

Committee On The Judiciary and Committee On Health & Human Services  
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My name is Jack McKay, and I'm testifying for my ANC, Mount Pleasant. I've been a resident of Mount Pleasant for 41 years, since long before it became "gentrified", and I've been an ANC commissioner for 12 years.

Homicides in DC are up by 45% this year, compared to last year. Virtually all of these homicides have taken place east of 16th Street, mostly far from our low-crime neighborhood. And yet, this sharp increase in homicides has reached us, too, with a shooting death in our neighborhood on September 18. Before this incident last month, Mount Pleasant had gone three years without a single homicide. That even our neighborhood, at the very edge of Rock Creek Park has seen a homicide, is an indication of how serious this surge in homicides is.

The homicide in Mount Pleasant was, I believe, typical of those occurring in the District: two young men, one 25, the other 27, engaged in some personal dispute, which one escalated to gunfire. There is no indication that they were engaged in any criminal activity. I don't know that either could be described as a "criminal". This was, I believe, just two young men having an argument, something that would never have amounted to anything, but one of the men brought a handgun to the argument, and the other is now dead.

What's clear is that conventional police work is not going to prevent such deaths. I believe that the homicide wave afflicting the District isn't about criminal activity, but about young men turning to gun violence over petty disputes. Read the homicide reports: almost always, the victim, and the perpetrator, if known, are young, commonly in their twenties. These aren't career criminals, killing people in the course of committing other crimes. They're just youths, too young to have mature judgment, too young to appreciate the magnitude of their deeds, and so young that pride counts for so much that the threat of prison time is not an adequate deterrent.

The bill under consideration here, establishing an Office of Neighborhood Engagement and Safety, and calling for sophisticated efforts to identify and dissuade potential perpetrators of gun violence, is on the right track. This won't be easy, I am sure, but we must do what we can to change this attitude that one should settle ordinary personal disputes by shooting one's antagonist.

Where I depart from the proposed legislation is its reference to "violent criminal activity". That's a suggestion that the violence is associated with "criminal activity", as if men are committing homicides in the course of committing other crimes. As in this Mount Pleasant incident, it's not about criminals committing homicides. It's about ordinary young men, engaged in ordinary personal disputes, then turning to guns to "win" the arguments. It's about a culture that demands that any insult, any words challenging one's manhood, be avenged, with gunfire, if one has a gun at hand.

After the fact, surely, the killer is a criminal. But before that, he may be merely another ordinary young man.

The bill states that the Office of Neighborhood Engagement and Safety "shall be responsible for the identification, recruitment, and engagement of individuals determined to be at high risk of participating in, or being a victim of, violent criminal activity". I would like to see that changed to simple "violence". Then let's see what we can do to put a stop to this senseless killing.