

# Statement of Chief Dwight E. Henninger

President of the International Association of Chiefs of Police

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Law Enforcement Officer Safety: Protecting Those Who Protect and Serve  
Committee on the Judiciary  
United States Senate

Tuesday, July 26, 2022

Good morning, Chairman Durbin, Ranking Member Grassley, and distinguished members of the Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's hearing.

My name is Chief Dwight Henninger, and I am currently the Chief of Police with the Vail, Colorado, Police Department. I am also the President of the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP). The IACP is the world's largest association of law enforcement leaders, with more than 32,000 members in 170 countries.

The IACP has long been focused on efforts to reduce firearms violence – both in regard to law enforcement officers and the community at large.

Let me begin by saying the focus of this hearing has personal meaning to me. When I was just starting my career in law enforcement 40 years ago, I was shot, and one of my partners killed, by a convicted felon motorcycle gang member with a handgun. Two citizens were severely wounded by this felon with a gun. This experience has influenced my career and life since that terrible night.

I have made my primary mission to provide the safest working environment for the officers I work with and to provide the tools and training to make sure they go home to their family at the end of each shift.

This is not always possible, and probably our greatest fear as a Chief, is to have to lead through the loss of an officer in the line of duty.

Tragically, my story is not in any way unique. We know when we take the oath to serve, that our jobs are particularly dangerous, however, that does not mean that we don't need and deserve adequate support. I appreciate the Committee holding this hearing to highlight ways in which we can further support peace officers.

Far too many officers have witnessed the death of a colleague or suffered physical injuries and emotional and physiological trauma that are a result of the job. We need to only look at the most recent Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) [data](#) which shows that 129 law enforcement officers lost their lives in the line of duty in 2021. Of this total, 73 officers were killed while 56 officers died in accidents. According to the 2021 data, the average age of an officer killed was 39, with an average of 12 years served in law enforcement during the time of the fatal incident. These victims were mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers, who had devoted their life to public service. The FBI data further breaks down the circumstances surrounding the deaths of the officers who were killed in the line of duty. Offenders used firearms to kill 61 of the 73 officers. Six were killed with vehicles used as weapons and four were killed by perpetrators without weapons.

To provide a glimpse into 2022, the most recent mid-year [report](#) (July 14, 2022) from the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund shows the number of officers killed by gun deaths increased by nearly 20% over the 2021 mid-year report.

Considering these statistics, and gun violence across our country, the sad reality is that every police officer must approach all stops, calls for service, and every encounter with the thought that the person could possibly have a gun. I cannot underscore the level of stress and daily toll that takes on us, and our families.

Last month, I had the opportunity to attend a White House event commemorating the passage of the Safer Communities Act – the most significant gun safety legislation passed in nearly 30 years.

The IACP commends the bipartisan group of Senators for their leadership in working across the aisle to pass this legislation so quickly, following the tragedies in Uvalde, Texas, and Buffalo, New York.

Sadly, since the passage of this landmark legislation, our nation was rocked by yet another tragedy in Highland Park, Illinois, on July 4th. In fact, over the July 4th weekend, we saw a spike in gun violence, with shootings [reported](#) in nearly every U.S. state.

While I believe this legislation is a step to reduce gun violence, it is only a first step, and more needs to be done to reduce the tragedy of gun violence that plagues our country. Progress cannot stop, and it is imperative that we address gun violence and identify workable solutions to dramatically reduce the 40,000 Americans who die each year from gun violence.

The IACP is committed to the safety of our communities and of the peace officers that serve them. Congress has taken the initial action, and now it is time for police officers, the criminal justice system and the public to act.

This legislation gives police and the broader criminal justice community the opportunity to address gun violence. For our part, the IACP will be working with our members to ensure that they are well positioned and prepared to enforce the new provisions targeting straw purchasers; sharing information and investigate attempts by prohibited individuals to purchase firearms; promoting the adoption of state level “Red Flag” laws to assist people in crisis. We will also continue to work closely with the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco Explosives and Firearms to implement evidence-based solutions that will help our agencies ensure safer communities.

However, this cannot solely be law enforcement’s responsibility, it must also fall upon our criminal justice system. History has shown that we can’t wait to only punish repeat offenders but need to make clear that the first crime committed with a firearm has severe repercussions for the offender. Our criminal justice system owes our communities nothing less.

We are constantly hearing frustration from our members regarding changes in prosecutorial direction/decisions, and how this can be directly attributed to a rise in violent crime. By this we mean, when prosecutors enact blanket policies not to prosecute certain categories of crimes or take a non-enforcement approach to the laws enacted. While prosecutorial and judicial

discretion is an important tenet of the justice system, there needs to be alignment between the police and prosecutors to ensure agreement on the enforcement and prosecution of offenses. If prosecutors and the judiciary are disconnected from the police, and/or the laws they are enforcing, the public loses faith in the police.

The IACP also urges Congress to increase resources to better allow state, local and tribal law enforcement agencies and the Department of Justice to enable greater prosecution of individuals for Brady Act violations. In addition, the IACP supports firearms enforcement programs that involve local, state and federal agencies, such as Project Safe Neighborhoods and Project Exile, which have shown significant reductions in firearms-related violent crime.

Studies have shown that firearm offenders have a higher recidivist rate for committing other firearms related violent crime with firearms than the rate for sexual offenders. Therefore, the IACP supports creating a federal registry, similar to the sexual offender registry, for offenders who have been previously convicted of a felony firearm violation or a misdemeanor that involved violent or threatening acts with firearms. At little cost, this registry would have great benefit toward preventing and investigating a myriad of violent crimes, as well as establishing a computerized list of dangerous offenders that could be utilized as a notification system to alert officers of potential danger. This system would allow more targeted enforcement than just throwing a broad net, which negatively effects our community relationships.

The instances of gun thefts from unlocked cars and homes from lawful gun owners has seen a significant increase and is contributing to guns getting in the hands of juveniles and criminals, there needs to be a concerted effort to educate citizens to lock-up their firearms.

However, gun violence is not the only threat that our officers face. The health and wellness of officers is under threat from a variety of issues.

Policing has always been a high stress job. Officers help people on their worst days and often see more trauma and violence in just one shift than many people will experience in their lifetime. And the stressors of the job are only intensifying in policing today.

Beyond the increases in gun violence, our nation is facing increases in opioid overdoses and community mental health crises. Police today take on more roles and responsibilities than ever to meet the varied needs of their communities. In many communities that lack other resources, police are the social workers, the public health workers, and the counselors because they are the ones trained and available to take the call. On any given shift, an officer may save a life with Narcan, console a family after a suicide loss, and de-escalate a situation to get a person in crisis to mental health treatment.

In addition to taking on these new responsibilities, officers today are working longer hours and more overtime as agencies nationwide are dealing with staffing shortages. Some agencies are even placing holds on officers taking personal leave to ensure that all shifts can be covered. Maintaining this constant level of work means that officers are missing out on time

with their families and support systems. They are missing out on time to sleep, time to process the stress of their experiences.

And as they are doing more and working more to protect the communities they serve, they are feeling less and less appreciated for their efforts. Officers deal with media portrayals that only highlight the bad and community anger at the very idea of police.

It is not an easy time to be a police officer. Stress levels are high and morale is often low. And yet, in the face of these challenges, officers show up every day, dedicated to doing their jobs, building trust, preventing crime, supporting victims, and keeping their communities safe. They enter the profession because they care, and they stay because of it.

We owe it to these officers to reduce their burdens and help them cope with the stressors of this meaningful but dangerous and demanding job.

I am proud that the IACP has been at the forefront of changing the narrative around law enforcement mental health and wellness. Speaking openly about the stressors we face on a regular basis normalizes the conversation around mental health throughout our field. Now, more than ever, we need to continue to expand our definition of officer safety to place equal emphasis on mental wellness.

This March, the IACP's Officer Safety and Wellness Symposium convened nearly 900 people, representing 49 states and 8 countries, which highlights the priority level of this topic across the profession.

Through the National Consortium on Preventing Law Enforcement Suicide, IACP convenes a multidisciplinary group of leading experts to continually assess and address evolving law enforcement mental health needs through evidence-based recommendations and resources. IACP's Law Enforcement Resilience Training has reached more hundreds of officers to help them learn the evidence-based skills they need to navigate adversity and grow and thrive in the face of the challenges of the job.

IACP's new police academy curriculum on officer safety and wellness will be made available nationwide to ensure that officers have the tools they need to have long and healthy careers. While we are extremely proud of the progress we have made, much more remains to be done to promote officer resiliency and wellness.

We commend the Department of Justice for continuing to expand funds for the Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act. This direct line of funding has helped many law enforcement agencies implement peer support and wellness services. But as we look out across the 18,000 U.S. law enforcement agencies, there are many agencies that do not yet have the training and resources they need to support their officers. Congress should strongly consider increasing the resources available under this act.

The IACP is proud to be a training provider with the Bureau of Justice Assistance VALOR Officer Safety and Wellness Initiative. The suite of trainings and resources on resilience, tactical safety, and suicide prevention have undoubtedly saved lives. By increasing funds to VALOR, we can magnify this impact across the field and continue to evolve services to meet the most pressing wellness and safety needs.

Finally, in addition to taking care of the officers we have, we need to address the hiring gap to reduce the stress on law enforcement agencies and individual officers. We urge you to expand COPS Hiring funds and explore ways to incentivize careers in law enforcement and promote recruitment and retention, through a national campaign. We also ask for other creative incentive programs – like loan forgiveness and education assistance. For example, an education assistance program that could be modeled after and expanded upon programs like the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA). An education assistance program would pay for four years of college, in return for service in policing. Ideally the program would be connected to multiple universities, including historically black colleges and universities, to encourage diversity.

In conclusion, our officers face threats on a daily basis. Some of these threats are direct, immediate threats like those posed by the proliferation of firearms in our communities. Other threats are a result of the profession they are in and the toll that constant exposure to traumatic events can cause. Our officers deserve our support, whether through the enactment of legislation that keeps guns out of the hands of criminals, a commitment by all members of the criminal justice system to effectively investigate and prosecute all violent and gun related crime, or providing our officers with the assistance, resources and tools they need to keep them safe.

I urge you to use your position and this opportunity to pass meaningful legislation that will further safeguard our communities and our officers. We look forward to working with this Committee and other Members of Congress as you work to pass legislation.

On behalf of the IACP, I conclude by thanking you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.