

Pennsylvania Chiefs of Police Association

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David Splain
President
Chief of Police
Nether Providence

Michael Vogel
2nd Vice President
Chief of Police
Allegheny County Housing
Authority

Patrick Molloy
4th Vice President
Chief of Police
Abington Township

Examining Criminal Justice Statistics and Trends in Pennsylvania

Law enforcement faces numerous challenges in their efforts to maintain public safety and uphold the law. There is a public expectation that officers extend themselves in an effort to reduce crime. When we Politicize and demonize their efforts sends the wrong message: that message is that they're the problem. As a consequence, many are quitting or leaving their jobs. Recruitment is down considerably. Some have suggested that unqualified or underqualified officers are taking their place. Violent crime is increasing. Juvenile crime is an issue. Guns and drugs are an issue. Children are being traumatized. Jobs are being lost. People and businesses are leaving our urban centers. There should be a furore over this injustice. The concept of justice is not isolated to policing. This is an issue that is also rooted in: employment, opportunity, education, mental health services, social services, substance abuse – recovery services, state and local budgets and civility.

Today we would like to focus on a few of those Issues:

- Violent Crime
- Juvenile Crime
- Officer Recruitment and Retention
- Bail Reform
- “Meet-Ups”
- Officer Wellness

Violence

In the last two years, our country has become less safe, both for the average American and for our law enforcement officers. This year's FBI data regarding line of duty deaths paints the picture. The number of attacks on law enforcement officers in 2022 reflects a 50 percent increase from the previous year. In 2021, we had over 340 police officers shot. In 2022, over 330, and this year we've already had 100. This year the State

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has lost 4 police officers in the Commonwealth to gun violence. With the proliferation of firearms in the hands of offenders and with most being under the influence of drugs or alcohol and/or having mental health or emotional issues, police contacts and arrests can become dangerous without warning. There's no criminal accountability without arrests. We may disagree on how we got here. But we should all agree that we need to do more to support law enforcement and ensure that they can safely carry out their mission.

Juvenile Crime

The estimated number of youth arrests for violent crime, which includes murder, robbery, and aggravated assault, has declined since the mid-2000s. By 2020, the number of violent crime arrests involving youth reached a new low, 78% below the 1994 peak, and half the number 10 years earlier. Males accounted for 80% of all youth arrests for violent crimes in 2020, but their share of murder (92%) and robbery (88%) arrests was much greater. Youth ages 16–17 accounted for more than half (55%) of all youth arrests for violent crime but accounted for 76% of all youth arrests for murder. Juvenile crime has continued to rise since our 2020 low.

As crime continues to plague citizens in our cities large and small, violent crimes involving juveniles continues to make headlines and frustrate elected leaders and law enforcement. Teens simply are not deterred from crime because of the light consequences that have become the new norm in many areas.

In response to teen violence, some have blamed police staffing shortages that critics say were made worse by the Defund the Police movement, progressive bail, and criminal justice reforms, as well as teens scoffing at authorities for young people's brazen acts of violence, often in broad daylight. In Philadelphia one constant for juvenile offenders arrested for violent crimes was that many had prior arrests for carjacking or gun crimes. Some attributed that to policies that release suspects back onto the streets after they are arrested, allowing them to re-offend with little-to-no consequences. Juvenile offenders need to be held accountable, but in age-appropriate ways that address the cause of their behavior. A bigger police presence would curb some of the juvenile violence, a difficult task given police staffing shortages coupled with recruiting and retention problems.

Recruitment and Retention

Law enforcement executives research studies indicate that 78% of responding agencies had difficulty recruiting qualified candidates, and 75% felt that recruiting challenges were worse than they had been five years earlier. The same survey found that generational differences in preferences

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for work-life balance, challenges in the hiring process, and the public's image of law enforcement were all perceived as affecting the profession's challenges in recruiting. Echoing similar findings, a report by the Police Executive Research Foundation (PERF) found that 63% of agencies reported a decrease in the number of applicants for open police-officer positions relative to five years earlier.

With a diminished pool of job applicants comes the attendant difficulty in hiring. A recent workforce survey by PERF found that hiring within medium- and large-sized police departments had decreased by 29% and 36%, respectively, over prior years. We have observed the impact this is having on suburban and rural agencies in the Commonwealth. Equally troubling has been the difficulty in keeping officers within the workforce after recruiting, training, and deploying them into the field of service. PERF found that the two most common reasons given for an officer's decision to separate from a police agency were to seek a job at another department, followed closely by the desire to pursue other work entirely outside of the law enforcement profession.

The continuing crisis in police officer recruitment and retention will further exacerbate rising crime rates and the attendant social dysfunction that accompanies it unless police departments and local communities commit to reversing course and adopting policies that incentivize qualified individuals to seek and sustain employment within the law enforcement profession.

Bail Reform

The reality of crime has long been that it's a phenomenon driven mostly by a relative handful of individuals in a given jurisdiction. That's just as, if not more, true for serious violent crime. Almost invariably, when you read or hear a story about a serious violent crime — especially a shooting or homicide — the suspect will be reported as having a lengthy criminal history or an active criminal justice status (like parole, probation, or pretrial release). This is hardly a new development; and it's certainly not unique to Pennsylvania.

By using data to inform everything from police resource deployment to pretrial release and sentencing decisions, we have it in our power to be more precise in how we do criminal justice, reserving the sharpest edges of the system for those who pose the greatest risks to their communities. This would allow us to reap the benefits associated with the incapacitation of the most chronic offenders without having to impose so many burdens on those who aren't threats. But our ability to do this has been hampered by reform efforts aimed at de-policing and de-incarceration.

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Repeatedly, we see [crime drivers] get second and third chances while repeatedly demonstrating an unwillingness to correct their criminal behavior. We are calling on lawmakers to make the necessary changes to give police, judges, and prosecutors the tools they need to keep our communities safe. This request is echoed by police executives, public safety advocates and concerned citizens across our State. The question is: Will our elected officials listen?

Public Safety – “Meet-Ups”

The popularity and visibility of illegal street racing known as “meetups,” “takeovers” or “slide shows” — where participants shut down public streets to spin doughnuts or perform other stunts with souped-up vehicles and ATV’s is on the rise. We have all seen the reports of large blocking the roadway for illegal street racing and stunts. In our urban areas and in some of the surrounding collar communities we are seeing incidents where a sizable number of vehicles illegally block the roadways, while others are doing burnouts and drifting, as a large crowd of spectators watched.

Recently a series of takeover events across the city of Philadelphia and was promoted online under the slogan “Philly vs Everyone,” featuring tricked-out cars, fireworks, and even one man with a flame thrower device. There have been reports of violence and death. Locations are shared on the day of to minimize the time understaffed police have to organize a response.

Communities are being impacted by illegal street racing and its dangerous and deadly nature.

Illegal street racing includes the following behaviors:

- Large groups or gathering of vehicles meeting up in public areas, parking lots, or warehouses who, as a group, plan, and race to the next meetup location
- Modifications of vehicles designed to increase the vehicle's speed, sound, and appearance and/or traveling in large groups on the roadways, creating traffic issues, and driving at high rates of speed
- Squealing of tires, revving of engines, and loud exhaust that can be heard from miles away community is impacted by illegal street racing and its dangerous and deadly nature.

We acknowledge that police presence and strict enforcement efforts alone cannot, and have not, solved this issue. We are seeking modifications to The Commonwealths Vehicle Code to strengthen illegal street racing vehicle seizure laws, not only in Philadelphia but all communities as and are explore other enforcement

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strategies and techniques which curtail street racing. We believe these changes are part of the larger scope of work to address street racing.

Officer Safety and Wellness

Law enforcement officers face physical risks and psychological stress in their daily duties. The need to address officer safety through training, equipment, and appropriate staffing levels is crucial. Additionally, ensuring officers' mental health and well-being is essential to maintain their effectiveness and prevent issues like burnout and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Scott L. Bohn

Executive Director, Pennsylvania Chiefs of Police Association

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