many cities saw crime rates drop to historic lows.

We recognize that there were a number of factors for this reduction in crime – including a strong economy and tougher prosecution and sentencing practices, mainly of drug related crimes.

However, additional police officers on the streets and greater support for innovative prevention programs had a major impact on crime.

And, the partnership developed between the federal government and local governments - under programs such as COPS and the Local Law Enforcement Block Grant - greatly helped cities deploy more officers and change the way policing is done in America.

I know that in Washington, there is debate as to whether these programs made an impact. In my city, and in thousands of cities across the nation, there is NO QUESTION that these programs made a significant difference.

In my city of Trenton, we are confronting a small number of heavily armed street thugs who are intent on committing violence against one another.

New Jersey, with huge public support, has some of the most stringent gun laws in the nation – but criminals circumvent those laws simply by crossing the state line – which is our city line – into Pennsylvania. There, an assault rifle can be purchased at a gun show for about a hundred dollars. Life should not be that cheap.

I have been to Harrisburg to urge legislation addressing guns and gangs and now I am here before you ... again making the case against a gun market that feeds those who are severely mentally ill ... or whose ruthless drug trade often involves the assassination of young African American or Latino men.

Rampant gun violence is more than a national tragedy. It is a disgrace.

Recently in Trenton our police arrested a murder suspect. At the time of the killing, he was out on bail. He was awaiting trial on the charge of shooting at a Trenton police officer.

Two years ago, a young man was arrested on gun charges four times in six months. Only on the fourth arrest was bail set high enough to keep him locked up.

Clearly, we have to address this “revolving door,” which is why I am urging the New Jersey General Assembly to create a special “gun court” to focus on weapons crimes and the small number of repeat offenders who are responsible for so much violence.

Like all mayors, I am responsible to the residents of my city for keeping our streets safe. Working for tougher gun laws everywhere in America is what I have to do to meet that responsibility.

In my city, as in many in the Northeast, we are the objective for an interstate gun market. Half the guns confiscated by our police come from Pennsylvania. They come up from Virginia, Georgia, and Florida.

Who in their right mind would twist this situation into a threat against the rights of hunters? We must confront the real threat – to innocent citizens. We must put some reasonable curbs on what is a scandalous supply line to chronic offenders who use guns – and to do so we need leadership and partnership, not rhetoric.

While the history of the 1990’s was one of partnership and crime reductions, what has happened in recent years has been very different.

Cities lost more than \$2 billion annually as the COPS hiring program was eliminated, and the local block grant was merged into the Byrne Justice Assistance Grant program - and then slashed. And now many cities are seeing significant crime increases.

The latest findings from the Police Executive Research Forum found that some cities are experiencing double-digit or even triple-digit percentage increases in homicides and other violence.

PERF’s 56 city survey found that over a two year period:

- Total homicides were 10.21 percent higher;
- Robberies increased 12.27 percent;
- Aggravated assaults increased 3.12 percent; and
- Aggravated assaults with a firearm increased by almost 10 percent.

Funding cuts are not the sole cause of the recent crime increases. But they DID have a major impact.

In my city, crime dropped 27 percent last year – but our focused enforcement required us to exceed our budget by \$6 million.

Cities face many problems related to crime such as:

- the growth of gangs;
- the increased availability of illegal guns - something made harder to address by bad federal policies;
- drug abuse, including new drugs such as meth; and
- the return of more than 600,000 ex-offenders annually to our cities.

There is also a growing culture of youth violence and disrespect on our streets - fueled by negative media and entertainment images and messages - that is contributing to the increase in crime.

And all of this is happening at the same time that local governments are being asked to do more to help secure our nation from terrorist attacks.

I know that the federal government has increased anti-terrorism grants, but the increased support for “homeland” security has unnecessarily come at the expense of “hometown” security.

We need to once again form a strong partnership between the federal and local governments to fight crime. And we also need to focus greater attention on successful efforts to prevent crime, and create meaningful alternatives for children and young adults.

Chairman Scott recently participated in a meeting of our Criminal and Social Justice Committee. Half-way through a discussion on crime prevention, the mayors switched to a discussion of education and after-school programs. Clearly, the issues of crime, education and opportunity cannot be separated.

In Summits we have held across the country, the Conference of Mayors has been focusing on finding innovative ways to:

- improve early childhood education;
- strengthen school learning;
- reduce school dropout rates;
- promote after-school opportunities; and
- increase college and workforce preparedness.

Law enforcement officers can be a critical resource in not only enforcing laws, but in preventing crimes and creating positive environments in schools and communities.

The Conference of Mayors has adopted policy which calls for the reauthorization of the COPS program, and we urge passage of H.R. 1700, sponsored by Representatives Weiner, Scott and Keller. As this bill moves forward in the House and the Senate, we hope that it will contain a number of elements supported by our policy including:

- Funding for the hiring or re-deployment of additional officers, with a continued emphasis on community oriented policing in and around schools;
- Significant retention funding beyond the initial three years of the program for officers where local fiscal conditions require continued support;
- Much needed flexibility to pay overtime so long as it results in an increase in the number of officers deployed in community oriented policing;
- A significant increase in the per-officer funding limitation;
- Significant support for crime-fighting technology including: improved public safety communications and crime mapping; expansion and replacement of facilities necessitated by the hiring of additional officers; and crime solving technologies including crime lab improvements and DNA backlog reductions; and

- Support for the criminal justice system including efforts to increase community prosecutions.

We also commend the new Congress for increasing funding for COPS and the JAG program – the first time in years that the programs were not cut – and urge that both programs be fully funded in Fiscal Year 2008.

And while we have not adopted official policy on the matter, I think that H.R. 933 - which would establish within the United States Marshals Service a short-term State witness protection program to provide assistance to state and local district attorneys to protect their witnesses in cases involving homicide, serious violent felonies, and serious drug offenses – could be very helpful.

All levels of government need to work closer together to find innovative ways to:

- Reduce the availability of illegal drugs;
- Increase access to drug treatment;
- Help ex-offenders successfully re-enter society;
- Keep kids out of gangs, and prosecute gang crimes with all available resources; and
- Fight the illegal gun trade and adopt common sense gun laws.

I want to end on this last point. April 16, 2007 is a national day of tragedy.

We need a common sense approach to guns in America.

We must allow the police to do their jobs and trace illegal guns by defeating the Tiahrt Amendment.

We must close the gun show loophole which allows guns to be sold without background checks.

We must prohibit the sale of military-style assault weapons and large capacity ammunition clips.

We must make sure that records are accurate and shared regarding those who should be prohibited under current law from purchasing a firearm.

The federal government must actively enforce all the current gun laws, and make sure the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) – which has been a strong partner with local governments – is provided all the resources and staff it needs to help keep America safe.

Beyond legislation, a new effort must be made against the use and trafficking of illegal weapons. Weapon buyback programs and ballistics tracking offer the hope of reducing the toll these weapons take on our citizens, our communities, our children. And in our communities, we can do more to help teachers, coaches and family members intervene where predictors for violent behaviors exist.

But comprehensive legislation at the federal level can take the lead in ensuring uniform protections and bringing safety to our communities. The dangers raised by inadequate protections in any given state threaten us all.

Our nation lost more than 30 people at Virginia Tech University, and we lose thousands more in cities across America every year to gun violence and crime.

This issue has been labeled gun control and cast in the terms of sacred, abstract constitutional arguments.

But respectfully, I am here to tell you that there is nothing abstract about innocent victims being wounded and killed.

Yes, we have a Second Amendment, but we also have a Declaration of Independence and there is something to be said for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Bi-partisan, common sense action must be possible, and we call on Congress and the President to act now.

Thank you.