

Secondary Impacts of Gun Violence

Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing

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Einstein Medical Center, East Norriton Township

Testimony of:

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Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this morning. My name is Jack Stollsteimer, and I am the District Attorney in Delaware County.

You and I both know the unfortunate realities: too many of our communities are plagued by gun violence; gun violence results in death and serious bodily injury; gun violence can destroy or significantly harm towns and neighborhoods; gun violence hurts the economy; and in addition to the direct victims and their friends and families, others, like our medical personnel, law enforcement, and our children, suffer harm as a result of gun violence as well.

Many national groups have been able to catalogue the costs of gun violence. These costs are astounding. Consider the following:

- [A 2019 report](#) by the United States House of Representatives Joint Economic Committee reported that gun violence results in \$229 billion in total annual costs on the United States. In Pennsylvania, according to the same report, the costs were \$8.5 billion, which is 1.1% of the total Pennsylvania GDP. Pennsylvania ranks 26th in terms of death rate by firearm nationally.
- [Brady United Against Gun Violence](#) aptly summarized a [2017 report](#) by the Urban Institute, which shows that higher levels of neighborhood gun violence can be associated with fewer retail and service establishments as well as fewer new jobs; and also that higher levels of gun violence are also associated with lower home ownership.
- [A 2013 study by the Urban Institute](#) found that in 2010 alone, 36,000 victims of firearm assaults visited the emergency room, and 25,000 were admitted to the hospital — coming to a total cost of \$630 million. The majority of that price tag — or 52 percent — was charged to taxpayers through publicly funded health insurance, and 28 percent was billed to people who lacked health insurance.
- [Everytown for Gun Safety reports that taxpayers](#), survivors, families and employers pay an average of \$7.79 million daily in health care costs, including immediate and long-term medical and mental health care, plus patient transportation/ambulance costs related to gun violence, and lose an estimated \$147.32 million per day related to work missed due to injury or death. The average annual cost for overall gun violence in the United States is \$1,698 for every resident in the country.

These studies also report what so many of us know all too well: exposure to gun violence can cause lasting trauma in young people, which leads to chronic stress, PTSD, and decreased future earnings. One study, published in 1986, analyzed 16 children who had witnessed gun violence in their communities and families: every one of those children were found to have experiences post-traumatic stress disorder and 15 had serious problems in school the year after the incidents they witnessed. The title of this hearing reflects this awful fact – there are more than just the direct victims of gun violence. There are those who see it, hear it, or otherwise live with it in their neighborhoods. They, too, suffer tremendously.

As district attorney, I see some incredibly sad and tragic events: the grief of a loved one's death, the trauma of a child's sexual assault, the fear of a family being held up at gunpoint in their own home. I also see those who have witnessed a family member being fatally shot, who have seen their father physically abuse their mother with or by threat of a firearm, or who have seen their

neighborhood retail establishment robbed with the threat of a firearm. I know that so many of those individuals, too, will suffer and that their lives will never be the same. Our collective hearts break at these incidents, knowing that trauma, grief, and even fear are realities that may begin to characterize these victims' lives.

It is hard to find any significant aspect of life that is not affected -- physically, economically, and emotionally -- by gun violence. Families are torn apart; community harmony and tranquility become a thing of the past; economic development falters; job opportunities decrease.

We cannot stand idly by. And Senators, I know you are not.

There is so much we must do, some legislative, some operational, some involving funding, and some programmatic.

The most important thing we must do on the local level is to collaborate. Collaboration is not a mere cliché, it is a necessity, without which efforts to meaningfully reduce violence are doomed. In Delaware County, we collaborate every day. It is not an ideal or goal, it is the norm. I expect my staff, our police, our elected officials, our social services providers, and our defense bar to collaborate. We do not always agree on everything; nor should we. We have different perspectives and approaches and different lived experiences. But we work through it. We talk, we listen, we make suggestions, we evaluate ideas, and we put aside any differences we may have for the good of the community we serve.

One example of collaboration in Delaware County is the Chester Partnership for Safe Neighborhoods (CPSN). CPSN was launched in October of 2020 to combat the out of control gun violence in my county's only city that placed Chester on the annual list of America's most violent small cities. CPSN implemented a focused deterrence strategy that attempts to deter violent criminal behavior through fear of specific sanctions as well as anticipation of benefits for not engaging in crime. Specifically, we target the small number of individuals in the City of Chester who are most at risk and are causing most of the violence. We offer job training, education and mental health support. But if these individuals break the law, the police take swift action. As we like to say, "We will help you if you let us, but we'll stop you if you make us." [The program has been enormously successful.](#) During the first full year of the program in 2021, the City of Chester experienced 42 fewer shooting incidents from 2020 and 88 fewer from 2017. The City of Chester has also seen a 44% decrease in gun related homicides and a 34% decrease of shootings with victims when compared to 2016. And our 2021 homicide clearance rate was nearly 60%. Focused Deterrence is a national model and has been implemented in other cities across the country, successfully. Hallmarks of the program are, indeed, collaboration, a sense of urgency, great staff, community support and a healthy combination of traditional law enforcement and social services.

Nor can we meaningfully reduce gun violence without improving our gun laws. Among other things, we must reduce the supply of illegal guns in our communities, make ghost guns illegal, require the reporting of lost and stolen firearms, and enact Extreme Risk Protection Order legislation. We must also close a loophole that Senator Hughes has been trying to close for many years that prevents district attorneys from prosecuting those who break the law by possessing an

illegal firearm even though they have been convicted of an attempt, conspiracy, or solicitation to commit a disqualifying crime, like murder, assault, rape, and robbery. We can and must reduce the supply of illegal guns without infringing on our Second Amendment.

However, I do not believe we will ever meaningfully reduce gun violence, including deaths by suicide, until we significantly improve our mental health system. In both our juvenile and adult systems, we see significant and troubling problems: a lack of treatment beds, a lack of service providers, and an overall lack of adequate funding for them. When I meet with my colleagues around the Commonwealth, most bemoan, like me, the inadequacies of our existing mental health system and know that if it improved, we would see a reduction in violent crime and suicides and, as a result, less incarceration.

I especially worry because of the mental health crisis among our children. This past December, the U.S. surgeon general warned of a “[devastating](#)” [mental health crisis](#) among adolescents. [According to Dr. Tami Benton, psychiatrist-in-chief at CHOP](#), “in the first half of 2021 alone, children's hospitals reported cases of self-injury and suicide in ages 5-17 at a 45% higher rate than during the same timeframe in 2019 and, for children under 13, the suicide rate is twice that for black children than for white children.” She added more generally that young children and adolescents in the US are experiencing mental health stress at higher rates and with more dire consequences than ever before. She also stated CHOP has up to 50 patients waiting for mental health beds on any given day. And because CHOP typically operates at – or over – capacity, there are fewer beds for children with more complex medical needs. She added that these delays can lead to the wrongful placement of children in the juvenile justice system. If we do not take the mental health crisis seriously, the tragedies will grow, and more young Pennsylvanians will come into contact with the juvenile justice system and very likely some will resort to using firearms for dangerous purposes.

In Delaware County we take the crisis very seriously. Last year, we launched the Delco Healthy Kids Healthy Schools Initiative, a collaboration between county government, the District Attorney’s Office and schools across Delaware County to improve the way mental and behavioral health services are provided to our school - aged children. We began this because educators unequivocally told us that the biggest challenge they faced in keeping our kids safe was the untreated or inadequately treated mental and behavioral health needs of their students. Our goal is to develop and enact and sustain a plan that will ensure school-aged youth in Delaware County receive the behavior, mental health, and substance misuse services they need. I am not the only district attorney to have programs that seek to address mental health issues. Attorney General Shapiro’s proposal to place one mental health counselor in every school is a significant and necessary step, and I support this wholeheartedly.

Finally, to demonstrate some of the immediate steps policy makers on the federal, state and local level can take to reduce the effects of both direct and secondary gun violence, please see [I want to highlight recommendations by a very well-regarded think-tank, The Council on Criminal Justice](#). The Council works to advance understanding of the criminal justice policy choices facing the nation and build consensus for solutions that enhance safety and justice for all. Describing itself as independent and nonpartisan, the Council is in its words an incubator of policy and leadership for the criminal justice field. The Council at all times advances the notion that a fair and effective criminal justice system is essential to democracy and a core measure of our nation's well-being.

The Council, through its experts, recently identified ten essential actions cities can take to reduce violence now. The Council does not consider this comprehensive but instead the list highlights the actions members believe are most likely to make the greatest immediate impact on violence. They are not a substitute for longer-term strategies and investments. But they are nonetheless critical. And if we cannot accomplish these goals, then I believe we are unlikely to significantly address violent crime committed with firearms.

- Set a clear goal: commit to saving lives by stopping violence.
- Identify the key people and places driving the violence.
- Create a citywide plan for engaging key people and places
- Engage key people with empathy and accountability.
- Engage key locations using place-based policing and investment.
- Place responsibility for violence reduction at the top.
- Emphasize healing with trauma-informed approaches.
- Invest in anti-violence workforce development.
- Set aside funding for new stakeholders and strategies.
- Commit to continuous improvement based on data, evidence, and peer-to-peer learning.

Why do I list these 10 goals? Because you as legislators should expect us as local leaders to adhere to them. Similarly, we as local leaders should ask you for help and support on the state level to help us adhere to them. These are necessary and attainable goals. Hold us accountable to them, and we will certainly let you know what we may need to ensure our practices reflect each of them.

Thank you for holding this hearing. You are focusing on a critical impact of gun violence and, in doing so, are demonstrating that the terrible toll of gun violence is so much greater than we might think at first blush, and that the effects hurt taxpayers, our economy, the vitality of our neighborhoods, the possibilities of economic development, and also shrink our job supply, put strains on our medical system, and make the jobs of medical personnel, counselors, trauma specialists, victim advocates and law enforcement far more difficult. I look forward to continuing to work with you.