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President Trump has sent in the cavalry (in the form of the National Guard) to the nation's capital. Although some Americans view the move as a stalking horse for authoritarianism, others charge its critics with looking a gift horse in the mouth. Like residents of other American cities, the denizens of Washington, DC deserve a locally accountable police department. However, the infusion of federal resources could pay ongoing dividends if it evolves into a sustainable partnership that invests in breaking the cycle of crime through both enforcement and prevention.

While those who dismiss any federal role in bolstering DC anti-crime efforts, including some members of Congress, accuse President Trump of acting like a "dictator," the truth is DC's unique status as a federal enclave allows for significant federal intervention that would be clearly unlawful in other cities.

However, to achieve lasting public safety in the nation's capital, the administration must establish a genuine collaboration with the DC government that systematically and sustainably strengthens the justice system's capacity to prevent, deter, and resolve criminal activities, while also investing in evidence-based community programs that redirect young people away from delinquency. Despite the vast powers of the presidency and federal government, limitations on the legal authority and resources at the president's disposal put his administration at risk of spinning its wheels if it goes it alone.

Limitations on President Trump's Power in DC

First, Trump's powers are limited by the 1973 Home Rule Act, which allows federal control of DC police, but only for up to 30 days. Extending such control beyond that point would require congressional approval, and there is no indication that this could surmount a divided Congress, given that Democrats have attacked Trump's action as an ill-advised political stunt.

Second, the administration's primary source of manpower, the DC National Guard and guardsmen from other states, has significant limitations. Those deployed typically have regular jobs and families, and while now armed, guardsmen are not trained in basic police functions like responding to calls and investigating crimes. Guardsmen are not authorized to

make arrests and are legally limited to advancing distinctly federal law enforcement purposes, such as securing federal buildings. While that's certainly a worthy goal, only a small share of the crime in DC occurs around such structures.

If the DC Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) were primarily charged with protecting federal buildings now, then relieving them of that responsibility could allow them to do more crime-fighting elsewhere. However, they are largely secured by agencies such as the United States Capitol Police and the US Marshals Service in a place that has more law enforcement per capita than any of the nation's other major cities.

Enveloping every federal building with troops and tanks is more than overkill. It risks making frequently visited parts of the city appear to be under siege, countering President Trump's laudable goal of creating both a reality and perception of safety that brings more tourists to DC.

Indeed, though the administration announced half of non-immigration arrests are taking place in high-crime areas, a *Washington Post* map indicates many federal officers deployed to date are in areas where violent crime is relatively rare. Consequently, restaurant bookings in DC are cratering.

Yet, even critics must acknowledge that FBI officers and other law enforcement officers, whose training, authority, and capabilities are better suited to the scope of the task than those of the National Guard, may be making a difference. They have confiscated 114 guns and made more than 1,094 arrests, including at least one suspect wanted for homicide, even as many of the arrests are for minor offenses. Additionally, a CBS News analysis finds a significant drop in many types of crime since the federal intervention.

Although given the short amount of time involved, this is a very limited sample size, and it could be attributable to fewer people going out on the streets. More importantly, sustaining this apparent success will be challenging, given that these personnel, including approximately 120 FBI officers, have been shifted from other important responsibilities and will likely return to their normal duties.

How the Trump Administration and DC Can Work Together

Fortunately, President Trump has demonstrated his willingness to adjust in response to

changing circumstances and priorities. By taking several key steps, the administration can calibrate this DC anti-crime effort to maximize the opportunity for sustained gains in public safety while minimizing unintended consequences and winning over some skeptics of its motives.

First, given that FBI agents and officers from other federal agencies involved, such as the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF), are on temporary assignments and typically lack training in developing relationships with communities, where possible, federal officers should partner with MPD officers in coordinated operations targeting areas where violent crime is concentrated.

When MPD, the FBI, and the US Attorney's Office dismantled the Southeast "MLK Crew" in 2021, the DOJ reported a 63 percent drop in violent crime in the area, crediting the focus on "the limited number of people driving violence." In addition to task forces, federal support could also underwrite rapid hotspot deployments, license plate readers in carjacking corridors, and warrant sweeps led by the US Marshals to locate the most dangerous fugitives.

Second, the president should recognize that temporarily surging disparate federal forces to DC is no substitute for strengthening a cohesive police force operating on a single dispatch system and put the weight of the federal government behind efforts to recruit and retain more qualified MPD officers.

In 2013, DC had more than 4,000 sworn officers; however, today that number has decreased to just 3,100. So far this year, data indicate the force has lost 225 officers while adding only 124. This erosion of the ranks has resulted in slower response times, including a nearly two-minute increase since 2019 for the highest-priority calls. When officers arrive at a scene later rather than sooner, it increases the chance that a perpetrator will escape accountability—and potentially go on to commit more crimes.

MPD is also handicapped in solving crimes because it has 65 fewer detectives than a 2024 DC Auditor's report found are needed. Yet, the DC city budget is under pressure, as congressional action awaits on restoring some or all of the $1 billion in federal funds that were omitted from the spending package passed earlier this year.

Augmenting the DC police force is not a quick fix, as recruits must complete a 37-week training academy, a timeframe that is consistent with the best research. Moreover, DC has already tried common financial incentives such as signing bonuses to little avail. The administration can leverage federal resources to help DC and other understaffed police departments think outside the box, including crafting more effective recruitment appeals,

developing partnerships with high schools and universities modeled after ROTC, and rehiring senior officers on a part-time basis who would otherwise retire. Additionally, the administration could seek to identify retired federal law enforcement officers in the DC area and offer the same $50,000 bonus that is being offered to new hires at US Immigration and Customs Enforcement(ICE).

However, while more MPD officers are needed, it is just as important to focus on allocating existing officers more efficiently. For example, a Niskanen Institute analysis found officer workloads are far from evenly distributed. As a result, officers in areas with more calls and higher crime rates must attempt to shoulder as much as three times the workload. The analysis also identified areas for improvement regarding the shift times of DC officers. While some overlap is often necessary to switch out equipment, simply reducing many shift overlaps from an hour to half an hour would free up thousands of patrol hours.

The administration could also push for MPD to redeploy sworn officers from desk assignments to patrol while expanding civilian call-takers and online reporting to free up patrol and investigative time. Federal support could also assist by helping DC follow the lead of other cities that have deployed civilian investigators for low-risk duties.

Community Service Officers and civilian crash units handle tasks such as minor thefts, vandalism, and non-injury crashes, allowing sworn officers to focus on violent crimes. For example, Charlotte's Civilian Traffic Investigators program, launched in 2024, has freed up thousands of police hours for high-priority calls, sped up response times for minor crashes, and boosted officer morale.

Additionally, the administration is well-positioned to address the barrier to adequate police staffing posed by the high cost of housing in DC. The recent downsizing of federal agencies presents a unique opportunity for the Federal General Services Administration to partner with the private sector to convert some federal office space into residences, some of which could be allocated for subsidized housing for police officers and other first responders.

The federal government has an even more significant role in addressing the longstanding understaffing of the DC judiciary, which undermines its capacity to resolve criminal cases promptly. DC faces a massive backlog of some 4,000 criminal cases. Yet 15 of the 71 DC judicial positions are vacant. These empty benches slow down case processing, even as we know deterrence depends more on the swiftness and certainty of consequences than on their severity. Remedying this front-end constraint depends on speedy presidential nominations and Senate confirmations.

Meanwhile, federal partners should target other chokepoints that stall justice. FBI Computer Analysis Response Teams could process body-camera and phone evidence in days rather than weeks. ATF's mobile NIBIN units for ballistics can help accelerate forensic matches.

Community Crime Prevention in DC

As crucial as police, courts, and corrections are, the administration should not focus exclusively on law enforcement as the only strategy for controlling crime. This approach led the Department of Justice to cut hundreds of millions of dollars in grants for violence prevention programs, including between 10 and 15 such programs in DC.

A disproportionate share of violent crimes in DC involve interpersonal disputes between a small group of people, largely between young males. Programs like Heal DC that lost $700,000 in federal funding utilize strategies such as mentoring and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) to intervene in the lives of those most likely to be perpetrators and victims of violent crime, and have shown they can be effective.

Not only do DC residents overwhelmingly support such programs, but also research suggests that well-implemented violence prevention programs targeted at the right population can reduce crime. For example, an evaluation of the Chicago CRED program on which Heal DC is modeled indicates it is lowering gun violence. Other studies of similar programs point to reductions in nonfatal shootings. Though the research base is still developing and we are still learning what factors are needed to achieve results that are replicable and scalable, pulling the plug on promising programs reduces the chance for such learning.

The administration was right to scrutinize grant funding for such programs, given the federal deficit, the lack of a federal connection to some activities receiving support, and the need for strong performance to ensure that support only goes to programs that make a meaningful impact on crime. But here, the federal nexus is unquestionable. Just as DC's unique constitutional status provides the legal basis for Trump's military intervention, it justifies federal investment in a comprehensive strategy to break the cycle of crime.

With those aged 24 or younger accounting for more than half of year-to-date arrests for violent crimes in DC, federal resources could help DC reach the nearly 7,5000 individuals aged 16 to 24 who are disconnected from school and work. While DC's probation system provides supervision for some in this population, many others have yet to be arrested or have completed their sentences. Thus, there are no legal grounds for forcing them into programs.

But once they are identified, outreach efforts could persuade them to reenter high school—the maximum age is 21 for DC high schools—or participate in adult education and workforce training programs. While DC has a summer youth employment program for residents ages 14 to 24, this does not address those who need a more sustained intervention. Studies of some job training and job corps programs have found substantial reductions in participants' arrest rates.

A Federal-DC Crime-Fighting Partnership

While crime in DC and nationally continues to decline since the pandemic-era surge, no one can claim that 500 carjackings or a murder rate that is among the highest in large American cities is acceptable for the nation's capital. After axing grants dedicated to improving policing, the administration's decision to invest valuable federal law enforcement resources in its own backyard provides an opportunity to put public safety ahead of politics.

However, doing so will require the administration and DC city government to forge a partnership to strengthen the city's crime-fighting infrastructure that lasts well beyond a necessarily temporary federal surge.

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