

The Virgin Islands Consortium

25 Homicides, One Arrest: VIPD Says It Is Operating at Half Capacity

With only one arrest from 25 homicide cases, lawmakers pressed VIPD over staffing shortages, limited foot patrols and weak street presence, while the department said it has only half the personnel needed to sustain enforcement across the territory now.

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The V.I. Police Department is operating with roughly half the personnel it needs as it confronts homicides, burglaries and other crimes across the territory, with 25 killings recorded and only one arrest made at the time of a Senate hearing this week.

Assistant Police Commissioner Sean Santos told the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and Public Safety that “we’re at actually half [of] where we need to be.”

The staffing shortage prompted lawmakers to question whether the department can maintain its current enforcement approach while also providing the foot patrols, community engagement and evening coverage they said residents and businesses need.

Senator Angel Bolques Jr. said VIPD “cannot sustain its current enforcement strategy with the existing staffing levels.”

A recently expired executive order from Governor Albert Bryan Jr. provided only limited relief. The June 29 order temporarily assigned peace officers from other government agencies to assist VIPD during a “recent increase in violent crime,” according to Mr. Santos.

The temporary assignment added six peace officers on St. Croix and 11 on St. Thomas.

“It wasn’t really a significant increase that we were hoping for,” Mr. Santos said.

Despite the limited number of additional personnel, he said VIPD “increased visibility in high-crime areas, conducted hundreds of community contacts, expanded traffic enforcement” and carried out other activities during the assignment.

The executive order has since expired, and the peace officers have returned to their regular agencies. VIPD’s staffing has therefore returned to its usual, but insufficient, level.

Staffing Limits Foot Patrols and Community Engagement

When Mr. Bolques raised the possibility of additional foot patrols, St. Croix Deputy Chief Naomi Joseph said staffing constraints frequently prevent officers from performing that work.

“For the most part, we don’t get that opportunity to do the foot patrol or the community engagement that we’d want to,” she said.

Officers are “really short-staffed” and are typically “moving from case to case,” Ms. Joseph explained.

She said VIPD would welcome the opportunity to conduct more foot patrols once staffing improves. In the meantime, the department performs daily patrols in the “town areas,” she said.

Senator Franklin Johnson stressed that the visible presence of officers can discourage crime. “Just the detection of officers being present sometimes curtail and stop things from happening,” he said.

Mr. Johnson encouraged VIPD to maintain a physical presence even when cruise ships are not in port, noting that residents and local businesses also need protection. “People have business; they invested their money and scared to open the door, scared to even invest more.”

The foot patrols that do occur are often conducted during regular daytime business hours, Ms. Joseph confirmed.

Senator Kurt Violet urged the department to extend that coverage into the evening, particularly while restaurants and nightlife businesses remain open. "I know a local Virgin Islander, just recently in the town of Frederiksted, was assaulted and his truck was stolen," Mr. Violet said.

"You can't be every place, but there's certain places we need to be. And until the restaurants are closed, we need to have coverage," he told VIPD.

Senators Call for Return to Basic Police Work

Senator Novelle Francis, a former police commissioner, said the department should focus on fundamental policing practices as it works to address the current crime problem.

"I think that this is not rocket science. I think that getting back to basic is so critical," Mr. Francis said.

"We have a few bandits that's wreaking havoc on this community, and we really got to take the fight to them."

Ms. Joseph agreed that traditional police work remains important, particularly in addressing burglaries.

"We are hoping that with what we're doing now, just basic police work, that we will be able to at least break up this current burglary unit," she said.

Reducing burglaries is among VIPD's priorities in both districts. The department is also focused on reducing homicides.

At the time of the hearing, 25 homicides had been recorded, but only one arrest had been made.

Mr. Johnson described that as "not a good number."

In response to increases in homicides and robberies, Mr. Santos said VIPD "immediately implemented an aggressive violence reduction strategy focused on intelligence-led enforcement, focused on repeat violent offenders, increased patrols in areas identified as areas of concern, and stronger criminal investigations."

He also reported that current-year figures show a 13 percent decrease in violent crime compared with the corresponding period in 2025.

Cameras and Drone Program Advance

VIPD expects expanded camera coverage and its developing drone program to assist with investigations across several categories of crime.

Information Systems Director Kishana Tweed told lawmakers that camera installation is fully complete on St. Thomas and approximately 85 percent complete on St. Croix.

The department is also making progress on a territory-wide drone program.

Mr. Santos said the drones will be stationed across the islands and have a “much more longer range, and they’ll be working in tandem with each other, so that if one is about to lose range, the other one would take off.”

VIPD anticipates that the technology will assist substantially across a range of enforcement matters.

Mr. Johnson suggested that drones could help monitor unlicensed off-road vehicles operating on public roads.

Mr. Violet, however, argued that the department should not make enforcement more complicated when officers could address large groups of riders directly.

“I find it hard to believe that we need drones in order to stop individuals in groups of 20 and 25 riding vehicles that are not licensed,” he said.

“Why are we making things more complicated? And what is the cost of this drone initiative? Cause that’s a next \$200,000. What’s the cost of that? And why can’t manpower [be used], just a special initiative?...Why can’t you go to the leaders, their leaders are all of those groups, and just have a discussion as to appropriate behavior for those vehicles,” Mr. Violet stated.

He said the department must restore a sense that violations will carry consequences.

“The police Department got to take back the street in terms of respect, in terms of individuals knowing that you can’t do X, Y, and Z because you’re going to be held,” Mr. Violet declared.