
CITY OF BALTIMORE

Shantay Jackson
Director



MAYOR'S OFFICE OF
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Honorable President and Members of the Baltimore City Council
City Hall, Room 400
100 N. Holliday Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21202

**RE: City Council Bill 21-0055R
Informational Hearing - Holding Gun Offenders Accountable**

Dear Council President Mosby and Members of the City Council:

The Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (MONSE) appreciates the opportunity to discuss the City's efforts to hold gun offenders accountable. MONSE is committed to developing and improving strategies to reduce violence by holding repeat violent offenders accountable and increasing coordination amongst law enforcement, corrections and supervision, victim services, and community partners at the local, state, and federal levels.

Gun Courts

In collaboration with the Baltimore City State's Attorney's Office, MONSE has held exploratory conversations around establishing a gun court with administrators of gun courts in Brooklyn, NY and Philadelphia, PA. Recognizing both the great promise and challenges of establishing and operating a gun court, discussions around establishing a gun court in Baltimore City have moved to the recently reconstituted Criminal Justice Coordinating Council. A workgroup focused on the backlog of cases in the courts is exploring the feasibility of establishing a gun court in hopes of increasing the swiftness and certainty of holding gun offenders accountable.

Community Supervision

Mayor Scott and MONSE have been working with members of the Baltimore City Delegation in Annapolis to pass legislation to increase resources and oversight for community supervision by state agencies including Parole & Probation. Research indicates that individuals are most at risk to reoffend within the first 10-18 months, and that the initial months of supervision are most crucial for making stability-building connections to services and supports. This has prompted leading research and policy groups from across the political spectrum to recommend shorter supervision terms in order to focus scarce resources on offenders at highest risk of gun violence and the period of time most relevant for public safety.

Unserialized Firearms

Last week, Mayor Scott joined BPD Commissioner Harrison in testifying in favor of Attorney General Frosh's bill regulating "ghost guns." House Bill 425 regulates unserialized firearms and certain unfinished frames and receivers. Anyone found in possession of unserialized firearms or certain parts used to make them is guilty of a misdemeanor and on conviction is subject to imprisonment not exceeding 3 years or a fine not exceeding \$10,000, or both.

On the streets of Baltimore City, untraceable handguns that bypass the federal background check system have become the weapon of choice. Over the past three years, the number of "ghost guns" recovered from crime scenes has grown exponentially. The Baltimore Police Department seized 30 unserialized firearms in 2019, 128 in 2020, and well over 300 in 2021.

These firearms are increasingly being used by violent criminal networks because they are currently not required to have a serial number or other unique identifying information. When law enforcement recover an unserialized gun at a crime scene, they offer little evidentiary value because they are so difficult to trace. This bill does not seek to ban all build kits and penalize hobbyists and legal gun owners. The bill clearly explains the requirements for serializing the firearm and balances constitutional rights with the public safety threat of unserialized guns.

Straw Purchase Penalties

In collaboration with the Mayor's Office of Government Relations, MONSE also provided testimony in Annapolis to strengthen penalties for knowingly being a participant in a straw purchase of a firearm by elevating the crime from a misdemeanor to a felony. Straw purchases are the most common way firearms are diverted into the illegal gun market. A straw purchase is when a prohibited purchaser, such as a convicted felon, uses individuals with clean criminal records who can pass a background check to purchase firearms on their behalf. Both academic research and the hard-earned expertise of law enforcement in Baltimore and across the country suggests that supply-side approaches of stronger enforcement such as increasing the penalties for straw purchases will lead to fewer prohibited individuals from accessing firearms.

Group Violence Reduction Strategy

In preparation for the launching the Group Violence Reduction Strategy (GVRS) pilot in the Western District, we collaborated with academic experts to conduct a systematic analysis of all homicides and shootings in the Western District. The data shows that a very small number of extremely high-risk people are involved in gun violence and the people at the center of gun violence are mostly well known to the criminal justice system. We also confirmed that serious gun violence is generated by disputes involving members of groups, or social networks, involved in criminal activity and these groups are relatively small but generate a bulk of serious violence and face high victimization risks. Finally, we learned that there is strong overlap between victim and offender populations.

This analysis confirms that Baltimore City must focus on the relatively small number of group-involved individuals who are already known by the criminal justice system and generate a bulk

of serious violence. Fortunately, GVRS, also known as focused deterrence, is a proven evidence-based initiative designed to reduce exactly this type of serious violence by communicating a credible deterrent threat, engaging a wide range of agencies and partners to focus on this group at extreme high risk of being involved in violence, and holding gun offenders accountable.

In partnership with the Baltimore Police Department (BPD) and the State's Attorney's Office (SAO), MONSE has launched the Group Violence Reduction Strategy with the first custom notification taking place on January 21, 2022. The strategy works by engaging directly with those most intimately involved in and affected by violence, and leveraging an intentional collaboration between law enforcement, social services, and community members, who collectively co-sign and deliver an anti-violence message to stop the shooting. When implemented with fidelity, GVRS can achieve what few other strategies can: reducing homicides and non-fatal shootings, while simultaneously minimizing the criminal justice footprint and empowering communities in the co-production of public safety.

Respectfully submitted,

Shantay A. Jackson
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cc: Sunny Schnitzer, Deputy Mayor, Public Safety
Nina Themelis, Legislative Liaison, Mayor's Office of Government Relations
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