

Testimony of
The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.

December 5, 2001

I would like to welcome all of you to the first hearing of the new Crime and Drug Subcommittee. It's been a long time since there has been a subcommittee focused solely on these issues - I look forward to working with Senator Grassley on this panel.

It is no accident that the inaugural hearing of this Subcommittee is on "Making America's Streets Safer: The Future of the COPS Program." I have long maintained the view - one shared by most of our witnesses today - that our commitment to put more cops on the street is one of the most effective means of stopping crime before it can occur.

This afternoon's hearing is on the future of the COPS program - that is the "Community Oriented Policing Services" Program. We have a very distinguished panel of witnesses here with us, and I am eager to hear their testimony.

I called this hearing for two simple reasons:

First, I want to find out whether the COPS program has worked? Let's examine COPS and hear from local officials, sheriffs, chiefs and criminologists on their views of the program.

Seven years ago, we passed the Biden Crime Bill. 100,000 new cops. More prisons. Smart prevention. These were part of the equation that I thought would make our streets safer.

In creating the COPS program, I had two primary purposes in mind: (1) to encourage police departments to make a fundamental and critical shift in philosophy by embracing community policing; and (2) to deliver needed dollars to our police departments so they could beef up their forces.

There are some things we know about crime, I said at the time. We know that if there are two street corners in the same city, one has a cop standing on the corner and one does not have a cop, the chances of a crime being committed where one has a cop is less than the one where there is not a cop. This isn't rocket science. Cops prevent crime as well as arrest perpetrators of crime.

And where are we, seven years later? Seventy three thousand new police officers are out on patrol. Crime is down 22% from the date the Crime Bill was signed. The percentage of cops who are community police officers went from 4 to 21 percent in just the last three years.

And one of our witnesses today, a criminologist, will testify about the results of the first comprehensive academic analysis of the COPS program and its effect on crime in America. It was a 5 year study that looked at 6,100 municipalities covering 145 million Americans. This study - being released by the University of Nebraska - found unequivocally that more cops on the street means "significantly" less crime.

Specifically, the study found that for every dollar spent per person in a city with a population of 100,000 resulted in decrease of over 5 violent crimes and a decrease in almost 22 property crimes. And the numbers are even higher for targeted COPS grants - a drop of 13 violent crimes and a drop in 45 property crimes.

Is the crime drop attributable solely to COPS? Certainly not. But to think that this increased police presence has not made a difference shows a complete lack of understanding about fighting crime. Any police chief in the country will tell you that the best way to deter crime before it starts is to have a visible presence of officers in the community.

You don't have to take my word for it. Let's ask police chiefs and sheriffs and county executives and criminologists on whether COPS has had an impact on the crime rate.

But I called this hearing today for a second reason as well. This nation is now in a difficult time, engaged in a war against terrorism. And three developments have me greatly concerned about the potential to lose valuable ground in our struggle against crime - a fight we've been winning for almost a decade: (1) I am concerned that the Administration may propose the elimination of the COPS program for the next budget cycle; (2) the FBI has announced a massive, potentially permanent "redeployment" of their agents away from street crime investigations, thereby creating an enormous "gap" which state and local law enforcement will have to fill; and (3) the economic downturn is squeezing localities, who will be forced to cut essential services - including law enforcement personnel. They will have trouble funding their existing police, let alone being able to hire new ones to "fill the gap" left by redeployed FBI agents.

Wouldn't it be ironic if our war on terrorism unwittingly undercut our successful fight against crime? Yet some have - incredibly - actually suggested that we raid the COPS fund to pay for the war on terrorism. We must do both. Indeed, this is the time to spend MORE on the COPS program, not less. Why penalize what has worked? It is sort of like cutting the grass. . . .

The time to extend COPS, with full funding, is now. I introduced a bill a few months ago that will send more funds out to police departments - enough to hire up to 50,000 more cops. It includes money for new technologies, so law enforcement can have access to the latest high-tech crime fighting equipment to keep pace with today's sophisticated criminals. Fifty two senators support this plan - It's time to take action and reauthorize COPS.

When police officers, chiefs, sheriffs and mayors came to me seven years ago and asked for a program to help them grow and modernize their police departments, I got all of them around my conference table and asked them what they needed. It's time to listen to law enforcement again who want more flexibility in the program and more funds for school resource officers. My bill provides these things.

I want to know where the Administration is on COPS. I hope the rumors aren't true. I hope we can make community policing a bipartisan issue. Sometimes I feel like my friends on the other side of the aisle don't like COPS because they didn't think of it. If that's the case, let's change the name, let's call it something else. I don't really care who gets the credit for this program - I just don't want to see it wither on the vine.

As a famous New York City mayor put it over a half century ago: "there is no Democratic way or Republican way to clean the city's streets." Likewise, there is no Democratic way or Republican way to clear our streets of crime. COPS has a track record of success. I say let's stick with what works.

With that, let me turn to Senator Grassley for any comments he may have.