

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
**METROPOLITAN POLICE DEPARTMENT**



**Fiscal Year 2021**  
**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 Charles Allen, Chairperson

Virtual Hearing  
February 17, 2022

Good afternoon, Chairman Allen, 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 since I became the Chief on January 2, 2021. As I was sworn in, I had my mind on how – after the momentous events and challenges of 2020 – the department would navigate a return to normalcy and embark on a cycle of continued improvement with renewed energy. The public safety challenges I was anticipating are ones new and incumbent police chiefs have faced for years. However, as we now know, 2021 was anything but routine. Today, I will take this opportunity to talk about both the challenges that the city and department have faced in the past year and share some thoughts about how we all move forward to create a safer community together.

Safety and policing are about far more than just numbers, but I will summarize the customary numbers here and talk more about them throughout my testimony. Serious violent crime increased 3 percent in 2021 when compared to 2020, led by a 14 percent increase in homicides and small increases in robberies and assaults with a dangerous weapon. Serious property crime also increased 3 percent, led by increases in vehicle theft and theft from auto. Adult arrests decreased 15 percent in 2021, while juvenile arrests were down 7 percent.

And underscoring these measures of public safety are changes in MPD’s workforce itself. MPD currently has 3,532 sworn members.<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of Fiscal Year (FY) 2021, there were 3,799 sworn members, a net loss of 267 officers in just 16 months. Just eight years ago MPD had more than 4,000 officers. What does this mean for our community? It means that it takes longer for our officers to respond to a crime. Response time to priority one calls – the most serious incidents – increased by almost 90 seconds in 2021, even while the number of priority one calls fell 4 percent.<sup>2</sup> It means that there are fewer officers in patrol, and we have to make hard choices about

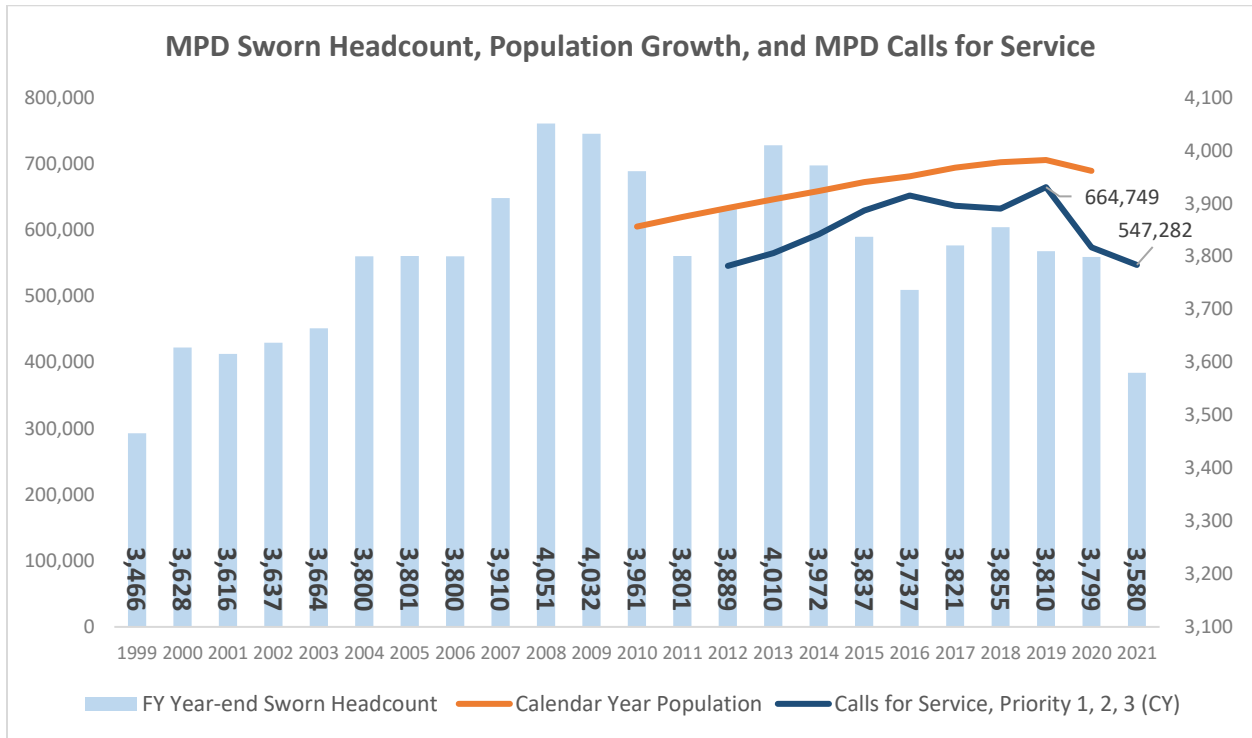
<b>Crime</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>% Change</b>
Homicide	198	226	14%
Sexual Abuse	177	176	-1%
Assault with a Dangerous Weapon	1,631	1,675	3%
Robbery	1,998	2,040	2%
<b>Violent Crime</b>	<b>4,004</b>	<b>4,117</b>	<b>3%</b>
Burglary	1,178	1,172	-1%
Motor Vehicle Theft	3,262	3,515	8%
Theft from Auto	8,285	8,690	5%
Theft Other	10,928	10,915	0%
Arson	13	4	-69%
<b>Property Crime</b>	<b>23,666</b>	<b>24,296</b>	<b>3%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>27,670</b>	<b>28,413</b>	<b>3%</b>

<sup>1</sup> As of February 12, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> There are multiple factors contributing to this increased response time. MPD started to see an increase in response time beginning in June 2020, at the time of enhanced deployments for First Amendment assemblies. Since then, in addition to ongoing assemblies, the January 6th insurrection resulted in injuries and continuing security risks. MPD has also had periods with high rates of COVID absences, either from illness or quarantine. However, all of these were also at least partly offset by a 21 percent drop in all calls for service (Priority 1, 2, & 3), and the overtime our officers have been required to work in order to meet urgent public safety needs.



if and when we can fill vacancies in other important units, such as investigations, Special Operations Division, or special liaisons.



With our depleted staffing, we have to make hard decisions about how we deploy our resources to meet community needs. And what our communities experienced last year is alarming shootings and an increase in violent carjackings. Last year, the District experienced 226 homicides – more than any year since 2003. A total of 904 people were wounded or killed by gunfire in the city, with 186 fatalities. It is difficult to find the words to adequately characterize this increase in violence in our city. It is beyond tragic, beyond unacceptable. My colleagues in Mayor Bowser’s administration have already testified about their efforts to combat gun violence, from prevention efforts to rehabilitation. Over the past year, MPD has worked to develop new enforcement strategies to combat violence and put the organizational changes and training in place to accomplish them. Some of the details will be announced tomorrow. I will share some highlights with you today.

The Department is taking an intelligence-led policing approach to reduce violent crime by focusing on both the locations where the violent crime is occurring and the people and groups most associated with it. For instance, we are taking the lessons learned from years of successful Summer Crime Initiatives (SCI) and deploying these with more focus. Since 2010, MPD has selected four to six areas experiencing high levels of serious violent crime for the SCIs, an intensive multi-agency intervention. In the combined 2021 SCIs, violent crime decreased 20 percent. MPD also coordinated a Fall Crime Initiative, which saw 11 percent reductions in violent crime in those areas. For communities grappling with gun violence, the enhanced



coordination and support during an SCI can offer a respite from violence and needed resources to the neighborhood.

We have increased the capacity of the Violence Reduction Unit to allow more room to pursue long-term crime issues that are often correlated with gun crime. I have restructured the former Narcotics and Special Investigations Division to focus more on investigations and intelligence-led policing. The new Violent Crime Suppression Division and expanded analytical capabilities will allow us to streamline criminal intelligence gathering and make its use more laser focused on the people using guns in our community.

The Department is bringing together tactical and investigatory resources in innovative ways to not only recover illegal firearms, but also effectively build cases against some of the most violent and dangerous gun offenders to get them out of our communities. We are teaming up with federal agencies to investigate cases and ensure we have high quality evidence so our partners can prosecute them fully. For instance, the NIBIN Investigations Unit (NIU) is a collaboration of MPD, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF), and the US Attorney's Office (USAO). The NIU is focused on investigating leads from ATF's National Integrated Ballistic Information Network, or NIBIN, a proven intelligence and investigative tool that links firearms from multiple scenes.

While we are enhancing our investigative capabilities, we also need the resources to quickly direct support to communities dealing with emerging or acute violence or crime sprees. I established the Community Focused Patrol Unit (CFPU) to supplement patrol in areas experiencing higher levels of violent crime. This agile unit is deployed on mountain bikes to maximize the opportunity for community engagement and communication. As part of the Violent Crime Suppression Division, this unit supports MPD in reducing violent crime while connecting with our residents on their most pressing public safety needs.

This focus on investigative strategies and partnerships will allow MPD to close cases more quickly and do our part to reduce violence in our city. But this is just one part. There is an entire ecosystem that works together to influence public safety in our city. I can tell you that MPD is dedicated to doing our part to both hold people accountable and to seek alternative ways to promote justice.

When we look at young people in our city, we have worked to limit contacts that might bring them into the juvenile system prematurely. We have worked with the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) to divert youth instead of arresting them for minor offenses, and to ensure that youth are not arrested if we do not have enough evidence to reach probable cause. The city has invested heavily in services for families and youth and in violence interruption strategies – as is appropriate. Overall, it seems that the ecosystem is well focused on healing our all too often traumatized youth. But with all of this, we need to make sure the partners in the ecosystem do not lose sight of the need for accountability for dangerous criminal behavior, no matter the age of the offender. I am not talking about shoplifting or a fight between kids. I am specifically concerned about the increase in armed robberies and carjackings in our city and neighboring



jurisdictions. The profile of our offenders committing these crimes has changed over the last two years and our juveniles are increasingly showing up as offenders in many of these cases. Most recently, this is evident in several cases involving juveniles committing multiple carjackings and robberies across our borders.

I am asked all the time for numbers, so I will share some with you. Last year, we had 426 carjackings; for 307 of them, the suspect had a gun during the commission of the carjacking. This is a dramatic increase since 2019, when there were 152 carjackings. We made 151 arrests for carjacking last year, 101 of which were juveniles. In 2019, 43 percent of the arrestees were juveniles. In both 2020 and 2021, two-thirds of the arrestees have been juveniles. Looking specifically at the juveniles arrested in 2021, four out of 10 had prior arrests related to car theft;<sup>3</sup> a quarter of them had prior carjacking arrests. Nine juveniles and one adult were arrested for carjacking more than once in 2021 alone. And these just represent arrests in DC. More than a third of the juveniles have an arrest history in Prince George's County, and at least 12 of them had one arrest in Montgomery County. I understand the narrative about juvenile crime that is framed by looking at just one end of a funnel. The funnel starts out with the number of crimes being committed, but gets smaller when you talk about the number of offenders arrested and smaller still when talking about those that get to court. If the story just reflects the narrow end of the funnel, we are missing part of the picture. At the wide end of the funnel, police see all the crime reports and all the suspect descriptions. And here in DC and the region, we are seeing a dramatic increase in kids involved with carjackings and robberies.

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.

Studies show that those committing homicides and shootings in our city are "life course persisters." Simply put, they began demonstrating antisocial behavior in childhood and it continued into adulthood. It is not a stretch to suggest that their delinquent behavior is attributed to several factors including neuropsychological impairments and negative environments. Our

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<sup>3</sup> This includes both motor vehicle theft or the related crime of unauthorized use of a vehicle.



homicide suspects and many of our victims have been arrested an average of about 11 times prior to being arrested for homicide or becoming the victim of a homicide.

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. I am hopeful that my intent will not be misconstrued as blaming anyone or any entity for where we are now, but an acknowledgment that there is much more work to do together. Who among us is totally satisfied with the outcomes we are seeing and the current state of some of our system involved young people? Perhaps there are a few. I will be the first to say, I am not satisfied and will continue to push and challenge MPD and our system to do better. It is not an exaggeration to say lives hang in the balance of the decisions we make regarding our youth. I am making an earnest plea to our city to be our best, to come together, and think differently about this very important issue.

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. We have seen this with the youth who commit carjackings and stream videos of themselves as they tear through our city streets. We need to do a better job of supervising and supporting youth who are committing crimes, and for those that are committing violent crimes, we 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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I appreciate the opportunity to speak candidly about the most serious problems facing our communities. At the same time, I would also like to speak about the many positive changes happening at MPD. Community trust is critical to successful policing, and I recognize that enhanced transparency and accountability is necessary to accomplish that. I have taken a number of steps to enhance both transparency and accountability to make sure we meet those expectations.

In the summer of 2020, the Council enacted legislation requiring the release of body worn camera video from serious uses of force within five business days. It takes a tremendous effort to prepare these videos to ensure that the privacy of involved subjects is maintained. To ensure we meet this requirement, MPD has hired Visual Information Specialists to establish a team to oversee this video production. We have also hired two data scientists to enable us to continue to release a variety of data on our open data page. We provide information on arrests, crime, hate



crimes, ShotSpotter, and stop data. Soon, we will be adding use of force data to the datasets available to the public.

There have been claims in the media that we have a secret panel of members that make disciplinary decisions. That is not the case. The government is obligated to provide due process for its employees. The policy governing the disciplinary process, which includes the panel, is available to the public on our website, along with almost 400 other policies guiding our work. In 2021, we began posting the Adverse Action Panel hearing calendar on our website. The panels are open to the public to observe. The Department also released five years of data on adverse actions and will release 2021 data in early 2022. And in the interest of ensuring that officers whose employment is terminated do not work elsewhere in law enforcement, MPD is contributing to the National Decertification Index, a Department of Justice funded registry listing members from across the country who have been removed from police service.

MPD has been working with the DC Auditor Kathy Patterson and Michael Bromwich, the Independent Compliance Monitor from our Memorandum of Agreement on Use of Force, to review and assess practices related to use of force. Mr. Bromwich made a number of recommendations to ensure that MPD continues to be a leader in use of force practices and investigations. As DC Auditor Patterson notified the Council this week, most of their recommendations have been either “fully implemented or [are] in progress. Chief Robert J. Contee, III, and his team are to be congratulated on this significant progress.” This included reconstituting the Force Investigation Team and issuing revised use of force and less lethal weapons policies that combined 16 existing orders into two comprehensive documents. All members have been trained on the updated policies which emphasize de-escalation and ensure force is only used when necessary, objectively reasonable, and proportionate to the threat faced by the officer or the community. We are also training all MPD members on Active Bystandership for Law Enforcement to ensure that we are holding each other accountable for meeting high standards. We are continuing negotiations with the Union to begin releasing the outcomes of serious use of force investigations to the public.

Of course, transparency and accountability are necessary, but they are not sufficient on their own to strengthen the relationship between the community and the Department. I have directed all of the bureaus, even those who do not normally engage with the public, to stretch themselves with the goal of enhancing our service and our relationship. From inviting professional women to speak with and inspire at-risk young women, to helping senior citizens with technology, hosting a chess tournament in Mt. Pleasant, and distributing food, school supplies, and toys to children and families across the city, our employees are building relationships every day.

But our community engagement is about more than just outreach. Our goal is to ensure that diverse communities trust MPD and feel safe and represented by our agency. This means that community members need to be heard. In my first year, Howard University has facilitated six listening sessions to allow me to hear from community members throughout the District. Almost 100 youth participated in my First Annual Youth Summit to share their experiences and vision for what they want from a police department. In addition, I have established a Chief of Police





Youth Advisory Board, comprised of young people from across our city to advise me on issues impacting our youth.

It is important that our community members not only feel heard, but also that they see themselves in the Department. 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. Young adults age 17 to 24 can join MPD's Cadet Program, through which they can work for MPD while earning up to 60-credit hours at the University of the District of Columbia. I am pleased to note that we have now hired two full recruit classes in the Academy composed entirely of graduates of the Cadet Program. This year, we have 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 for as a Cadet.

The Cadet Program is also a key strategy for recruiting more women into the MPD. About half of our cadets are women. The Department has joined a national coalition of law enforcement agencies across the United States and Canada committed to having women equaling 30 percent of police recruits by 2030. I am pleased to announce that MPD is launching a national search to hire a Chief Equity Officer for the Department, an important step to help ensure that the Department models the fair and inclusive values that we aspire to. This new role will be focused on advising me and MPD's Executive Staff on best practices related to diversity and inclusion. I want to ensure that we are diligent about considering equity in everything we do as an agency, as we build an inclusive workspace for all.

MPD is a leader in addressing the needs of our many diverse communities in the District, and we are continually working to improve service to them. For example, over the past two years, the Latino Liaison Unit has taken the lead in discussing COVID-19 alerts and protocols on multiple Spanish-language platforms and disseminating materials in Spanish to small businesses in the community to provide to their customers. In 2021, they conducted two dozen safety briefings on robberies of our Hispanic and Latino residents, including at construction sites. The strong relationship of our Special Liaison Branch officers with our Asian and faith-based communities has been critical during a time when the city has seen hate crimes targeting their communities.

We have made important strides in making it easier for individuals with no or limited English proficiency (NEP/LEP) to communicate with MPD. In October 2020, we deployed a mobile phone app to facilitate officer communication with NEP/LEP persons. Once a member selects a language from the app, it connects with an interpreter in that language without having to wait for additional prompts or provide access codes, reducing the time needed for communication. In addition, the app enables all members to contact an American Sign Language-certified interpreter for video communication with a member of the public who is deaf or hard of hearing. In June 2021, the Department launched a multi-lingual phone tree with interpreters/operators routed directly into MPD's primary non-emergency phone number. The phone tree covers Spanish, Amharic, Chinese, French, Korean, and Vietnamese. In addition, this spring, we expect





to launch a new process to make it easier for involved persons to go to a police station to request a police report to be translated into one of the same six languages.

MPD is working closely with agency partners to ensure that people in the District with behavioral health needs receive the right care at the right time. Over the past three years, our officers have administered lifesaving naloxone to almost 2,000 people who appeared to be overdosing on opioids. In 2021, MPD worked with the Department of Behavioral Health (DBH) to develop materials to communicate about the Good Samaritan Law to ensure that people feel safe calling for medical assistance if they suspect or know someone is overdosing. And over the next two years, DBH is providing training to all of our officers on either Crisis Intervention or Mental Health First Aid, two industry standards.

We appreciate the funding that the Committee approved for Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 for a Behavioral Health Partnerships Coordinator. The new position will provide needed resources to strengthen the partnership between MPD and DBH to better support people with chronic or crisis behavioral health needs, the communities in which they live, and the employees in both agencies who serve them. This is not simply about establishing new programs, but rather policies and norms for operating across multiple levels in any situation. A candidate has been selected and is expected to start next month.

Lastly, it is critical that we, the government, look out for the well-being of our officers. And the past two years have been challenging for officer wellness. The decline in MPD staffing comes during a period of historic demands on the city and the Department. MPD officers have worked during a global pandemic, while facing national and local unrest directed at police since the murder of George Floyd, growing extremism leading to the January 6th insurrection, and rising gun violence.

These demands have required MPD officers to work more than 1.1 million overtime hours in FY2020 and again in FY2021. This is more than the annual totals for at least the past decade, and the equivalent of more than 550 officers. While the use of overtime is a necessary tool, it is not a good solution as it contributes to employee stress, illness, injury, and burnout. In FY21, the Department saw more than 130,000 hours lost to performance of duty injuries. This represents a 29 percent increase from the prior year, with January 6th injuries the leading cause. More than 1,700 officers have tested positive for COVID during the pandemic, with the highest rates coming during the Omicron wave, as they did across our communities.

Not only are officers dealing with higher levels of gun violence from people in the city, but nationwide, they are seeing more violent assaults against police. According to preliminary information from the FBI, in 2021, more officers died from felonious assaults than any year since 2001. If we exclude deaths associated with 9/11, 1995 was the most recent year with more officer deaths from assaults. This local and national increase in violence has contributed to more officer-involved shootings in DC. In 2021, MPD officer shootings lead to five fatalities and 11 subjects with injuries.



To be clear, any loss of life in our city is unfortunate. I do not want our officers to have to use their firearms, and our officers do not want to be involved in a shooting. MPD's values are reflected in our use of force policy and training, which emphasize de-escalation, proportionality, and reasonableness. We are committed to ensuring that our officers are well trained, that our policy and investigations are thorough, and that we remain open to review and recommendations from the DC Auditor. I have been open with the public when our officers use force, including when I don't think it is consistent with our standards. But that same candor means I will also tell you that the level of violence on the streets and the unrelenting stress on officers have an impact on the uses of force. While MPD continues to strengthen our use of framework, we are also investing in our officer wellness. In the wake of the insurrection, MPD hired a Director of Well-Being Support to develop a comprehensive wellness strategy to focus on health outcomes and health behaviors to support officers in coping with the challenges and stresses of law enforcement. After developing a robust roadmap for employee wellbeing, initial efforts include expanding our Chaplains Corps and bringing access to healthy vending markets to each police district. This is just the start of an important investment in our officers that will support their dedicated service to the city.

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I have talked today about the serious crime issues we face today and strategies to address them. But beyond that, I want to ask that we all keep in mind that public safety is about people. It is the relationship between people in the community and between the police and community. It is about the surviving families and friends that are left whenever we lose someone to homicide. Safety is about the people I talk to at every community meeting who want their young son or daughter, their older mother or father, to be able to walk on the block without dodging bullets. It is about small businesses who are invested in our neighborhoods and community, but are also worried about the impact of gun violence on their customers and their employees. It is about the mothers and fathers, grandmothers and uncles, everyone who is raising or working with kids, who want to make sure that their loved ones don't end up on either end of a gun.

These are the people impacted by the numbers. That is what keeps me up at night – not what direction a number is going, but the knowledge that we are losing so many lives to gun violence. Every day I am asked what is driving the violence and what can we do about it? And while MPD and I, Mayor Bowser and members of the Council, and other agencies are all working on strategies and programs to support the public safety and justice ecosystem, we also need to talk about what members of our community can do.

We know that many in our community are living with a lifetime of trauma. But this trauma has been magnified in 2020 and 2021 as most of the bonds and connections that hold our communities together have been strained, frayed, or broken. We have families, friends, neighbors, and colleagues who have not seen each other, except on videos. This often means that people only see what we want them to see, and we may be missing key signs of pain or struggles.



But there are ways that we can work on the personal connections. And I urge the public listening to me to think about how they can personally work to rebuild the connections that hold us all together, while of course maintaining current public health protocols. Visit your neighbors – whether they are senior citizens living alone or families struggling due to the pandemic – to drop off food, offer to toss a ball with kids outside, or see if they need help raking leaves or shoveling snow. If you belong to a community group, brainstorm about ways that you can host a day of service to support people struggling in your community. Talk to each other as you move about your community or walk your dog. Make the effort to reach out to each other. I know it doesn't sound like a way to fight guns and bullets, but from my perspective, it is essential.

Our officers will continue to work to get guns off the street, but we need families and community leaders to convince kids not to pick them up in the first place. MPD will work with schools to address truancy, but neighbors who see that kids are circling back home after parents leave can alert them. MPD will respond to homes plagued with domestic violence, but friends and family may see stress points earlier and can talk through an exit strategy before violence occurs. These essential connections are not going to be rebuilt on their own. We need to be intentional in strengthening our personal community, to take care of each other and to hold each other accountable.

And of course, MPD and the whole of District government has a critical role to play in these twin themes of strengthening connections and accountability. Over the past year, as I have listened to the community and MPD members, I have heard these messages repeatedly. I believe that we can all work together to make them a reality so that we can all live in a compassionate, vibrant, and safe city.

