

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
METROPOLITAN POLICE DEPARTMENT



**Fiscal Year 2018**  
**Performance Oversight Hearing**

Testimony of  
**Peter Newsham**  
Chief of Police

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

John A. Wilson Building  
Room 412  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20004  
February 7, 2019

Good afternoon, Chairman Allen, members and staff of the Committee, and guests. My name is Peter Newsham, and I am the Chief of Police for the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD). I am pleased to brief you today on public safety in the District of Columbia and the Department's operations.

I would like to begin by thanking the men and women of the Department, sworn and civilian, who work tirelessly to serve the residents of the District of Columbia. This past year, the District hosted even more large, high-profile events than usual, providing the Department an opportunity to demonstrate how well the Metropolitan Police Department handles these events. The March for Our Lives came to the District in the spring, highlighting the need for national attention to gun violence issues. Soon thereafter, MPD officers were deployed as the city anxiously watched the Washington Capitals' play-off games outside of the Capital One Arena, and they shared in the city's joy during the championship parade. National attention turned to DC again as we hosted the Major League Baseball All-Star Game in July, a few days after the sold-out opening match at Audi Field, the new home of DC United. We shared the country's grief at the passing of President George H.W. Bush, as MPD members supported the state funeral. The District also played host to multiple First Amendment assemblies including the Unite the Right rally. Regardless of the type of event or the message of the participants, MPD's members worked long hours to protect the constitutional rights of the participants and ensure that the District and event participants were safe. We should all be grateful for their dedication; I know that I am.

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Over the past year, MPD has continued to work closely with our residents, community organizations, businesses, the Council, the Advisory Neighborhood Commissioners, partner agencies in the District, and our regional and federal partners to support public safety. As we are all well aware, the city's persistent challenge has been gun violence and the spike in homicides we saw this past year. We will certainly be discussing that in detail, however, I would like to first highlight the significant progress on overall public safety in the District.

In calendar year 2018, there were 313 fewer violent crimes – which includes, sexual assault, assault with a dangerous weapon (ADW), and robbery – than in 2017. This continues a downward trend, with approximately 2,200 fewer violent crimes in 2018 than in 2015. Violent crime dropped across the city, with a reduction in six of the seven police districts. Robbery fell 7 percent, sexual assault decreased 8 percent, and ADWs dropped 10 percent. Reported violent crime in the District is 33 percent lower than it was in 2014. During the same time frame, the District's population grew 7 percent. Calls for MPD service have been steadily increasing, while MPD response time to Priority 1 calls has continued to improve.

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Despite the remarkable progress we have made in reducing reported violent crime in our city, I know that this reduction in violent crime is not comforting to crime victims or to families who



have lost someone to senseless violence. The statistics illustrate progress, but any violent crime is one too many. Every violent crime impacts not only an individual, but also a family and a community.

Preventing the next violent crime and its devastating impact is, as always, our central focus. I am often asked what is driving our homicides, what is the common immediate cause or motive for the spike? Some homicides stem from domestic disputes, some from robberies, and some from crew retaliation. In recent years, the category of petty disputes between known participants has been on the rise. The one common thread is the prevalence of illegal firearms. Nearly 80 percent of our homicides were gun related, and all of our 500 plus shootings were. The fact is that when a firearm is introduced into any of these situations usually someone is going to the hospital, and in some cases someone is going to the morgue. A family, a neighborhood, a community, our city is permanently impacted.

Reviewing the data suggests that gun violence in our city has remained consistent over the past few years, with approximately 500 victims of shootings in the District annually from 2016 through 2018. However, while the number of shootings has remained roughly the same, the percentage of fatal shootings has increased. In 2016 and 2017, the percentages of fatal shootings was 17 to 19 percent. This rose to 23 percent in 2018. That 4 to 6 percent increase is not just a number; it represents lives needlessly and senselessly lost to gun violence. The shootings appear to have been more lethal for a number of reasons, including that they were more likely to happen during the day, at close range, and with more shots being fired. The increased lethality, together with a high number of homicides coming from incidents that happened in prior years, drove the increase in homicides in 2018.

Last week, Kevin Donahue, Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice, briefed the Council on Mayor Bowser's overall strategy to address and prevent violence in the city. Briefly, this includes both public health tools to create economic opportunities, treat trauma, and prevent violence through intervention and mediation, as well as more traditional criminal justice tools, focused on strengthening partnerships in the District's complex criminal justice system, enhancing response and support from other District agencies for crime victims, and continuing to develop and deploy police resources strategically. Over the course of the performance hearings in February and March, the Council will hear more about the activities throughout the government. I will focus on MPD's work and partnerships today.

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The most important MPD resource—for combatting violence or serving the community in our various roles—is our employees, both sworn and civilian. As you know, the Department struggled with declining staffing beginning in Fiscal Year 2014, due to the long anticipated retirement bubble. When Mayor Bowser came into the office in 2015, she challenged MPD to develop new ways to both reduce attrition and recruit more people to join MPD. I am proud to





report that for the second year in a row, MPD was able to increase its total sworn staffing. Over the past two fiscal years, we have increased the size of the force by 118 officers. Several initiatives have contributed to this. Through Mayor Bowser’s Police Officer Retention Program, the Department has provided student loan forgiveness grants to almost 200 officers since 2016. Last year, we began offering a housing allowance of up to \$1,000 per month for six months to new recruits living in DC so they can get established in the District and deepen their knowledge and experience with the communities they serve. So far, 29 recruits have participated in this program.

Our human resource planning goes far beyond the number of recruit officers we can hire today. We have had to develop a sustainable strategy of hiring over a period of multiple years. To accomplish this, we have been working with a professional public relations team to create a comprehensive marketing strategy for our recruitment efforts. With the continued low unemployment rate and significant competition for our target labor pool, it is vital that our messages reach the target audience. The new advertising that will be used throughout 2019 will present the diverse and approachable face of MPD. The campaign focuses not on police tools and gadgets, as is often seen from law enforcement, but on our values: community, teamwork, service, and leadership. The goal is to attract people who are committed to a career in public service. Examples of some of the messages are included in my testimony, which is posted on our website at [mpdc.dc.gov](http://mpdc.dc.gov).

Our enhanced Cadet Program is one of Mayor Bowser’s important long-term investments in developing pathways to the middle class and strengthening police-community relations. Young adults who graduated from a District high school can join MPD’s Cadet Program, through which they can work part-time for two years while both learning about MPD and police work and earning up to 60-credit hours at the University of the District of Columbia. In the past four years, the program has grown to 76 cadets from fewer than 20. In FY 2019, we will expand the program to 100 cadets. In the past four years, 31 cadets graduating from the program have become MPD recruit officers.

Of the 76 current cadets, 58 percent are age 21 to 24, demonstrating the success of the recent expansion in eligibility. Forty-two percent are age 17 to 20, the original age group. The Cadet Program also represents an important opportunity to recruit more women to law enforcement. The demographics of MPD more closely resemble the racial and ethnic demographics of the city



we serve than any other major city police department. The one exception is for gender. Currently, 22 percent of MPD's sworn officers are women. Although this is significantly higher than the national average of 13 percent, I believe we can continue to recruit strong female candidates to serve their community in law enforcement. Our cadets, of which 39 percent are young women, will help us to get there.

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We know that we cannot prevent violent crime by just putting more officers on the street. The Department must continue to work to ensure officers are deployed wisely, with the appropriate tools and information to build strong relationships with the community and to prevent and investigate major crime.

A strong relationship between the community and police is absolutely essential to success and has been my top priority since being named the Chief of Police. This is a message that I continue to personally deliver to the entire Department and to each class of new recruits. We reinforce this through training, such as through our innovative training program in partnership with the University of the District of Columbia and the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). This program features a guided tour of the NMAAHC, a lecture on black history and culture, and a discussion on race and policing. The program traces the history of the policing profession, particularly with respect to African Americans in the United States and in the District of Columbia. By teaching members this history, we hope to equip them with a



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better understanding of the community's perspective, enabling them to engage more effectively and build trust with the communities we serve. This year, we have invited the Metro Transit Police Department to begin sending officers to our training as well. We value their partnership, and recognize that the city would benefit from their officers attending this important training.

The new uniforms that MPD began wearing in November are also an important tool for community trust. For officers, these uniforms provide greater





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comfort and convenience. For the community, they provide information and reassurance. Over the years, different uniforms had evolved for various units of MPD. The variety of uniforms together with the dozens of police agencies in the District meant that it was sometimes hard for the public to identify who was an MPD officer, which can be critically important for an individual. For instance, when dealing with a police officer, District residents should know if the officer is following MPD policy or federal law in regards to marijuana possession or immigration. With the new uniforms and our marketing to familiarize people with them, we hope that the community can more easily identify our MPD officers.

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In order for our officers to prevent violent crime, the Department must ensure they are deployed strategically, and with appropriate information. We know that violent crimes are more likely to be committed in specific areas or by repeat violent offenders. By analyzing crime trends and other data, our analysts will be able to support precision, block-by-block decision making in the deployment of patrol and other resources to the areas most impacted by violence. Equally important, MPD is working to increase the effectiveness of the intelligence-gathering and information-sharing processes within MPD to identify and address neighborhood conflicts before they escalate, close criminal cases, and recover illegal firearms. By working with the officers who know their neighborhoods and the people who are involved in crime and improving information sharing so that other units can better respond, we hope to prevent and solve crimes while minimizing negative contact within the neighborhoods. This effort is not focused on increasing stops or minor arrests. On the contrary, officers will be focused on positive interactions that help to build relationships. They will also develop the information on the bad



actors who are often coming into a neighborhood to prey on community members, enabling the officers to better protect and serve the neighborhood.

Once a crime happens, the community is looking to MPD to get the offender off the street in order to prevent future violent crimes. We are working with our criminal justice partners to improve our ability to do that. Through the Crime Gun Intelligence Center (CGIC), MPD is working with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) and the District's Department of Forensic Sciences to improve data collection and use related to gun crimes. The CGIC leverages state-of-the-art imaging technology and the National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN) to link firearm evidence between crime scenes. This investigative tool and partnership provides our detectives with critical pieces of intelligence when investigating shootings.

Once we are able to make an arrest, the criminal justice system should ensure that those most likely to commit violence are not quickly back on the street. Our communities and our officers are frustrated that all too often, the person we arrest with an illegal gun today is soon back on the street, often within a few days. Not only does this increase the risk of violence, it discourages community members from sharing information. Yesterday, Mayor Bowser, U.S. Attorney Jessie Liu, and I announced the Felon in Possession Initiative (FIP) to improve gun case outcomes for individuals who have already been convicted of a dangerous felony offense and then choose to possess an illegal firearm. Felons illegally in possession of a gun show a clear disregard for the law and pose a high risk for District residents. The U.S. Attorney's Office (USAO) will be leveraging federal resources to work with MPD to continue to reduce violent crime and create safer, stronger neighborhoods throughout the District. The FIP cases, of which there were about 350 last year, will be presented in federal court, where caseloads are smaller and the timelines tend to be faster. This means judges will be able to focus more on these serious cases, and hopefully bring about a swift and appropriate resolution. This is good for both the defendant and the community. Additionally, the concerning decision by the DC Sentencing Commission last fall to reduce the offense level of prior felon-in-possession convictions on future sentences does not apply to federal court sentencing, so the community have a greater assurance that the cases will be treated with the seriousness and urgency they deserve.

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I would like to highlight two other important issues in my testimony. This past year has been the first full year since MPD began a comprehensive effort to rethink its use of force policies and trainings. In 2017, the Department implemented new use of force principles, policies, and training to emphasize necessity and proportionality in response, and an explicit commitment to the sanctity of human life at all times. Over this time period, the Department also implemented less lethal tools, including electronic control devices, commonly called Tasers, to support the lowest level of force necessary to effectively bring an incident or person under control. I am pleased to report today that we are seeing positive results, with the fewest number of officer-involved shootings



since at least 2001. Last year, there was a 76 percent reduction in officer-involved shootings from the average over the past decade.

As you know, Councilmember Allen, I have been focused on reforming police uses of force for much of my career. As a young officer, I saw the impact of MPD's excessive use of force and police shootings in the 1990s. For almost eight years, I worked with the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) on a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) to reform MPD's use of force policies, training, and practices. In 2015, seven years after the conclusion of the MOA, Bromwich Consultants, which included members of that DOJ compliance team, returned to MPD to evaluate whether the reforms had taken hold. The findings of the review confirmed that MPD continues to be a leader in use of force practices, and "remains committed to limiting and managing use of force – and to fair, unbiased and constitutional policing."

With this background, I recognize that any use of force can have an indelible effect on an individual, and it can undermine community trust. That is why, upon being named the Interim Chief of Police, I briefed the community in all seven patrol districts, as well as the Mayor's Interfaith Council and the Council of the District of Columbia on the different responsibilities of MPD and the USAO when conducting use of force investigations. Our community should be confident that all allegations of use of force are investigated thoroughly and impartially. We must continue to strive to meet high expectations for both uses of force and accountability in this arena. This reduction in firearm-related incidents is a noteworthy milestone that I hope becomes the new normal here in the District and in my profession.

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Secondly, I would like to brief you on MPD's promising collaboration with the Department of Behavioral Health (DBH) and the Department of Human Services (DHS) that has grown out of the *Neighborhood Engagement Achieves Results Amendment Act*, which sought to reduce crime and increase access to social services. Year after year, MPD interacts with hundreds of individuals facing chronic mental illness and substance use disorders. Many encounters do not result in arrest; others result in arrest for low-level offenses, with a low probability of prosecution. All too often, these individuals end up back on the street, no closer to services or meaningful engagement with society.

This cycle falls short on many levels. It falls short for individuals experiencing behavioral health challenges because they are not getting needed treatment. It falls short for police officers who cannot solve the issues for either the individual or the community. It falls short for members of the public, for whom legitimate quality-of-life complaints are not addressed.

The Pre-Arrest Diversion Program, a pilot partnership between DBH, DHS, and MPD, is working to find more effective means of supporting individuals in our community by:

- Increasing connectivity to behavioral health services;





- Improving housing stability;
- Increasing access to other supportive services, such as enrollment in economic benefit programs and education and employment supports; and
- Reducing arrests of those with behavioral health needs and substance use disorders.

The Diversion Program pilot was developed by an interagency program team looking at national trends in behavioral health and policing collaborations and adapting them to take advantage of the many resources already available within the District. MPD members refer individuals with indicators of chronic mental health or substance use disorder issues to a team of DBH licensed clinical social workers and certified peer specialists. While the initial implementation was focused on identifying and diverting individuals subject to arrest for low-level criminal activity, the program has evolved to engage individuals in the community who are not only at risk for arrest, but also at risk for victimization or a public health crisis.

The DBH team works with each participant to assess their needs and create a collaborative plan tailored to individual needs. Program staff provide ongoing outreach, referrals and resources to participants and assess them for vulnerability and service needs throughout the program. Since the program's initial roll out last summer, it has surpassed its target engagement of 60 enrolled participants, reaching 82 participants by the end of the calendar year. In addition, the Diversion team has engaged with more than 200 individuals referred by MPD who were in need of more limited assistance and engagement or were not currently open to full program participation.

A report with more detailed information about the program and participants will be provided to the Council later this month. Some highlights include that:

- Two-thirds of participants have been reconnected with treatment or linked to a higher level of care.
- 26 participants were moved or approved to move into housing.
- 39 participants have been helped to secure vital documents, opening doors to other services.

The DBH team has been collecting powerful testimonials from participants reporting a wide variety of positive outcomes—from being reconnected to services, taking medication consistently, moving into housing, reconnecting with estranged family, coming into compliance with court supervision, and getting job training. Referring officers are feeling more empowered to successfully help community members. Anecdotally, we are also hearing positive feedback from the Superior Court and Pretrial Services. While the partner agencies are still assessing experiences and lessons learned from 2018, the initial response is encouraging, and we are looking forward to developing the next stages of the program.

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In closing, I would like to thank the Mayor and the Council for their leadership in the District, and for supporting our officers and public safety. I look forward to continuing to work with the Committee on our shared goal of improving safety in the District. This concludes my testimony, and my staff and I are happy to address your questions at this time.

