

Letter to the Editor: Gun Violence Will Persist Until the Virgin Islands Confronts Open Drug Markets

Former VIPD law enforcement executive Curtis Griffin argues that open-air drug markets fuel gun violence by making firearms tools of enforcement, and says reducing shootings will require focused policing, treatment, prevention and community cooperation.

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Open illicit drug markets are not merely a nuisance or a sign of neighborhood disorder. They are a direct threat to public safety and a significant contributor to gun violence throughout the Virgin Islands.

Unlike private drug transactions, open-air markets operate in public spaces—near homes, businesses, schools and recreational areas. Dealers compete for profitable locations and

customers. Because illegal markets cannot rely on courts or contracts to settle disputes, disagreements over territory, unpaid debts, stolen drugs and perceived disrespect are often resolved through intimidation and violence.

Firearms become the enforcement mechanism of the drug trade.

Those involved carry guns to protect their drugs, money and territory. Rival dealers carry guns for the same reasons. A single dispute can quickly escalate into a shooting, retaliation and then another act of retaliation. Too often, innocent residents are caught in the middle.

The damage extends beyond those directly involved. Residents become afraid to sit outside, allow their children to play nearby or cooperate with law enforcement. Businesses lose customers. Property values decline. Young people may begin to view armed drug dealers as symbols of power and success. As fear grows and witnesses remain silent, offenders become more confident and the cycle continues.

The Virgin Islands has taken important steps to address gun violence, including implementing strategies associated with the National Network for Safe Communities and establishing an office focused on gun-violence prevention. However, allowing open illicit drug markets to operate while pursuing those initiatives is counterproductive. We cannot credibly tell individuals to put down their guns while tolerating illegal markets in which firearms are routinely used to protect drugs, money and territory.

The Virgin Islands cannot arrest its way out of this problem, but neither can it ignore open drug-dealing as a minor offense. Law enforcement must use focused, intelligence-driven strategies to identify the individuals who control these markets, supply firearms and repeatedly engage in violence. Police, federal agencies and prosecutors must coordinate their efforts and concentrate their resources on the relatively small number of offenders who cause the greatest harm.

At the same time, enforcement must be supported by prevention, treatment and opportunity. Substance-abuse services can reduce demand. Employment programs, mentorship and recreational activities can offer young people alternatives to the drug trade. Residents must also have safe and confidential ways to provide information without fear of retaliation.

Every Virgin Islander deserves to live in a neighborhood where drug dealers do not control public spaces and gunfire is not treated as a normal part of life. Reclaiming those spaces will require sustained enforcement, community cooperation and meaningful investment in our young people. Open drug markets and gun violence are connected. If we are serious about reducing shootings and saving lives, we must confront both.

Curtis A. Griffin, Esq., is a former Virgin Islands law enforcement executive with the Virgin Islands Police Department and a graduate of the FBI National Academy. He served more than three decades in law enforcement and is an attorney and former prosecutor.