

Testimony of Commissioner Michael Harrison
Baltimore Police Department
US Senate Judiciary Committee Subcommittee on the Constitution
May 11, 2021

Chairman Blumenthal, Ranking Member Cruz, and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee, thank you for holding this important hearing today about ghost guns. I am honored to appear before you today.

As the Commissioner of the Baltimore Police Department (BPD), I lead one of the nation's largest police force with nearly 3,000 sworn officers and civilian personnel. I became Commissioner of the BPD in 2019 after almost three decades with the New Orleans Police Department, which I had the honor of leading as its Superintendent. When I accepted the job in Baltimore, I knew the challenges facing the City were many, especially when it comes to reducing the unacceptable rates of gun violence.

For far too long, Baltimore's residents have borne the devastating impact of this violence. However, the data shows that the vast majority of guns used in these violent crimes are illegally trafficked. In fact, last year alone, more than 82% of the guns recovered in Baltimore came from outside the city. Nearly 65% of those guns were purchased out of the state of Maryland.

In Baltimore, we are working every day to break the cycle of gun violence with evidence-based solutions and community policing initiatives. But we face a new threat to public safety from unserialized firearms known as ghost guns.

Baltimore has seen a 300% spike in the number of ghost guns that have been seized in our city. Last year, Baltimore police linked fifteen ghost guns to a shooting or homicide. The Southwestern District, which experiences the most gun crimes and homicides in the city, also had the highest number of ghost guns seized. And most disturbingly, nearly one-fourth of all the ghost guns recovered by Baltimore police were from individuals who were not old enough to obtain a firearm - including a 14-year-old.

As alarming as these statistics are, this growing problem is not unique to Baltimore. Cities from New York to Los Angeles are experiencing a similar explosion of ghost guns.

Years ago, privately assembled firearms were projects for a few hobbyists and gun enthusiasts. But today, the failure to regulate the core building blocks of ghost guns under our firearm laws has allowed the market for these parts to thrive in broad daylight. Today, this isn't an issue about hobbyists and enthusiasts, but about gun traffickers and criminals. Due to the lack of regulation, ghost guns have quickly become a weapon of choice for criminals. Unless action is taken, I only expect this problem to get worse.

Let me explain why.

- A ghost gun is easy to obtain. Gun traffickers no longer need to work with unscrupulous dealers or gun shows. A criminal can go online and purchase the parts to create a fully functioning firearm with only a few clicks of a mouse. Many of the parts sold online are so easy to assemble, that a criminal can make a fully functioning firearm in less than an hour or two.
- A ghost gun is untraceable. For criminals and those involved in illicit activity, a ghost gun is attractive because it is difficult to trace when used in a crime. Because ghost guns do not have serial numbers like traditional firearms, law enforcement cannot rely on the ATF tracing database to determine where the gun was purchased or if it has been used in other crimes.
- A ghost gun is anonymous. Because ghost gun parts are not currently regulated as guns, individuals are not required to undergo a background check when purchasing them. That means people who are prohibited from purchasing a weapon - a convicted abuser for example - can become armed through purchasing and assembling a ghost gun. Even though a criminal would fail a background check in a brick and mortar retailer, they can purchase a ghost gun online, no questions asked.
- A ghost gun is deadly. Just like any firearm made by a licensed manufacturer, ghost guns are fully functional and just as lethal.

If criminals are turning to ghost guns, what does that mean for law enforcement officers in Baltimore and other communities? Put simply, ghost guns add a new level of danger to our work. When criminal elements can evade a background check with a ghost gun, law enforcement loses the ability to keep firearms out of the hands of dangerous individuals. When we can't trace recovered crime guns, there is no way to identify trafficking patterns. It makes our job more difficult and puts lives at risk.

Last week, the Department of Justice issued new proposed regulations that would bring ghost guns in line with our federal firearms laws. This action is critical and needed. Most importantly, it will save lives. As we applaud the Biden Administration for taking action, I hope that Congress won't lose sight of the need to help Baltimore and other cities that are struggling with daily gun violence. Passing gun safety legislation must be a priority to protect the public and provide federal support so communities can interrupt violence before it becomes deadly.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify in this important hearing and look forward to your questions.