

Testimony from Michael Harrison
President of the Police Executive Research Forum
Police Commissioner, Baltimore Police Department
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“Law Enforcement Officer Safety: Protecting Those Who Protect and Serve”
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to testify before you today.

Serving as a member of law enforcement is not just a profession; it’s a calling. In my 30 years of experience as a police officer and my 8 years as a police executive in two major cities, I have witnessed first hand the challenges that members of the policing profession face on a daily basis.

As President of PERF, I am also part of a network of police executives in major cities who share with me their accounts of the work they are doing to combat gun violence in their jurisdictions.

The proliferation of illegal guns and the availability of illegal guns, in nearly every major American city, county, town and jurisdiction, is a significant and direct factor in why we have been seeing the upward trends in gun violence across the country.

This is the environment in which our officers wake up every day, put on their uniforms, arrive at roll calls, and go out to protect and serve the communities they are sworn to protect.

If I could take a personal moment, I want to highlight one such officer from the Baltimore Police Department. Officer Keona Holley died one week after being shot in an ambush style attack while she was in her patrol vehicle. While the tragedy of her death brings into stark relief the danger our officers face, it is the story of her life that exemplifies what we want in our officers. The kind of service we ask of them. The kind of person who swears an oath and enters the policing profession. She joined our Department in 2019 and did so because she wanted to serve her city and protect its communities. Even during her time at our Police Academy, she gave a powerful testimony of the need to improve police-community relations and her passion to serve. On the night she was shot, she was picking up a voluntary overtime shift in patrol. She was where she was supposed to be, providing visibility in an area that had been seeing a significant level of gun violence.

Confronting the national challenge of gun violence must have a multi-layered approach that involves more than just law enforcement.

We must invest in historically disinvested communities. We must provide wrap around services to victims of violence and intervene with them to prevent retaliatory violence. We must invest in violence prevention programs, drug rehabilitation programs, re-entry programs and much more to provide individuals with pathways away from violent crime.

But even when cities are engaged in all these programs, doing all they can, the sheer volume of illegal guns and the trafficking of those guns into our communities make it very difficult for officers to perform their duties safely.

It's having an impact on the rate of officer separations and retirements. It's having an impact on the rate of recruitment of new officers. Because of these staffing impacts, it's having a significant impact on overall deployment strategies that could enhance officer safety and create safer communities.

Officers are doing great work in seizing illegal guns and holding accountable those that commit gun violence. But let's be clear, in many cases the number of guns outnumber the populations in some cities. And with police departments facing staffing challenges, the impact we can have on reducing gun violence is further diminished.

Recent passage of federal legislation on guns is certainly welcome and additional investment in law enforcement investigative resources can certainly serve as a force multiplier for local police departments. We welcome this support and greatly value the coordinated efforts of agencies like the FBI, DEA, ATF, U.S. Marshals, and the U.S. Department of Justice.

As police officers, we take an oath, and we are trained to protect and serve under very difficult circumstances. We are called to be guardians, and to work in cooperation with the communities we protect. I am constantly impressed by the achievements of police officers who perform this duty with distinction and honor, knowing full well the danger they could face when they put on that uniform each day.

I again thank you for the opportunity to testify today.