

Testimony of

Mr. Dennis A. Mook

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Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, good morning and thank you for allowing me to address this body today.

My name is Dennis Alan Mook. I am the chief of police for the city of Newport News, Virginia. Newport News is approximately 175 miles south of Washington and is located in the southeastern corner of Virginia, one of the 7 cities known as the Hampton Roads area. The cities of Hampton Roads serve a population of approximately 1.6 million.

Newport News is a diverse, urban city with a population of 182,000 residents. For perspective, Newport News is known, among other things, for making aircraft carriers and submarines for the United States Navy.

I am in my 30th year as a police officer and my 10th year as a chief of police. For almost all of my adult life I have worked, either directly as a police officer or indirectly as a supervisor or manager, on the streets of the inner city. I have witnessed dramatic changes in our culture in many respects during my career. Specifically, in regard to this committee hearing today, I have witnessed dramatic increases in gun violence in the streets of the cities of Hampton Roads. These changes are not much different than that which is experienced in other medium and large cities across the United States.

Thirty years ago the proliferation of guns like we have today was not evident. Additionally, those who used guns in crimes used them more as a threat than for actual use. That has changed. Now, for example, I see street robberies in which the victim willingly gives up his or her property and then is shot anyway. Increasingly, drug dealers commit robberies and home invasions with gun violence involved. Individuals are robbed and shot as though it was normal behavior. This is an alarming trend that has increased in frequency over the past 15 years.

Another aspect of how violence has changed over the years is the increase in threats by offenders against their victims, their victim's families, their victim's friends and witnesses to the crimes. It is apparent that the tactic to threaten those who are victimized, as well as their families and witnesses, has been successful. More and more offenders cannot be brought to justice do to fear experienced by those who have the knowledge of their illegal acts. Additionally, those who are arrested often walk free due to witnesses not appearing in court or simply changing their testimony due to those threats.

In Newport News, we have experienced this type of intimidation. Several dozen dangerous criminals had repeatedly terrorized certain neighborhoods in our city. That had happened for several years. In fact, one offender had been arrested over 50 times for felony crimes but had never been convicted due to the reasons I just stated. Our citizens had been intimidated into becoming prisoners in their homes and repeated victims of crimes.

Why did this happen? After all, the Newport News Police Department is nationally known for its innovative policing strategies in problem solving and community policing. The Newport News Police Department is a professional, internationally accredited police agency that stresses the suppression and prevention of crime through partnerships with our community members. We are aggressive but respectful of our citizens. We are staffed with some of the finest men and women anywhere. So why were we not able to stop or deter these serial violent offenders?

The reason is that we tried to attack the issue in a traditional manner. By that I mean we acted as a singular agency in partnership with citizens, the business community and other agencies in local, state and federal government to improve the quality of life and reduce crime. We demonstrated community policing at its best. But that approach was not enough. It was not enough because our strategies always focused on one criminal justice system or the other. Either the state system or the federal system was used to prosecute but not both.

It was only after we changed tactics and utilized the philosophy of taking advantage of the attributes of both criminal justice systems simultaneously did we see real results. We partnered with the United States Attorney's Office in Newport News, the Norfolk office of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and the Newport News prosecutor's office to form the Violent Crimes Task Force. Only then were we able to start to achieve success. Each criminal justice system, its laws and procedures, has certain strengths that make it advantageous to use for certain specific aspects of criminal investigations and prosecutions.

In the formation of the Violent Crimes Task Force in June, 2001, detectives re-opened, reviewed, re-constructed and re-investigated hundreds of closed cases involving violent crimes. Virtually all of the cases had ended with no arrests or dismissed charges due to repeated intimidation of witnesses and victims. The Task Force carefully chose and targeted 35 individuals who, in our opinion, were repeat, violent criminals responsible for over 300 crimes. To date, the Task Force has been able to arrest and have prosecuted successfully or are ready to try all 35 individuals in federal and state courts. Eight of these individuals have been charged in 6 different murders. The others have been charged with numerous counts of maiming, robbery, firearm and drug violations. All 35 of the individuals used illegal firearms at the time of their crimes. All but one of these already tried have received significant prison sentences ranging from 24 months to 143 years.

As a result of this partnership, reluctant victims and witnesses were brought before a federal grand jury, assured anonymity and safety, and testified to the crimes they observed. It was only through the use of the combination of federal firearms statutes as well as state laws for murder and other serious crimes, that these serial offenders were brought to justice. Neither system, in and of itself, possessed all the attributes to make this effort successful. Additionally, none of the agencies alone possessed the resources to successfully accomplish the task at hand.

This violent crime reduction effort in Newport News resulted in a dramatic reduction in homicides in Newport News, 42% in fact, for 2002.

Project Safe Neighborhood provides exactly the right ingredients and the right approach to assist localities in conducting gun violence reduction programs. Unlike Newport News, many localities cannot commit sufficient resources to a large, long-term program and need assistance through grants. Additionally, because of the complexity of the problems, it is difficult to create the sort of partnerships that are essential for an effective effort. A program such as Project Safe Neighborhood is tailor-made for these efforts.

Project Safe Neighborhood provides for the flexibility to choose federal or state prosecution to help ensure longer and more determinate sentences for criminals who possess or use guns illegally. Additionally, with the proper authorization, local law enforcement officers can arrest violators of federal statutes.

Coordinating federal, state and local resources can enhance prosecutions significantly and help ensure their success, through services ranging from forensic analysis to tracing the origin of suspect firearms.

The involvement of the federal criminal justice system sends a message to citizens that law enforcement will do whatever is necessary to stop the violence. This message gives citizens confidence to come forward with information and cooperation. This aspect of the program has particular significance.

By strengthening the partnerships among citizens, local governments, local police, federal law enforcement, state prosecutors as well as federal prosecutors, a balanced approach in enforcement, prevention and intervention can be accomplished.

It is said that information is the life-blood of law enforcement. Project Safe Neighborhood provides that avenue for vital information, at every level, to be shared efficiently among law enforcement which results in an increase in effectiveness.

Project Safe Neighborhood provides for the resources to create a program that reinforces the message that the community will not tolerate gun violence and will, together, do everything to prevent it. It removes serious violent offenders from the streets and out of our neighborhoods. Additionally, it increases the risk faced by potential offenders because resources are focused more efficiently on enforcement and prosecution.

In conclusion, Newport News saw a gun violence problem that seemed as though it could not be solved. Only by innovative and creative partnerships, commitment of necessary manpower, resources and money, as well as the tenacity of local and federal law enforcement officers and prosecutors, did we make a difference in the lives of our citizens by taking the most violence-prone serial criminals off the streets and out of the community.

Other localities with similar problems may not have the resources available nor the willingness of their United States Attorney's Office or local prosecutor to achieve similar results. The Project Safe Neighborhood program provides the needed assets for a successful strategy to the gun violence reduction issue as well as generate those resources and incentives for the essential partnerships that have to be formed in order to remove serial, violent offenders from the streets of America today.

Thank you and that concludes my remarks.