

# “The Violence Must Stop”

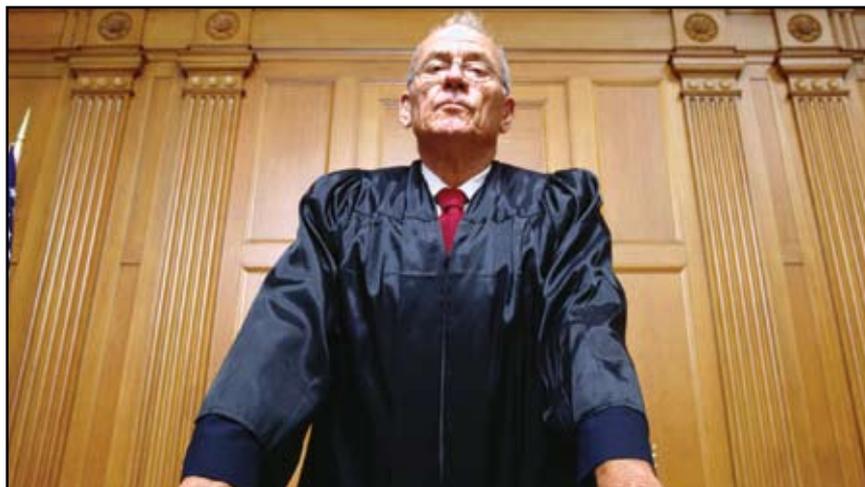
## Violence Reduction and Gang Call-Ins in Washington, D.C.

By **Leonard A. Sipes, Jr.**, *Senior Public Affairs Specialist, Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency*

We are on Pennsylvania Avenue in downtown Washington, D.C. We are mid-way between the U.S. Capitol and the White House. Immediately adjacent to us is the Canadian Embassy. We are in the power center of the country, if not the world.

The wood-paneled federal courtroom is a stately site, designed to portray a sense of power and control in a city that exudes power and control. The front and rear of the courtroom are filled to capacity with the leadership of Washington's law enforcement community. The U.S. Attorney is here. The Chief of Police for the Metropolitan Police Department is here. The Director of the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency is here. Amongst the crowd are senior representatives from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Secret Service, the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, U.S. Probation, the U.S. Parole Commission, the U.S. Marshals Service, the Drug Enforcement Administration, plus other agencies. Since the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice published the "Challenge of Crime in a Free Society" in the mid-1960s, the criminal justice system has called for unity and interagency cooperation to combat crime successfully. Within this federal courtroom, that legacy is being honored to its fullest.

There are four rows of benches reserved in the front. The doors are flung open at 3:00 p.m. Approximately 40 criminal offenders on parole or probation supervision with the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (Washington, D.C.'s federally funded parole and probation entity) file into



the courtroom. Most are veterans of the Superior Court of the District of Columbia, where local charges are adjudicated. The vast majority have never been in federal court. They are escorted to the benches and told to sit quietly. They look confused and bewildered. Some look angry. Hard stares come from many.

No one speaks. There is nothing but silence for the first five minutes. They look at us. We look at them. They know they are not here to face a formal criminal charge. They simply know that they have been ordered to appear in a federal courtroom. They were told that all would be explained to them upon their arrival. But for the moment, there is nothing but silence that seems to last forever.

### The Federal Judge

All rise! The bailiff calls out the traditional command for all within the courtroom to stand. All do, and all are told to take their seats. The proceedings commence.

United States District Court Judge Reggie Walton calls the roll. The offenders acknowledge their presence. Some of them call out in strong voices; others indicate confusion with their lackluster responses. Those who chose

not to attend will be the subjects of warrants by their sentencing judges or the U.S. Parole Commission.

The federal judge begins the proceedings. "Freedom is a precious commodity," he states. "You need to take what I'm about to say very seriously. You know whose community you're destroying. Your criminal activities have put you on the radar screen. Today we are giving you a taste of federal court. Here in federal court you get big time, and you serve the vast majority of your sentence. You are here today because you are involved in ongoing criminal violence within the District of Columbia."

Judge Walton continues, "There are a variety of people who will discuss your activities with you, and my advice to you is that you had better listen. You'll be offered an opportunity to improve your lives with the services they have to offer. But if you disregard this offer, and you continue your life of violence, and if you continue to harm the citizens of Washington, then you will receive the full attention of a unified criminal justice system. I urge you to listen very carefully to what will be said today. You are on the radar screen. You better expect the worst. You have an opportunity, and you better take advantage of it."

## Project Safe Neighborhoods

Gang call-ins such as this one stem in part from criminologist David Kennedy's efforts to encourage criminal justice agencies to pursue the most active criminal offenders in a given community. Project Safe Neighborhoods was pilot tested in Boston and several other cities during the mid 1990s with considerable success. The strategy is not to target principal characters within gangs (often known as crews within Washington, D.C.) but to seek out all who are part of the criminal conspiracy to commit violence.

Too often in the past, principals within violent criminal organizations have been successfully identified and prosecuted and sent to prison for long periods of time. Unfortunately, however, the structure of the gang or crew is left intact, and the violence continues. What is different about this program, part of Project Safe Neighborhoods, is that it pursues an entire criminal conspiracy. For those who are currently under parole or probation supervision, all are told that if they do not stop their violent activities, the entire gang or crew will be the focus of police attention and will be brought into federal court for prosecution and long federal prison sentences. A comprehensive array of services (jobs, job training, drug counseling, etc.) is offered in the hope that active offenders will mend their ways. Some will. Some will not.

But the effort is not just to focus on those currently under community supervision. Within the District of Columbia, only a small percentage of arrests involve those currently under parole supervision. The new message is that everyone, regardless of their supervision status, will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law if violence continues.

Project Safe Neighborhoods is a national effort funded by the Department of Justice and is administered in D.C. by the U.S. Attorney's Office. The gang call-ins are just one part of an overall strategy that emphasizes interagency cooperation amongst all within the criminal justice system.

## Parole and Probation

"All rise."

The judge leaves the courtroom, and the silence continues. Then, Paul A. Quander Jr., the Director of the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA), gets up, walks over to the gathered offenders, and begins to speak.

"I am the reason you are here," he begins. He paces the floor, looks down, and then greets the eyes of the assembled offenders. "Listen to what we have to say. Children are being killed in Washington, D.C. The violence must stop. If a body falls, and we can prove that you're connected, we take the whole group. Everybody is going to go. I'm tired of people being shot and killed."

"We know who you are. We know where you hang out. We know where you were last night. We know where you sleep, the crimes you're committing, who's carrying a gun and where you stash your drugs. We have good intelligence on each and every one of you."

"Take the message back to your community. Make it clear to everyone you hang with. If the violence continues and we know that you're part of the violence, we're coming after you."

"I'm asking each of you to take this seriously. Your children need you. We need all of you to be law-abiding citizens. You need to take advantage of the services we offer you today. But if you choose to continue a life of crime, we will be coming after you -- all of you."

Every offender's eyes are now locked on the Director. He rattled off the names of all of the agencies that are present. "We are all focusing on you. The violence has to stop. The citizens of this city demand it."

## Interagency Cooperation

Violence has decreased in Washington, D.C. for several years. Homicides, violent and property crimes have seen substantial declines. Property values are improving in most communities, and citizens are reclaiming their communities through pride and home ownership. But like some

other cities, too many children and young adults are caught in the web of violence. In too many instances, children have been the innocent victims of homicide.

The Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency has partnered with the Metropolitan Police Department and United States Attorney's Office through joint ride-alongs, intelligence sharing and mass orientations where new offenders are briefed on levels of accountability and services to assist their transformation. The provision of city and CSOSA-supplied services such as drug treatment, job training and placement, mental health assistance and counseling are seen as integral to a law-abiding lifestyle. But offenders must make the decision to improve their lives. For the moment, the offenders assembled in this federal court have yet to make that decision.

## The Detectives

Captain C.V. Morris heads the Violent Crimes Branch of the Metropolitan Police Department. He is the next speaker.

"We know who you are. We know your girlfriends. We know everything about you. You have the opportunity to walk as free people through the front door or as convicted felon through the back door. When we convict you, you're going to go to federal prison. You're not going to be held in local institutions -- you're going to be all over the country. Your boys aren't going to be there, and no one is going to know you. You're going to go to prison in Texas, Arkansas, Ohio, California, and anyplace else the Federal Bureau of Prisons decides to place you."

"You have more attention than you need. If you become our focus, we are coming after you, all of you. You may think you're too slick. You may think that you've been through all this before, but I'm here to tell you that you have just bought yourself a world of trouble. If you continue the violence, you're going to do long, hard federal time."

The detective then shows slides of offenders arrested in the Sursum Corda area of Washington, D.C., which is approximately a 10-minute walk from Union Station, not far from Capitol Hill.

He shows slide after slide of people arrested and convicted and sent to prison after a young girl was murdered in her home. He then shows slides of members of the Congress Park crew and additional photographs of offenders convicted and sentenced in federal court. "Your actions will dictate our response."

James Boteler and Fred Johnson of the Metropolitan Police Department take their turns.

Sgt. Johnson: "You have been a cancer to society and we are going to remove that cancer. You have torn at the moral fiber of our community. If you continue this activity, we will remove you for the good of all." They continue the theme of the day of knowledge of the assembled offenders and the willingness to remove them if they continue a life of crime and violence. Jim Boteler states, "What you do affects your parents, your children, and the entire community. It must stop, and we are here to make sure that it stops. Spread the word to your entire crew, we're coming after everybody involved in violence."

One offender starts hyperventilating and has to leave the courtroom temporarily. One young female offender begins to weep. Others are looking at the floor. The rest stare intently at the next speaker. We are approximately 40 minutes into the program. It is clear that we have the attention of everyone involved.

The next speaker is Gus Giannakoulinas, a detective for the Metropolitan Police Department serving on the FBI/MPD Safe Streets Task Force. He proclaims that he has obtained 88 guilty pleas through Project Safe Neighborhoods. Of the eighteen who chose jury trials, all were convicted to life sentences. All involved crews engaged in violent criminal conspiracies. He has not lost a case in federal court.

"If you hold a gun, provide a ride, hide a gun, know of a homicide, or any other violent crime, we are coming after you. We will convict you. You will go to federal prison for many years to come. Each of you. All of you."

## The Chief

Most criminal justice officials know that budget meetings are one of the

most important events of the year. Charles Ramsey, Chief of the Metropolitan Police Department of Washington, D.C., decided to leave his budget hearing a bit early to attend this call-in. It was that important.

It's not every day that criminal offenders get face time with the Chief of Police of any large metropolitan area, let alone the Nation's Capital. It's difficult to describe the demeanor of all the offenders in the courtroom that day. But there was not an inattentive individual. If the purpose of his appearance was to gain their attention, then he succeeded.

"I've been in law enforcement for 37 years," he states. As he speaks he walks deliberately across the courtroom, stopping just inches from the seated offenders. "I'm tired of the murders in the District of Columbia. We had a 9-year-old boy shot in the head because some idiot decided to fire a round down the street."

"All the thug life is doing is hurting people. And people who hurt people need to be put behind bars for as long as possible. Pay attention or don't pay attention, it doesn't matter to me; we're coming after you if you continue in acts of violence. Anybody who engages in these acts is a predator, and I dislike what they do."

The Chief walks over to the table and slowly makes eye contact with everyone in the room. He pounds his fists against the table several times for emphasis. "A 9-year-old child was killed, and anything I can do to put the perpetrators behind bars for life, I will. I will relentlessly pursue anyone who commits acts of violence against citizens. You have an opportunity to change. Make the change, or I will personally come after each and every one of those involved."

## The United States Attorney

Kenneth Wainstein is the United States Attorney for the District of Columbia. In D.C., he is the local as well as the federal prosecutor. Like so many things in District government, the federal presence is everywhere. The Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (the local parole and probation

and pretrial services agency), the public defender, and even the local courts are all federally funded (beginning in 1997) to relieve the District of the fiscal burden of services that a city usually depends on a state for. Some suggest that federal funding (and a criminal justice coordinating council) prompts the excellent cooperation among criminal justice agencies. Where other cities' justice systems constantly agree to disagree, the level of cooperation in the District is good, and may be a reason for continuous decreases in violent crime and homicides.

The U.S. Attorney coordinates Project Safe Neighborhoods. He, along with other members of the criminal justice system, authored a plan -- "The Homicide Reduction Strategy" -- to decrease violence by emphasizing cooperation and targeted operations. He created a media campaign featuring bus and subway posters encouraging citizens to provide information on gun-related crime.

Like the other speakers, he approaches the offenders. He speaks with confidence and authority, as a father would speak to an errant son. "Ladies and gentlemen, there's too much death and violence in this city. Today is a new day in law enforcement. We've got all the people in D.C. who can put you away for a long time -- MPD, the FBI, ATF, the DEA and all our other law enforcement partners -- and there are 350 attorneys in my office who are very anxious to do anything they can to lock up the crews that are ruining our neighborhoods."

He then spells out exactly how his office will work to accomplish that task. "Ladies and gentlemen, there will be no pleas. No plea-bargains. We're going to charge you, and we're going to charge you to the max. We're going to bring these cases here in the big court, in federal court, where you will serve every day of a very stiff sentence."

To dispel thoughts by any of the offenders that their past violent behavior would go unpunished, the U.S. Attorney tells them: "We'll also bring back old cases. If we can legally bring back cases that have been dropped in the past due to lack of evidence, we will investigate them fully to make sure you go

away for as long as possible.” He ends by offering the offenders a choice and by giving them an invitation: “You can meet this fate or you can hear this message and take it back to the street and be part of the solution. I invite you to be part of the solution.”

## Law Enforcement Wrap-Up

Paul Quander, Director of the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency, returns to the front of the courtroom. “Ladies and gentlemen, it’s a new day, and that’s why you are here. This city is tired of the pop-pop-pop of gunfire gunning down the mothers of our children. Grandmothers are afraid to go out on the streets in some of our communities. Some of our children are afraid to play on the streets. We have a reason to believe that you are involved in these acts.”

“If you continue to come to our attention, we will raise the level of your supervision. We will make you very uncomfortable. If need be, we will bring you into the field office to spend the entire day, everyday. We will put you on satellite monitoring and track every step you make. We will compare your movements to a map of all criminal activity. If you are anywhere near an act of violence, the entire criminal justice system will be coming after you. Do not give us a dirty urine, do not miss an appointment.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, the violence must stop.”

“The next people who will speak to you will offer you an array of programs that you can get involved in to change your life. I hope and pray that you will take advantage of the opportunities presented to you. I hope and pray that you turn your life around. But if you do not, we will be coming after you.”

With that, most representing the criminal justice system exit the courtroom. Some offenders begin to walk out and are quickly ordered back to their seats by parole agents (known in D.C. as Community Supervision Officers). The offenders look as if they’ve been through a difficult afternoon. It is approximately 4:15 p.m. We have been assembled for approximately an hour and 15 minutes.

## Defense Attorney

Defense attorney James Rudasill is next up through the invitation of Director Quander. He is well known in the D.C. metropolitan area for his aggressive and successful defense of those charged with crimes. He was often on opposite sides of the aisle when Quander was a prosecuting attorney in the U.S. Attorney’s Office. He tells of violent criminal conspiracy cases prosecuted by the U.S. Attorney.

“These people are not playing,” he warns. “They’re serious about putting you away. “They know who you are; they know where you live. The game is over in Washington, D.C.” To further emphasize their inability to escape their fate if the pattern of violence isn’t stopped, he states: “When you come to me, it’s too late. I’ve listened to thousands of hours of conversations between young men who had no clue the feds were on to them. You can be home asleep in bed at the time one of your boys does the shooting, and you still can be convicted of murder.” To further emphasize the hopelessness, he tells the offenders, “All the rules are on their side. The judge is going to grant the government’s request for pretrial detention, and you’re going to be detained because you are on supervision. Then you sit in jail until your trial. That could take months.” “Gentlemen,” he says, “it’s time for a career change.”

## Roving Leaders and Others Who Are There to Help

There are individuals known in the District of Columbia as Roving Leaders. Roving Leaders are stationed throughout the city to assist young people and all citizens with efforts to obtain their GED, to find housing, to obtain jobs or job training, counseling or other social services. They provide brochures and an opportunity for those assembled to take advantage of a wide array of services. They remind all that the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency and the City have a multitude of services at their disposal. They remind them that Director Quander promised that they will be given priority if they make the decision to change their lives.

Les Butler wears a button with a picture of his brother, Charles Edward Butler, who was an innocent bystander murdered in D.C. He tells the story of having a multimillion-dollar technology opportunity to start a business. But the death of his brother affected him so deeply that he spent the summer working with kids and introducing them to the world of computers and technology. He describes his deceased brother’s bullet wound -- how it entered before it exited in the back of his head.

“Who is the enemy?” he asks. Is it those who oppressed people of color for so long, or it is the people in this room and all those who take the breath of those who are so dear to us. Who is the enemy?”

A young woman in jeans and a jean jacket slides into the wooden bench in front of me. She is having trouble breathing. She is softly crying. She is clearly troubled by the afternoon’s proceedings. She could easily be my daughter, or yours. “Can I go now?” she asks. “I’m sorry, but you have to stay to the end,” I tell her. She continues to softly weep.

The day ends with a minister who is an ex-offender with prison time served. “It’s time to make a change,” he implores. “There is something on the inside that needs to come out. It’s time to stop allowing people to run your lives. Please, for the love of God, change now.”

It’s over. Most file out. Some stay to speak to the Roving Leaders or the Reverend or the defense attorney or to Mr. Butler, but most leave with the urgency of people needing oxygen. It’s close to 5:00 p.m. Some will heed the call, some will not. Some will kill or be killed. The impact on their lives and the well being of the citizens of the District of Columbia remains to be seen.

But all those who spoke felt they represented the voices of citizens who are fed up with violence and anxiety. They, and the speakers, simply want a life where children play peacefully without fear in the capital of the free world. ☛

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