

Statement of
The Honorable Patrick Leahy

United States Senator
Vermont
May 23, 2007

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Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee
Hearing on "Rising Crime in the United States: Examining the Federal Role in Helping
Communities Prevent and Respond to Violent Crime"
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Violent crime in the United States is a problem that affects us all, and the rise in violent crime rates is an alarming trend that Congress must address. I thank Senator Biden for holding this important hearing.

Like my colleagues, I have been extremely concerned that violent crime, which had been declining through the 1990s, has once again been on the rise. I worry that the previous Republican-led Congress and the current Administration may have contributed to this trend by cutting funding to local law enforcement, which has always been our best resource in preventing violent crime.

We have seen a steady and significant decline in the funds appropriated and spent for the Community Oriented Policing Services Program. The COPS program increased police presence on the streets, and by all accounts aided in the steady decline in the national crime rate in the 1990s. Beginning with President Bush's first year in office, the Administration has proposed consistent cuts, and in fact has proposed to completely do away with the COPS program.

In 2005, the GAO recognized that the COPS program had been effective in reducing violent crime. Between 1994 and 2001, violent crime dropped by 29 percent. State and local law enforcement officers have consistently appreciated the program. Since the Administration and the Republican Congress began cutting this program, however, the rate of violent crime has once again been steadily climbing, as statistics for 2005 and the first half of 2006 show. Yet, the President continues to propose cuts in the COPS program and the Byrne grant program, another important program to fund local law enforcement.

We have been trying to reverse this trend. This Congress and this Committee have been taking important steps to show our support for our nation's law enforcement officers. In March, the Senate Judiciary Committee voted to report the COPS Improvement Act of 2007, which I joined with Senator Biden to introduce. Despite tremendous support for this legislation, a Republican objection to passing the House version of this bill has prevented this important legislation from passing the Senate. I hope the objection is soon withdrawn.

This legislation would reauthorize and expand the ability of the Attorney General to award grants aimed at increasing the number of cops on the streets and in our schools. In Vermont, for example, passage of the COPS Improvement Act would likely mean that 110 new officers would be put on the beat. Additionally, the COPS Improvement Act would authorize funds for district attorneys to hire community prosecutors and for law enforcement technology grants. The COPS program has been a resounding success, and the proposed improvements to the program would help our State and local law enforcement agencies cope with the substantial reductions in funding they have endured in recent years.

I am also a longtime supporter of the Edward Byrne Memorial Assistance Grant Program, which has been targeted for elimination by this Administration. Byrne funding is the backbone of counter-drug enforcement and prosecution efforts in Vermont. Over the years, Vermont has been able to support a broad spectrum of projects within corrections, courts, training, forensics, and domestic violence and victim services as a result of the Byrne grant program. In March, this Committee agreed to report reauthorization of Byrne grants, as well.

We must do what we can to reverse the alarming trend of rising crime in this country. We must give local law enforcement the resources they need, and we must make sure that the Federal Government is doing its part. We must fund and encourage more prevention programs, particularly for young people, which can reach kids before they turn to crime and keep all of us safer. I look forward to the insights of today's distinguished witnesses, including leaders of important law enforcement entities about how best to address our crime problem.

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