

Gun Violence Prevention Head Warns of Deep-Rooted Crisis as USVI Faces One of World's Highest Homicide Rates

Testifying before the Senate, Antonio Emmanuel said gun violence in the USVI stems from personal vendettas, extortion, and emotional need, not random attacks—adding that community healing and de-escalation require collective effort.

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As the community reels from a recent spate of gun violence which has resulted in several deaths, the executive director of the Office of Gun Violence Prevention has weighed in on possible causes.

Antonio Emmanuel appeared before the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs, and Consumer Protection on Monday to discuss a bill to establish a Gun Violence Awareness Week. There, he was pressed by several lawmakers to offer an explanation for current trends.

“What are we missing? What is happening?...What are we doing? Are we doing something wrong?” asked committee chair Senator Avery Lewis.

Mr. Emmanuel did not think that there was anything necessarily wrong with current policy. “I think that we have folks that are committing crimes, some by emotional outbursts, some because they have an ax to grind with somebody else. These are retaliatory homicides,” he explained. Random homicides, he said, are not common. “People have issues with somebody else, or one person claims he got disrespected, or we have some domestic violence issues,” he added. According to Mr. Emmanuel, there are many “system issues” that “we just can't seem to wrap our hands around.”

the U.S. Virgin Islands remains one of the most homicide-plagued places on earth. The rate has hovered near or above 50 per 100 000 — on par with Jamaica and four times higher than notoriously violent Mexico — for much of the last 20 years, according to data from Macrotrends homicide-rate series 1997-2025, VIPD statements for 2010 record and 2022-23 counts, CDC FastStats U.S. homicide rate 2022, and UNODC & World Population Review global and country homicide rankings 2022.

So far for 2025, the USVI has experienced 22 homicides, 11 on St. Croix, 9 on St. Thomas and 2 on St. John, putting the territory on pace for another record year.

“We have a community that is clearly angry, clearly frustrated, and we try to come up with ways to try to heal this community the best we can,” Mr. Emmanuel declared. “The homicides that we're having now, like I said, they're directed, they're personal attacks on each other and that's disturbing.” The Office of Gun Violence Prevention is attempting to educate the community on de-escalation and conflict resolution. “Unfortunately, some of the older perpetrators of the crime aren't getting that information,” Mr. Emmanuel admitted.

“I truly believe that we need some divine, divine intervention...because we have some deep rooted challenges here in this community,” remarked Senator Novelle Francis, a former police officer.

“All the studies we've looked at by psychologists and sociologists say that violence occurs and erupts because somebody's need isn't being met, either emotional, financial, physical,” explained Mr. Emmanuel. “Their way to handle it is to attack; is to use violence to get what they think they want.” The Office continues to work in schools and communities to encourage stronger communication and conflict resolution. It runs summer camps and other activities intended to keep vulnerable children exposed to a message of de-escalation and non-violence.

“A lot of the homicides here are also extortion related, where you got to pay me to do certain things in my neighborhood, and if you don't, I'm going to kill you for it,” Mr. Emmanuel explained to Senator Milton Potter.

“There's so many variables that are affecting the violence in this community that it's hard for anybody to wrap their hands around it, even collectively,” he continued, abstaining from casting blame on any one agency or family dynamics.

Mr. Emmanuel agreed with Senator Carla Joseph's call for more volunteers to support community-building programs. "We need more after-school programs, more activities on the weekends, more stuff for young people to do, but we need more people to do it," he stated.

The Office of Gun Violence Prevention and the Legislature are among several entities that are all attempting to devise strategies to clamp down on crime. But as Mr. Emmanuel stated, "there's no silver bullet for it." Moving the needle on gun violence in the territory, Mr. Emmanuel said, would take co-ordinated action by dedicated people on several fronts.

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