

Testimony

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America Speaks Out: Protecting Our Children from Gun Violence
Democratic Policy and Communications Committee
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Thank you, Senator Stabenow and all of the senators gathered here today, for the invitation to testify. My name is Hank Stawinski and I currently serve as the Chief of Police in Prince George's County, Maryland. I have served in this capacity for over two years, and served as a law enforcement officer for 25 years.

My colleagues and I are the ones people call when they are in crisis—when they are afraid and when they need help and protection. I have experienced this myself, and I have borne the responsibility of sending my officers into high-risk situations. We are trusted with keeping the families, neighborhoods and communities of Prince George's County safe, which is an obligation I take very seriously. It's an obligation that matters on a personal level, because Prince George's County is my home and always has been.

It's this personal responsibility I feel to keep my community safe that brings me before this Committee, and that encourages me to come to work each day with my neighbors. In my law enforcement career, I have worked hard to develop relationships with community members from all over the County and country—whether that may be through participating in violence prevention marches, attending events on National Night

Out, or listening to folks who disagree with me. I firmly believe that partnerships and good policy do prevent crime and keep communities safer.

I feel comfortable handling the partnerships. It's policy, however, where I need help. In Prince George's County, 80 people were murdered last year, and 69 of them were murdered using a firearm.¹ But this problem is not specific to my community, it spans our country. In this country, nearly 34,000 people die every year and another 81,000 people are injured by a gun. Children are 17 times more likely to die from a gun in America than in other countries.² There is no doubt that the United States is experiencing a gun violence crisis.

Make no mistake: gun violence impacts every community in this country and law enforcement. It happened in Prince George's County 14 days ago, when one of my police corporals, Mujahid Ramzziddin, was killed with a gun while off duty, responding to a domestic violence call. Mujahid was a 14-year veteran of our police force—someone who was passionate about his family, his faith, and giving to his community. He was a hero who was taken too soon. His wife Tammi joins me today.

Mujahid should still be alive, and so should many other officers just like him. Officer fatalities with firearms are up 150 percent at this point this year over this point last year.³ Domestic violence situations are particularly dangerous. More than one in five officers killed responding to a call for service are responding to a domestic dispute. Most of the

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/local/homicides/>

² <http://www.childrensdefense.org/library/protect-children-not-guns/protect-children-not-guns-2013.pdf>

³ <http://www.nleomf.org/facts/officer-fatalities-data/>

time, these officers are killed with a gun.⁴ Such lethal nexus of guns and domestic violence is not surprising: the simple presence of a gun in a domestic violence situation makes it five times more likely that the woman will die.⁵ From 2001 to 2012, more than 6,410 women were killed in the United States by an intimate partner using a gun— more than the number of American troops killed in action during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan combined.⁶

This is a problem that can be solved. To do this, we need to close loopholes in our laws. Federal law prohibits individuals convicted of a misdemeanor crime of domestic violence from purchasing or possessing a gun—but only if that person has a qualifying relationship with his or her victim, meaning they are or were married, live or lived together, or share a child in common. Despite the fact that current or former dating partners are more likely to injure their victims than spouses,⁷ federal law leaves these individuals unprotected. Similarly, individuals convicted of misdemeanor stalking—which we often see starts as a felony charge but is pled down—are not prohibited from gun possession. Lastly, we can and must do more to ensure that those individuals who are prohibited from accessing guns—[as the individual who killed Mujahid was]—surrender these firearms to the appropriate authorities.

I acknowledge that domestic violence is not the only danger that my officers face. Gun-related incidents overall were the primary cause of death for law enforcement in 2016,

⁴ http://www.nleomf.org/assets/pdfs/officer-safety/Primary_Research_Final_11-0_updated_8_31_16.pdf

⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1447915/>

⁶ <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/GunsDomesticViolencereport.pdf>

⁷ <https://news.upenn.edu/news/dating-partners-more-violent-and-account-more-domestic-violence-spouses>

when the number of law enforcement officers were killed with a gun was at its highest rate in over 20 years.⁸ Often, these are individuals who have previously been arrested for crimes of violence or weapons offenses. In over 20 percent of cases, individuals responsible for killing a law enforcement officer had been arrested for assaulting an officer or resisting arrest.⁹

I am providing this testimony before you today as you consider the need to protect all corners of our community from gun violence. On behalf of my officers and the innocent lives lost across the country from gun violence, I urge you to act. I can handle the partnerships. I ask you for your support with respect to sound policy.

Thank you for considering my testimony today.

⁸ <http://www.nleomf.org/newsroom/news-releases/2016-officer-fatalities-report-release.html>

⁹ https://ucr.fbi.gov/leoka/2015/tables/table_45_leos_fk_criminal_history_of_known_offender_2006-2015.xls