

Written Testimony of
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Office of the Attorney General
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Members of the Senate:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today, and for the work you have undertaken to address crime and violence in Pennsylvania. The Attorney General appreciates your consideration of our past comments. Today, I would like to highlight some of the trends that we are seeing around the state that both deserve and require critical attention and workable solutions to help us achieve public safety.

Juvenile Crime and Social Media

Recognizing that juvenile crime has been on the rise, we need to do all we can to hold individuals accountable for increasingly violent acts. As you are aware, our Gun Violence Task Force does tremendous work. Sadly, we have seen startling examples of juveniles who have access to firearms, access to advanced weaponry, and access to social media on which they brag about their guns and the crimes they have committed, knowing full well that the consequences for those illegal acts may be minimal.

I'd like to share a few examples of cases our GVTF has handled in the past 12 months to illustrate my point: A juvenile was adjudicated delinquent for possession of a firearm by a minor on July 1, 2022. Juvenile Probation conducted a probation enforcement action at this juvenile's residence after they saw him on Instagram in possession of a gun with an extended magazine. GVTF agents executed a search warrant at his residence and recovered 3D printers, other tools necessary to produce Poly 80 ghost guns, a complete Poly 80 pistol with an obliterated serial number, multiple Poly 80 lower receivers and slides, and Glock switches.

An 18 year old was on Philadelphia Juvenile Probation supervision at the time of his arrest for an adjudication of "minor in possession of a firearm." E.S. is a known member of a gang and was a suspect in at least two separate Philadelphia homicides. Analysts observed E.S. on Instagram in possession of a semi-automatic firearm with a full auto switch inside his probation-

approved address. Agents executed a search warrant and recovered a revolver, fired cartridge casings, drug paraphernalia, and 50 oz. of cocaine. E.S.'s father was also present at the time of the search warrant execution, and he was also found to be a person not permitted to possess firearms. E.S. stated that he bought the recovered firearm from someone on the street in Kensington.

Three juveniles were arrested on November 1, 2022 in a stolen car. One was heard on a recorded prison call threatening to bring a gun to his high school. Agents observed a video of him on Instagram Live where he was in possession of a semiautomatic handgun and a large amount of cash. While the video was being filmed, agents located the three juveniles in a stolen car in NE Philadelphia. One had an active arrest warrant for robbery at the time. The car was searched, and marijuana, cash, packaging material, and paraphernalia were recovered from the stolen car. Agents found a key fob on one of the juvenile's person during a search incident to arrest which corresponded to a Kia Fore that was also stolen.

Nineteen year old S.R. was arrested by GVTF agents on July 13, 2021 when GVTF executed a search warrant at his residence and found a handgun and marijuana. He is prohibited from possessing firearms due to an adjudication of delinquency for Felony Aggravated Assault. Agents located the individual who likely straw purchased the recovered gun, and seized two other firearms from the straw purchaser on August 9, 2022.

Eighteen year old J.T. was arrested on July 7, 2022 for shooting a firearm indiscriminately in the air on July 4, 2022. After observing a video of the incident on Instagram, agents responded to the area and recovered FCCs (fired cartridge casings) on the block. On July 7, 2022, members of the GVTF, US Marshals, and Philadelphia Police Department executed a search warrant at J.T.'s residence and recovered a Taurus 9mm handgun, a .44 special revolver w/ an obliterated serial number, and various magazines and ammunition.

These examples are just a small representation of the types of cases we're seeing, and unfortunately, they are pervasive. After reviewing them, it is easy to see why a lot of arguments begin on social media and then escalate in real life to serious violent incidents because of the staggering number of easily-available firearms.

Social Media

In terms of social media in general, we are seeing harm to kids manifest in many ways, and in scope. The dangers of social media include not only the brazen showing of guns, drugs, and money, but also encourage bullying, dangerous “challenges,” and unsafe, illegal or anti-social behaviors. Social media causes mental health issues for our children, including depression, anxiety, self-worth issues, and in some cases, suicide.

Student safety

Safe2Say launched in January, 2019. This statewide program enables students, teachers, school administrators and others to detect and report potential threats of violence and additional student safety issues before they happen. The Safe2Say reporting system has received more than 109,459 tips and calls from across PA (figure as of March, 2023). Last school year there was a 250% increase in calls from the previous year. The OAG crisis center processes the tips and thousands have been referred to local law enforcement and school officials for follow up.

While Safe2Say is one of OAG’s many solutions-oriented efforts to address violence, particularly in schools, as you can see from the increase in calls, the trend across PA is that more students and adults are utilizing the system, which we hope ultimately will help to prevent elevated incidents of violence. This burst in calls for help or to report potentially perilous situations spotlights the extraordinary need for Trauma-Informed training for law enforcement and Trauma-Informed care for students.

Other issues that contribute to crime and violence in PA

Drugs / Opioids

Addressing the heroin, fentanyl, and opioid crisis from every angle has been an ongoing priority for the past several years. In addition to investigations and arrests through our Bureau of Narcotics Investigation, we are involved in three types of task forces – OAG controlled, DA controlled, and Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force for multi-county cases. These task forces combat violence driven by narcotics trafficking. Trends we are seeing include increased seizures of fentanyl and more unregulated or unscheduled drugs used in mixtures.

To address substance abuse disorders: LETI (Law Enforcement Treatment Initiative) launched in 2018 partnering with county DAOs and local police to help establish pathways to

treatment without risk of arrest. More than 25 counties have begun LETI programs. By investing in treatment alternatives for substance abusers, the criminal justice system can better focus on arresting the traffickers and violent offenders.

Retail Theft

Statewide, we are grappling with organized retail theft chains, where perpetrators steal items or pre-activated gift cards from stores and re-sell the stolen merchandise for profit. Retail theft in general impacts businesses, closes businesses, and dilutes the quality of life in our cities, counties, and neighborhoods. The trend we see is the effects of the closures in all types of retail stores, especially low-dollar stores and convenience stores that keep early and late hours, which cascade into abandoned store fronts, loss of jobs, increased crime and general despair among inner city residents.

Guns – Adults

Our Gun Violence Section (GVS) has been operational in Allegheny County since 2019. In 2022, PA had the 27th highest rate of gun violence in the nation with 2851 shootings, 924 killed, and 2589 injured. Also last year, there were 71 homicides in Pittsburgh, a 39% increase over the 51 homicides in 2021. In 2022, in all of Allegheny County, there were 122 homicides. 80% of the additional 51 countywide victims were black. The gun violence epidemic continues to ravage our state, no matter how many resources we dedicate to stopping it. The number of illegal guns, innocent victims, and unrelenting fear and trauma to our communities continues to rise each year.

In conclusion, as a statewide agency, we are seeing trends in crime and violence shifting in the wrong direction, and we appreciate the opportunity to discuss these observations more fully with a mutual goal of strategizing to increase public awareness and public safety.