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Social Media Slights, Poverty and Gangs Among Drivers of Gun Violence in Territory, and Data Should Lead Effort to Reduce Crime, Leaders Say

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VIPD officers respond to an incident in Orange Grove, St. Croix. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

The need for data-driven solutions to reduce gun violence in the U.S. Virgin Islands dominated a discussion between the Office of Gun Violence Prevention and senators in the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety.

One message was clear when the committee met on Monday, and it is that data must drive policies that will allow the Office of Gun Violence Prevention to intercede at the earliest stages for children at high risk of committing gun crimes.

“The takeaways from today’s dialogue I believe are the importance of acquiring data, housing data, and analyzing data in order to drive the policy that you would need to utilize to run your office so that we could see those numbers go down,” said Committee Chairman Senator Angel Bolques.

Non-committee member Sen. Donna Frett-Gregory strongly encouraged the office to derive its statistics from the V.I. Virtual Information System (VIVIS) which falls under the purview of the V.I. Department of Education and which is responsible for collecting “cradle to grave” data across the territories.

Antonio Emanuel, executive director of the Office of Gun Violence Prevention said the data the office currently gathers is from law enforcement and that provides the organization with information about the most current and the most active problems.

“The data gives us direction as to who are our frequent flyers, who are the ones that are doing the most crime in our neighborhood and then we collaborate with our local and federal law enforcement agencies,” he said.

While the vast majority of people involved in shootings, as victim or suspect, are members or associates of street groups, according to Mr. Emanuel, these crimes have been fueled by retaliation.

He said often shootings are precipitated by a “petty conflict, misunderstanding, a simple argument, relationship issues or the now ubiquitous social media slight.”

“The social media slight sometimes becomes a social media incited shooting. This is caused by postings and or videos that promote certain neighborhoods or cliques that also “dis” other crews or individuals, sparking a series of comments and competing videos that exacerbate existing beefs that can escalate into shootings,” he explained further.

So far, the office has determined that most dropouts occur in the 7th grade which places these children at a high-risk of delinquency and exposure to gun violence.

He noted too that most crimes of gun violence in the territory occur in neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty, blight, and low performing schools and offered that the most essential work to address the root causes of crime and violence should focus on eliminating poverty, improving the quality of and access to education, offering well-paying jobs and improving basic quality of life issues.

“Combined with poverty, substandard education, and lack of opportunities, these neighborhoods become havens for violence,” Mr. Emanuel remarked.

To tackle the risk factors, the newly established office must work alongside other stakeholders like the V.I. Department of Human Services.

DHS Chief Legal Counsel, Kimberly Berry, represented DHS Commissioner Kimberley Causey-Gomez in the Legislature during the Monday hearing. She spoke in support of the office and told lawmakers that she is hoping that the establishment of the office will help to reduce the number of claims made for compensation.

“I’m hoping that the Office of Gun Violence Prevention will put us out of business because the majority of our cases last year were applications filed by survivors of homicides and the next

largest class were non-fatal gun shots,” she noted.

According to Ms. Berry, this year alone, the Crime Victims Compensation program reviewed 58 applications and approved 54 claims.

“Of the reviewed claims the program approved \$391,880.89,” she said.

The department has since been able to pay out \$208,329.83 to 73 individuals which included approved awards going back several years.

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