Featured Speakers

Chiraag Bains – Special Assistant to the President for Criminal Justice and Guns Policy

Dr. Shani Buggs – Assistant Professor, University of California, Davis

Libby Schaaf – Mayor, City of Oakland

Thomas Abt – Senior Fellow and Director, CCJ's National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice (moderator)

Abby Walsh – Vice President, Strategy and Operations, Council on Criminal Justice (moderator)

As noted in a recent Council on Criminal Justice (CCJ) report, violence in America's cities is rising. In response, the Biden Administration recently announced a series of efforts to fund community-based strategies to reduce urban gun violence. In this session, a key Administration official, an innovative mayor, and a leading anti-violence researcher discussed promising public safety strategies at a time when rates of homicide and firearm-related crimes are increasing nationwide and confidence in criminal justice institutions remains low.

Event Summary

Held on May 21, 2021, the event opened with an overview of recent crime trends by Thomas Abt. Drawing on recent reports released by CCJ, Abt noted that:

- In 2020, data from a study sample of 24 cities found that homicides rose 30% compared to 2019.
- For the first quarter of 2021, murders increased 24% compared to the same quarter in 2020 – and 49% compared to same quarter in 2019.
- Despite the recent spikes, homicide and violent crime rates in the U.S. remain well below the historic highs recorded in the early 1990s.

"At the Council, we see two key challenges: improving public safety while simultaneously improving confidence in the criminal justice system." Thomas Abt, CCJ Senior Fellow

Chiraag Bains

Bains outlined the Administration's recent efforts to address gun violence, saying that President Joe Biden has long viewed the issue not just as a matter of public safety, but also as a public health and racial equity concern. Noting that homicide is the leading cause of death for Black men under the age of 45, Bains outlined recent executive actions and other Administration initiatives to address gun violence, including:

- A new Justice Department rule to stop the proliferation of ghost guns.
- New model guidance for "red flag" laws that allow family members to seek court orders that can temporarily bar people in crisis from accessing firearms.
- Potentially historic investments in community violence intervention, which, if approved by Congress, would dedicate more than $5 billion over eight years to support evidence-based community violence intervention programs as part of the American Jobs Plan.

"We feel like we've come out of the gate strong, but we recognize that we have a lot more work to do. And we want to do that work alongside all of you." Chiraag Bains, Special Assistant to the President for Criminal Justice and Guns Policy

Dr. Shani Buggs

Professor Buggs studies comprehensive and community-level gun violence-prevention programs and policies, as well as the intersections between drugs, drug enforcement, and gun violence. Calling such violence a public health epidemic, she noted that it has been driven by a long history of community disinvestment and neglect, mass incarceration, and the widespread availability of deadly firearms. The coronavirus pandemic, she said, exacerbated longstanding health, economic, and racial inequalities while accelerating increases in gun sales.

In her presentation, Dr. Buggs noted that:

- To sustainably reduce gun violence, immediate efforts should be focused on the very

small number of individuals who are at the highest risk for gun violence.

- Violence-reduction strategies should be shaped not only by the science, but also by the lived experience of those who have been exposed to such violence firsthand.
- Initiatives such as street outreach and hospital-based prevention programs, which mediate conflicts, provide services, and deliver treatment, often have strong results yet remain underfunded and understaffed.
- Short-term strategies must be complemented by broader, long-term efforts to remedy disparities at population and community levels.

"Success requires deep transformative thinking about how we support people," concluded Dr. Buggs. "It means recognizing that when people have their needs met, communities are safer." Dr. Shani Buggs, Associate Professor at UC Davis

Mayor Libby Schaaf

When Schaaf was elected mayor of Oakland in 2014, the city had been frequently ranked among the most violent metropolitan areas in America. To improve safety, Schaaf focused her initial efforts on implementing a recently started program called Oakland Ceasefire. Describing the program, Schaaf said:

- Ceasefire is a local version of a national evidence-based strategy known as focused deterrence.
- A partnership between law enforcement, social service providers, and community groups, Ceasefire engages those at the highest risk of violence through multiple strategies reflecting a balance of empathy and accountability.
- Ultimately, an independent evaluation credited Ceasefire with significantly reducing shootings and killings in the city.

With its lockdowns and social distancing rules, the pandemic temporarily halted Oakland Ceasefire, while the murder of George Floyd deeply damaged already strained relationships between police and communities of color. Homicides increased dramatically in Oakland, as they have in other cities. As the pandemic wanes, Ceasefire has restarted, the city is expanding its public health approach to focus more on "upstream" strategies, and efforts to restore confidence in law enforcement are being redoubled.

When asked how mayors should approach the issue of gun violence, Schaaf replied, “Be a policy nerd,” emphasizing the need to explore the evidence on both the problem and potential solutions. She also noted that while Ceasefire was not launched by her administration, she nevertheless worked hard to implement it.

“Sometimes we mayors have to put our egos aside. Every leader is so interested in having their own initiative, but they’re not working on the implementation. Building that partnership muscle has taken years, and we are still doing it. Do not give up!” Mayor Libby Schaaf, Oakland, CA