

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Police Commissioner: System Has Failed Youth, VIPD Alone Cannot Fix Problem

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Virgin Islands Police Department Commissioner-designee Delroy Richards says a main cause for the ongoing gun violence in the territory has to do with the territory's leaders, and various government agencies, failing young people. Richards believes this is made evident by much of the violent crime taking place in the same neighborhoods with every new generation.

Richards opened up to *VI Consortium* after a recent press conference at Government House, adding that the VIPD alone should not be blamed for the current crime situation and called for a "multi-agency response" to help reverse the deeply rooted problem.

"The problem that I have is that we seem to have failed somewhere along the line -- and when I say we, not just the police department, because these guys that are in [Hospital Ground](#) today, and in those same communities who are committing these crimes, are not the same individuals who were there back in 1994 -- some of them weren't even born," Richards said. "But it is so much of a cycle that, as the older ones are removed, whether by incarceration, death, or they relocated, we have a younger group in the same community, so it tells me that somewhere along the line, we have lost them or somebody forgot them."

Acknowledging the root of the problem as a broken system that has neglected its young people, Richards said there must be efforts put in place prior to young Virgin Islanders' turning to a lifestyle of crime and violence.

"It must be a multi-agency response to what is happening," Richards said. "The police can only do the patrols, the police can only do the apprehensions, but you know what, there must be intervention prior to all of that. If not, this cycle will continue."

In relation to solving crimes that have already been committed, *VI Consortium* asked Richards about the seeming distrust of police by citizens as being one of the reasons that leads are sometimes difficult to come by. However, the commissioner disagreed, stating that there are many avenues whereby citizens can send in tips anonymously.

"I don't believe that that's so much the case," the commissioner-designee began. "Let me tell you why, citizens, if they want to remain anonymous, can call [Crime Stoppers](#), or they can call certain numbers within the police department and provide the information without giving their names."

The real problem, Richards said, is the issue of witnesses deciding not to testify in court because they fear for their lives.

"The problem that we seem to be having is the lack of witnesses who are willing to testify," he explained. "They're not afraid to testify because of the police; they are afraid to testify because of possible reprisals from the same folks who they are testifying against, and it has nothing to do with being afraid of the police. They will call up and be anonymous, and they will lead us to an individual, and that person then becomes a person of interest; but you know what happens, we cannot rely on the witnesses to testify, because they're not going to come forward."

Because of citizens' unwillingness to give testimony in court, Richards said police must rely on forensic evidence, which sometimes takes more than half a year to produce results.

"So, we've got to wait on all the forensic evidence that we were able to collect, and we have to send that away to the laboratories, and let me tell you, sometimes that takes months -- six months, seven months, to get evidence back," he explained.

Richards said these days criminal activity has changed so much so that those involved in it no longer tell police who may have perpetrated a violent act against them, reverting instead to what is being called "street justice."

"Years ago when a guy was shot, his first response was, 'I know who shot me.' Today, it's, 'I don't know who shot me.' What it does, when they invoke that code of silence, is that you've got to open your eyes because what comes next is retaliation. They are using street justice as a way of getting even, and that's what it's referred to. They have their code of silence, and they resolve it by street justice. So, the only thing the police can do is target them, apprehend them, and enter them into the criminal justice system," Richards explained. "That's about it."

Richards' comments on the high crime rate in the territory comes at a time when residents are looking to the Virgin Islands' government to find ways to stop the bloodshed and other criminal acts.

On Saturday near the St. Croix Educational Complex, [a couple was carjacked and robbed of their cellphones by two men brandishing what appeared to be a machine gun.](#) Police later apprehended the suspects and recovered the vehicle; however, the incident indicates that even after Governor Kenneth Mapp's strong stance against crime and his administration's vow to crack down on criminal activity, gun violence remains a daunting issue for the territory's police department.