

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
METROPOLITAN POLICE DEPARTMENT



**Fiscal Year 2022**  
**Performance Oversight Hearing**

Testimony of  
**Robert J. Contee, III**  
Chief of Police

Before the  
Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety  
Council of the District of Columbia  
The Honorable Brooke Pinto, Chairperson

Virtual Hearing  
February 23, 2023

Good afternoon, Chairperson Pinto, members of the Committee, and everyone watching the hearing virtually. My name is Robert Contee, and I am the Chief of Police for the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD). Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you and the public about the Department and public safety in the District of Columbia. The city has faced challenges in the past year, which I will talk about here today.

To begin with, I want to acknowledge the significant level of public debate about public safety and our laws. I will try not to opine on legislative matters for which there will likely be a dedicated hearing. But I think it is important that as the Chief of Police, I acknowledge that many people in our community do not feel safe right now, while others may imply that the concern is misplaced because violent crime is at a historic low.

To the people who are feeling unsafe, I want to say: I hear you, I understand you, and I share your concerns. To those who look at the longer-term trends, who see that violent crimes are nearly half of what they were a decade ago,<sup>1</sup> and feel encouraged, I say that I am also pleased with the significant progress in the District of Columbia, in this city that I love. I was born and raised here. I have committed my entire adult life to working with the men and women of the Metropolitan Police Department and with partners at every level to serve this city every day. And I have chosen to have a family and raise my children in this city. So I cannot help but be pleased and proud that people in the District are generally safer than they were a decade ago, or two or three decades ago. But there is still more work to be done.

As the Chief of Police, I have to ask myself: are people in the District safer than they were a year ago? And, as always, the numbers can tell different stories, depending on how you look at them. Today I want to share with the residents of the District what makes me concerned, and what gives me hope.

My top concern remains the possession and use of illegal guns. Fatal and non-fatal shootings decreased slightly – 2 percent – last year, the second year with a small decrease. A small decrease is better than none, but it is of small comfort to the families, friends, and communities, mourning a loved one, or helping a survivor who may face long-term struggles due to injuries and trauma. And critically, over the past three years, shootings have averaged 30 percent higher than in 2019, before the pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

A two percent increase in robberies last year were driven by a 14 percent increase in carjackings. In 2022, we had 485 carjackings, three times as many as 2018 and 2019, and a firearm was present in seven out of every ten carjackings. More than two-thirds of our arrests for carjacking have been juveniles.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2012, 6,963 serious violent crimes (homicide, sex abuse, robbery, and assault with a dangerous weapon) were reported to MPD. In 2022, 3,830 serious violent crimes were reported, a 45 percent reduction.

<sup>2</sup> This includes incidents in which a person was shot, not just property damage or sounds of gunshots. In 2019, 692 people were shot. That rose to 925 people in 2020, and has come down slightly each of the past two years, ending at 884 in 2022.



Every day, MPD’s officers are taking illegal guns off the streets through intelligence-led policing. We have worked to improve investigations and streamline criminal intelligence gathering to support a laser focus on the people using guns in our community. In 2022, the number of guns recovered by MPD increased 36 percent, to more than 3,100 guns, and arrests for illegal gun possession increased 34 percent, to more than 1,500.

<b>Crime</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>% Change</b>
Homicide	226	203	-10%
Sex Abuse	181	158	-13%
Assault w/ a Dangerous Weapon	1,665	1,387	-17%
Robbery	2,046	2,082	2%
<b>Violent Crime - Total</b>	<b>4,118</b>	<b>3,830</b>	<b>-7%</b>
Burglary	1,173	1,050	-10%
Motor Vehicle Theft	3,493	3,761	8%
Theft from Auto	8,688	7,825	-10%
Theft (Other)	10,905	10,832	-1%
Arson	4	4	0%
<b>Property Crime - Total</b>	<b>24,263</b>	<b>23,472</b>	<b>-3%</b>
<b>All Crime - Total</b>	<b>28,381</b>	<b>27,302</b>	<b>-4%</b>

I cannot stress enough that our laws and criminal justice system must treat gun crimes seriously. A 2019 study by the U.S. Sentencing Commission found firearms offenders generally recidivated at a higher rate, recidivated more quickly following release into the community, and continued to recidivate later in life than non-firearms offenders. More than two-thirds (68.1%) of firearms offenders were rearrested for a new crime during the eight-year follow-up period, compared to slightly less than half of non-firearms offenders (46.3%). They also found that a greater percentage of firearms offenders were rearrested for serious crimes than non-firearms offenders.<sup>3</sup>

The type of guns we are seeing is also concerning. Seventeen percent of the guns recovered were untraceable, privately made firearms, otherwise known as ghost guns. And the number of guns that were modified with Glock switches, which convert them from semi-automatic guns to fully automatic ones, nearly doubled, from 66 in 2021 to 127 this past year. What does this tell us? Criminals have guns that are more dangerous and harder to trace.

I want to acknowledge and thank Committee Chair Pinto for hearing my concerns about illegal guns and moving an amendment – that unfortunately failed – to address the sharp reduction in the penalties for these crimes in the future. In 2017, Mayor Bowser sent to the Council legislation to help the city address illegal gun trafficking, but it was not enacted.<sup>4</sup> As the Mayor announced earlier this month, she will be sending proposed legislation soon, and I hope the Council will give it serious consideration.

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Sentencing Commission (2019). *Recidivism Among Federal Firearms Offenders*. Retrieved from [https://www.ussc.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/research-and-publications/research-publications/2019/20190627\\_Recidivism\\_Firearms.pdf](https://www.ussc.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/research-and-publications/research-publications/2019/20190627_Recidivism_Firearms.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Possession of Firearm and Ammunition Penalties Amendment Act of 2017.



I am also concerned by both the victimization of youth in our city, as well as their involvement in serious crime. In 2022, there was an 81 percent increase in the number of youth shot. Sixteen young people will never return to their families, and 89 young people and families will never be the same, dealing with the long-term physical and mental effects. At the other end of the spectrum, more juveniles are being arrested for a serious offense for their first arrest. As I mentioned earlier, more than two-thirds of carjacking arrests are juveniles. Overall, arrests of juveniles increased 13 percent, driven by an 11 percent increase in robbery arrests (to 323 arrests) and a 56 percent increase in weapons charges (to 215 arrests). For 2021 homicides, 12 of the arrestees were under the age of 20 at the time of the murder. For 2022, that grew to 20 of the arrestees under the age of 20. At the same time, the number of School Resource Officers helping to support students and safe learning environments decreased from more than 100 before the pandemic to 40 now, and is required by the Council to be phased out entirely in three years.

So that is, admittedly, a lot of information on crime that is driving heightened concern among our residents. And while MPD has long tried to keep the public informed about serious crime, people are seeing more information about every crime because of social media. The additional information can be useful to prompt people to think about what they can do to increase safety for themselves, their loved ones, and their community. But it can also be very alarming for people who may not have given much thought to crime before. Regardless, it is unrealistic and unsympathetic to tell people who are concerned about these crimes and how crime might impact them, “don’t worry, because we have less serious violent crime overall than a decade ago.” I don’t support that position.

That said, there is also real reason for optimism. Although it may not feel like it, the number of serious violent crimes fell 7 percent last year, including a 10 percent drop in homicides. That was largely because we saw a dramatic reversal in the second half of the year. From January to June 2022, homicides were up 13 percent, and robberies up 29 percent, when compared to the same time period in 2021. In contrast, in the second half of the year, homicides were down 26 percent, and robberies were down 17 percent, when compared to the same period in 2021. That progress is real and important.

We know that in order to combat crime, we have to balance our resources in patrol, to deter and respond to crime, and investigations, to focus on the people committing crimes. As I mentioned earlier, our members – in both patrol and investigations – are helping to get illegal guns and the people who use them off the street. Our detectives and analysts are using all available tools, including federal partnerships, to link guns to crimes, and identify evidence to make cases. MPD continues to have much stronger closure rates for index violent crimes than comparable cities.

One effort that we believe has helped to reduce violent crime in the areas most plagued with persistent violence was the Homicide Reduction Partnership, a whole of government response to the four Police Service Areas (PSAs) that routinely have the most homicides in the city. Overall, there was an 8 percent decrease in homicides and a 13 percent decrease in serious violent crimes. But to be clear, the results were also mixed. Homicide decreased in two out of four PSAs, but increased in one. Assaults with a dangerous weapon decreased in three but increased in one; robberies decreased in two and increased in two. But only one PSA decreased in all three categories.



To put it more directly, even where we make progress, for every three steps forward, there is sometimes a step back. Some areas may see progress, and crime may pop up in other areas. There is no magic formula, no valid unifying theory of crime that if the police, the government, or the community simply did “X,” crime would decrease “Y” amount. Crime happens between strangers as well as friends or loved ones. It can happen on public streets or behind closed doors. It can be a quick reaction from a flash of anger, or it can take planning and forethought. The reasons behind it can be similar from city to city, or different. All of this is to say, there is no straightforward or easy answer to addressing crime. We all agree in the importance of the city’s efforts to address root causes through long term investments in things like education, jobs, and homes, and to deter crime through intervention efforts focused on those most likely to be involved in violence. In addition, we need to prevent offenders who are hurting people now from doing it again. It is not an “either / or” question; all three are needed.

Since there is new leadership in multiple areas in the criminal and juvenile justice system, I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate the warning I voiced last year during the performance hearing. Looking at the crime and conversations 12 months later, not only does it still ring true, but the issues seem all the more urgent. So I hope you will bear with me as read part of my statement from February 2022, in hopes that my message may resonate more now than it did then:

“Over the past decade, there has been a policy evolution to focus more on the healing of our justice-involved youth, which I commend as an approach. But given what we are seeing, we owe it to our youth and our communities to ask ourselves whether we have struck the appropriate balance between care and accountability. I believe these unique challenges also present a unique opportunity for us to go upstream and intervene, before we see escalations to homicides and shootings. I submit to you that youthful offenders, committing crimes of violence while armed, are at extreme risk for escalation and involvement in homicides and shootings. And to be clear, historically when we are talking about the people committing homicides in our city and committing most violent crime, we are normally focused on young adult men, age 18 to 24. They account for half of suspects charged with homicide in 2019 and 2020. This is consistent with prior data collected for several years. However, I am concerned if we are not successful as a city in our interventions with youthful offenders, younger people will be increasingly represented in the population of homicide suspects and victims before they reach the age of 18...

“When I say that I am concerned that there is not enough accountability, I am sounding the alarm for what I am seeing daily in reported crimes and hearing from community members. This is a challenge to our entire system and our larger community to think of additional things we could and should do differently in our respective lanes or collectively to help address the changing landscape of those involved in violent crime...

“Some of our young people are on a dangerous trajectory of being involved in violent crimes that I have not seen in many years. The disregard for consequences can be seen in the overall attitudes of many those arrested, social media postings, and of copy-cat offenders, who see other young people committing crimes with minimal repercussions... [W]e have to



ask whether they have the support necessary to ensure they don't commit more violent crimes. Do we love them enough to make hard decisions and sit them down when they demonstrate reckless, violent behavior in community? Or do we simply return them to environments that fail to provide the support they need to be successful and live beyond the age of 24?"

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While our response to crime, and particularly youth involvement in crime, may be the most important issue facing this city, I also want to highlight a few other issues. One challenge that is hindering MPD's efforts to address safety in our neighborhoods is police staffing. The Department has had fewer than 3,400 members since December<sup>5</sup> – 430 fewer officers now than we did in 2019, and likely the lowest number of officers since at least the 1970s. And while there is a long-running debate about whether the Department should have 3,800, 4,000, or even 4,200 sworn members, the reality is that unless the economy, the environment for law enforcement, or the attraction to long-term stable careers, changes dramatically, it will take more than a decade to reach 3,800 sworn officers if we are able to sustain even modest net gains in staffing each year.<sup>6</sup>

On the positive side, beginning in FY25, MPD projects the Cadet Program will begin to yield a dedicated stream of more than 50 cadet conversions to recruits per year. MPD's Cadet Program is one of Mayor Bowser's long-term investments in developing pathways to the middle class and is instrumental to recruiting more District residents into the Department. Last year, the Department also launched the high school track of the Cadet Corps, which is designed to prepare high school seniors for entrance into the full-time Cadet Corps. This program enables high school seniors to complete their senior year of school while working part-time as a Cadet. The Cadet Program creates a career path for young District residents, while bringing local leaders and particularly young women from our community into the Department.

I am asked repeatedly what fewer police officers means for our community. First, it means that it takes longer for our officers to respond to a crime – even the most serious ones. In 2022, officers managed to shave eight seconds off of the average response time to priority one calls, but that is still one minute and forty seconds longer than in 2019. Even though call volume has not rebounded to pre-Covid levels, because of the reduction in officers, the average patrol officer responded to 8 percent more calls for service (all priority levels) in 2022 than in 2019, and 23 percent more than in 2017. This is despite expanding the Telephone Reporting Unit to handle more types of police reports, and efforts from partner agencies to take on more calls for service related to parking complaints, minor crashes, and behavioral health.

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<sup>5</sup> The Department has 3,377 sworn members as of February 23, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> If MPD could hire a net gain of 42 officers per year, it would still take a decade to get back to 3,800. However, there has been an average net loss of 60 officers per year for the past decade. This was largely driven by the retirement bubble of Fiscal Years (FY) 2014-2016, which was anticipated, and the deep cut to the FY21 budget.





The lower staffing means that we have to make hard choices about if and when we can fill vacancies in other important units, such as investigations, Special Operations Division, or special liaisons. It also means that just to perform our mission critical functions, police have had to work more than 1 million overtime hours each of the past three years, compared to an average of 650,000 hours the prior eight years – a 74 percent increase.<sup>7</sup> Overworking our employees is bad for their health and increases compassion fatigue and risks around decision-making. It also can leave the city vulnerable during emergencies if we have limited capacity for surge staffing.

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Despite these challenges, I am pleased to report on several initiatives that I believe will make MPD a stronger Department and better able to meet the needs of the city. Last year, the city and the Fraternal Order of Police, which represents more than 3,000 officers, detectives, and sergeants, were able to sign a new labor agreement. This is an important recognition of the critical contributions of MPD’s rank and file to the safety and success of DC, as well as an essential tool to support retention and recruitment. I am very thankful to all of our employees – both sworn and professional – who are so dedicated to the city and our residents, and continue to give more than 100 percent effort every day, often in the face of significant challenges and stress.

Given the high workload and stress, I have made it a priority to promote a comprehensive wellness program for our employees. Since being hired in 2021, our Director of Employee Well-Being Support and her team have been working on a number of important initiatives. They are working to ensure we have healthy food options at all MPD facilities for members working around the clock. They have developed and launched an internal wellness website and monthly newsletter with content and resources on mental health and other dimensions of wellness. All of our members now have free access to Headspace, an app that provides content about supporting and promoting positive mental health. The Department has offered training on suicide prevention to all members, as well as to our newly expanded and diversified volunteer Chaplain Corps to better serve all members, regardless of faith.

The expanded Chaplain Corps aligns with my focus on supporting a diverse and equitable agency across all levels. In 2022, I hired the Department’s first Chief Equity Officer to be MPD’s equity strategist, responsible for guiding efforts and creating opportunities to define, assess, and promote diversity and inclusion initiatives within and across MPD. Our Equity Officer is assessing where we are now with regards to DEI through a series of listening sessions with all MPD employees. At the same time, she is working to build our overall capacity and response to these issues at all levels of the Department. I am excited about the positive path for an agency where all members feel included and represented.

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<sup>7</sup> MPD sworn members of the rank of captain or below worked an average of 1,127,050 hours of overtime in Fiscal Years 2020 – 2022, with the lowest total last year still surpassing 1 million hours. In comparison, the average for FY12 – FY19 was 649,517 hours, with the previous high reaching almost 765,000 hours in 2015.



Lastly, I am pleased to note that in 2022, we hired a Behavioral Health Partnerships Coordinator to strengthen MPD's programs and partnership with the Department of Behavioral Health (DBH) and other partners in order to better support people with chronic or crisis behavioral health needs and the communities in which they live. She is working closely with DBH on a variety of planning partnerships, including the 911 Diversion Program, the 988 Coalition, and the launch this year of the Sobering and Stabilization Center. The District has also been fortunate to be selected for on-going technical assistance programs to strengthen the 911 diversion efforts by both the Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab and the Council of State Governments. In addition, DBH continues to support MPD by providing either a 40-hour Crisis Intervention Officer training or a 20-hour Mental Health First Aid for First Responders course to all of our members.

Our partnership with DBH has never been stronger. This summer, Dr. Bazron and I traveled to Denver to see their efforts in this area, and team members from both of our agencies traveled to Houston and Pittsburg for other learning opportunities. These trips reinforced the reality that there is no single program to encompass the variety of needs and calls for service in any community. Nationwide, professionals in both the behavioral health and law enforcement fields agree that there are not yet best practices, but rather a variety of promising practices. We are working on plans for two pilot initiatives modeled on these promising practices.

This summer, DBH will assign five dedicated behavioral health professionals to a joint response pilot. Each two-member team will have an officer and a behavioral health professional who will ride together, responding to incidents with subjects with mental and behavioral health needs. After that, we are exploring a promising practice deployed in Harris County, Texas, which is providing officers in the field with quick access to behavioral health professionals via an online app. This video telehealth program would be able to answer questions for officers to help in decision-making about resources and next steps for members of the public facing chronic or crisis behavioral health issues. Both of these programs would help to address a gap in the level of quick support available to officers on the street and potentially better connect members of the public to resources.

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To close, despite the many challenges facing the city and our police department, I retain a measure of optimism. I am optimistic because every day I work with people who are committed to serving our residents and creating a better city for all. I can see a path forward where the city supports both long term strategies to address systemic issues that may contribute to crime, while at the same time making it clear that we will not accept or tolerate when people choose to hurt or put at grave risk members of the public. But I urge our policy makers and my partners in the criminal justice system to recognize that we must do both. The cost of not doing it is more lives lost, and incalculable trauma on our families and communities. We must work together to have a safe, compassionate, and vibrant city that respects and meets the needs of all of our residents.

