

Statement of

The Honorable Patrick Leahy

United States Senator

Vermont

September 10, 2008

Statement Of Chairman Patrick Leahy

Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee

Hearing on "New Strategies to Combat Violent Crime:

Drawing Lessons from Recent Experience"

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Today, the Committee turns to the critical issue of violent crime. While we saw great progress in reducing violent crime in the 1990s, that success has largely stalled.

The rate of homicide per person in the United States is nearly six times greater than in Germany, and four times greater than Great Britain or Canada. Since 2000, the number of murders and armed robberies remain nearly unchanged across the nation. These statistics do not tell the whole story, though, as nationwide trends no longer effectively explain what is truly happening in our cities and towns. Too many of our communities are seeing resurgences in violent crime. One such community is Rutland, Vermont, where the Judiciary Committee held a hearing last spring to study that city's effective responses to a disturbing spike in violent crime. Other communities have seen declines in violent crime since 2000, as some major cities like New York have the resources to try new strategies and are reporting historically low crime rates.

At today's hearing, I hope we can begin to look behind these national statistics and trends and learn more about what is working and what is not. I particularly want to hear about the new, community-based strategies that are proving to be more successful than ever and that could lead to another era of substantial crime reduction, as we saw in the 1990s.

No one knows these issues better than Senator Joe Biden. He has long been at the forefront of crime fighting efforts and led us to promote these community-based models of policing. His leadership in writing and passing legislation to create and fund the COPS program and other innovative policing

strategies led to the unprecedented drop in violent crime we saw during the 1990s. The support for these initiatives has often been bipartisan. Senator Specter recently called Senator Biden a "leader on crime control" and has long supported Senator Biden's efforts. I know that Joe Biden's leadership will be essential next year as we move to restore our Federal assistance efforts and to formulate the next breakthrough in reducing violent crime in our country.

Since 2000, violent crime statistics have presented us with a new, disturbing dilemma. While violent crime rates overall have remained mostly unchanged, the rates of incarceration nationwide over the past eight years have spiked to levels once thought unimaginable. Today, we imprison more than 2.3 million adults in America, more than any other nation in the world. For the first time ever, one in every 100 adult men in America is in prison or jail. The rates are even more startling for certain minorities. For Hispanics, one out of every 36 men is locked up; for African-Americans, it is one out of every 15. For black men between the ages of 20 and 34, it is one in nine.

If locking up more and more people were the simple answer, we would have seen crime continue to drop over the last eight years. That has not happened. In fact, in many of those places where we have locked up the most offenders, crime continues to cripple our communities, particularly in poor and minority neighborhoods.

As a former prosecutor, I have always supported accountability and tough sentences for those who commit serious crimes. But most veteran police chiefs will tell you, as Los Angeles Police Chief Bill Bratton told this Committee earlier this year, you cannot just arrest your way out of this problem. As a Nation, we need to be honest about these basic facts and acknowledge that more mandatory minimums and longer sentences do not make crime go down. We need to figure out what will make crime go down.

As we saw in the 1990s, we have real success in combating violent crime when we focus our communities, and when our communities join with our law enforcement professionals in the fight against crime. Supported by the COPS program in the Clinton administration, community policing has long provided greater safety for our hardest hit neighborhoods.

The focus on communities has also led to new innovations in police strategies that have shown great promise for the future. These new community initiatives have focused on combating youth violence and eradicating entrenched drug markets. Their success is encouraging as evidence grows that these initiatives work to keep crime down.

In High Point, North Carolina, the local police had all but written off the West End, which for decades was dominated by drugs and prostitution. In 2002, police there decided on a new approach, building on

earlier models proven successful in the Boston CEASEFIRE initiative. Instead of just doing more sweeps and arresting the usual suspects, police targeted the most serious offenders, met and worked with local community leaders, clergy, and service providers, and united all of these parts of the community to attack the problem together.

As one of our witnesses -- Reverend Summey -- will tell us this morning, the results were clear. Within weeks, drug dealers and prostitutes were gone from the streets; crime fell by more than 50 percent, and now more than five years later, it is still down. More importantly, the community looks and feels like an entirely new place. This initiative involved more than just the police making arrests; it put the community and its police and service providers on the same page, so they could give hope and promise to all its residents. This spirit of unity and joint commitment remains.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about the most effective new strategies for combating violent crime so that the next Congress, and the next administration, can be better prepared to help our cities and towns to implement effective anti-crime strategies. Bringing down the rate of violent crime in this country is a vital responsibility, and we should tolerate nothing less than success.

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