

Testimony of

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.

May 13, 2003

I want to commend Chairman Hatch for holding today's hearing on one of most important crime policy issues we face today - how best to combat illegal gun use, and the violence that flows from it, by criminals on our streets. "Project Safe Neighborhood" has been well-received by law enforcement around the country and I looked forward to hearing from several U.S. Attorneys, including my neighboring city of Philadelphia, as they described its effects in their communities. Unfortunately, I was unable to attend today's hearing as I was attending the funeral of Senator Russell Long in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

I have long been an advocate of tough laws to combat the illegal possession of guns by felons, the use of guns in drug trafficking, and other such crimes. Mr. Chairman, you and I have spent years studying this issue, and have together written many of the tough laws and penalties which are today being enforced as part of Project Safe Neighborhoods.

I have also long advocated an interagency approach to reducing gun violence. Several years ago, my home town of Wilmington experienced an unprecedented number of shootings.

In response, I convened all the law enforcement agencies in Delaware - including the Wilmington Police, FBI, ATF, DEA and the U.S. Marshal's Service. We sat down around my conference table and brain stormed about how best to mount a unified strategy to halt gun violence in Wilmington.

We set up a Law Enforcement Response Team to flood the neighborhoods where there were drug-related homicides to recover bullets, casings and other evidence. We instituted a Gun Review Committee, composed of state and federal prosecutors, which met bimonthly to review state gun cases and to determine which would be better prosecuted in federal court. We got the ATF to install new tracing technology to help in the recovery of illegal guns.

The result? A multi-agency response to help reduce gun violence by greater police presence in the neighborhoods and by swift, sure prosecution of gun crime offenses. My initiative is now part of Project Safe Neighborhoods, known locally in Delaware as "Operation Disarm." Operation Disarm has continued and expanded the coordination efforts we started and has been applauded by law enforcement.

Mr. Chairman, one of the most important things, in my view, that the federal government can do about crime is provide critical coordination and funding to crack down on gun violence. In 2001, there were over 13,000 murder victims in this country, not including the terror attacks of 9/11. Of these, over 8,700 - or 63% - were by firearms.

I look forward to hearing more about Project Safe Neighborhoods as a result of today's morning. In addition to 4 distinguished United States Attorneys, an impressive group of state and local law enforcement representatives will give their perspective on the program's successes in their communities. And I am also pleased that two noted criminologists will testify to discuss their analyses of this program, potential ways to improve it, and other initiatives that we all should consider as we work together to reduce gun violence in America.

And while I am very supportive of Project Safe Neighborhoods - I have seen it work in my hometown - I am interested in hearing the results of a study which suggest that this is not the one and only antidote to gun-related crime. It could be that estimates of the initiative's impact may be overly optimistic. The Attorney General noted a few months ago that federal gun crime charges were up 20 percent from 2001 to 2002. That's good news, but it's a continuation of the good news Attorney General Reno brought us at the end of her tenure: gun charges were up 37 percent from 1998 to 2000. From 1993 to 1999, the number of firearm-related homicides decreased by an average rate of nearly 11 percent per year, for an overall decreased of 49 percent. But we need to keep our eyes on the ball: In 2000, gun deaths increased 2 percent. They increased again last year.

I am glad today's hearing will shed light about what works in preventing gun crime. Mr. Chairman, this is a timely, necessary hearing, and I thank you for your leadership. I look forward to working with you in the coming months as we consider additional tools and resources we can provide to our police and prosecutors.