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Law Enforcement, Youth and Policy Groups Denounce Mayor's Emergency Crime Proposals

Spike in youth crime exaggerated; Crackdown on youth not justified, employment programs more effective at dealing with delinquency

WASHINGTON, D.C.—The Mayor's emergency proposal to crackdown on D.C. youth through an historic erosion of youth protections, and increased surveillance and policing is not justified by crime data or best practices for enhancing public safety, according to law enforcement, youth, civil rights and policy groups. Despite several high-profile violent crimes impacting tourist destinations and affluent neighborhoods, D.C. youth are not committing most of the city's violent crime, which reached a five-year low in the last calendar year. Evidence does not show that curfews reduce crime, but employment and youth development programs, which have experienced massive funding cuts nationally and in D.C., are proven to be effective at reducing delinquent behavior among young people.

Analysis of data does not indicate the kind of significant increase in violent crime that has been used to justify emergency measures, according to the Justice Policy Institute. Between 2004-2005, overall crime declined 6.7 percent in Washington, D.C. While the short-term increase in adult and juvenile robberies is cause for concern, the analysis of small numbers over short time exaggerates shifts, and does not reveal a trend in rising youth crime. Overall, youth crime has not changed significantly for categories other than robberies and weapons, which increased by small numbers of actual arrests.

"There are many good reasons to enhance safety in D.C., but opening up juvenile records, extending curfews, expanding surveillance cameras, and adding millions more to police budgets won't solve our real crime problems," said Jason Ziedenberg, executive director of the Justice Policy Institute. "Exaggerating youth involvement in crime does not make for sound public policy. Instead of adding more funds to the police budget, the city should invest in the kinds of effective employment and youth development programs that have been shown to reduce crime in other jurisdictions."

The Mayor's proposal overplays youth involvement in crime, with young people making up only a small fraction of arrests in D.C. Data from the Metropolitan Police Department shows that 94 percent of all arrests in 2006, and 82 percent of all violent arrests in 2006 were of adults.

"Legislation that opens up confidential youth records will not stop the violence, or make our communities safer," said Arja Nelson, an organizer with the Justice for DC Youth Coalition, an organization comprised of youth, parents and community activists working to promote education and youth development instead of punishment and incarceration. "Rather than criminalizing D.C.'s youth and communities, the Mayor should follow the recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Commission report on juvenile justice, which called for investing in community-based programs and alternatives to incarceration, and closing Oak Hill."

Expanding curfews, as the Mayor proposes, is not likely to reduce crime. A JPI analysis on the curfew policies of California found no evidence that curfews reduce youth crime. For the entire state of California there was no category of crime (misdemeanors, violent crime, property crime, etc.) which significantly declined in association with use of youth curfews. Overall, counties with strict youth curfews witnessed no decrease in youth crime relative to counties without strict curfews. Four large counties (Los Angeles, Santa Clara, Fresno, and Ventura) displayed a racial bias in curfew enforcement.

The Mayor also proposes to dismantle a fundamental protection of the youth justice system by eroding the confidentiality of youth records. While there is plenty of reason to believe that young people will suffer from more open records, there is no evidence to suggest that diminishing youth protections will enhance public safety. The confidentiality of youth records did not prevent juvenile crime in D.C. from falling by 30 percent between 1995 and 2005, while adult crimes fell by a much smaller 7 percent.

“The city needs to respond to crime with a more balanced approach,” said Ron Hampton, executive director of the National Black Police Association. “These proposals are short-sighted, and won’t serve the best serve the public. Rather than investing overwhelming amounts in suppression, the city needs to develop thoughtful and long term approaches that address the historic needs of D.C.’s communities.”

Statistical Overview: DC Crime Change in Perspective.

Crime declined last year: Between 2004 and 2005, *overall crime actually declined* 6.7 percent in Washington, D.C. and homicide, sexual assault and assault with a weapon reached the lowest point in five years. Because of an increase in robberies, overall violent crime rose 5 percent. The increase in robberies represents less than *one percent* of all crimes reported in D.C. in 2005. The “95 percent” in juvenile robbery arrests is a measure of the change from the first six months of this year to the first six months of 2005. A comparison of juvenile robbery arrests of the last six months of 2005 and the first six months of 2006 show that the number of arrests stayed about the same.

Youth underrepresented in arrests: JPI also warns against the exaggeration of youth involvement in D.C.’s crime. The latest figures from the Metropolitan Police Department show that 94 percent of all arrests in 2006, and 82 percent of all violent arrests in the city in 2006 were adults. As of June, 2006, one of 36 homicide arrests, 93 of 829 aggravated assaults, and one of 10 rape/sexual abuse arrests were of juveniles. Of the 343 robbery arrests made in D.C.—a particular concern raised by law enforcement—209 arrests were adults, and 134 were juveniles.

Spending on police and public safety outpaces spending on other areas

The crime “emergency” was called during a week that the Washington, D.C. Council approved a plan to increasing the policing budget, resulting in an increase of 450 new officers at a cost of \$28 million.¹

The Mayor’s budget plan for 2007 would see the Metropolitan Police Department budget rise by \$66 million, from \$365 million in 2005 to \$432 million (or 18 percent increase in General Fund spending on MPD).² *Just the increase* in the Mayor’s budget plan for police would represent:

- More than what the city spends on the University of the District of Columbia (\$59 million);
- More than what the city spends on the DC Public Library system (\$41 million);
- More than what the city spends on the Parks and Recreation (\$44 million);

According to the D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute³, the Mayor’s budget plan saw public safety and justice spending rise nearly three times faster (10.8 percent) than spending on human support services (3.8 percent), and public education (3.7 percent).

Youth crime correlates with rise and fall of youth employment. A near decade-long trend in Washington, D.C., shows that youth unemployment closely tracked youth referrals to the juvenile justice system (see graph below). Employment for young people may be an effective way to reduce crime. Between 1997 and 2000, the youth unemployment rate in DC (ages 16-19) fell from 42.4 percent, to 30.4 percent, a decline of 28 percent in youth unemployment. During that same time, the rate at which youth were referred to DC courts for violent and property crimes declined by 18 percent, and for all crimes, there was a 16 percent decline in youth referrals to court per 100,000 youth.

¹Klein, Allison. “Robberies on the Mall a Trend, Chief says,” *The Washington Post*, July 13, 2006

²FY 2007 Proposed Budget and Financial Plan, June, 2006. The budget is still awaiting Congressional approval.

³What’s in the FY 2007 Budget Request, DC Fiscal Policy Institute, May, 2006.

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The Justice Policy Institute is a Washington, D.C.-based think tank dedicated to ending society's reliance on incarceration and promoting effective and just solutions to social problems. For more information, visit our website at www.justicepolicy.org