

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO ADDRESSING GUN VIOLENCE





Dear Philadelphia,

For over a decade, I've coached young people because I believe youth programming is one of the best tools to keep young people safe and on the pathway to success. I wanted to understand better what I could do in my role as a Councilmember to address gun violence outside of our basketball courts and inside our judicial courts. So I stepped out of my comfort zone and into the First Judicial District's court designated for preliminary hearings involving a gun. My team and I have attended almost every week this past summer to understand what was happening, what was not happening, and what could happen to address gun violence intervention and make our communities safer.

Philadelphia Municipal Court has allocated a courtroom for preliminary hearings for firearm cases as a response to the rise in crimes involving a firearm. I commend President Judge Dugan for taking this important action and thank Judge Moss for being the judge who regularly presides in that courtroom. This summer, I wanted to learn more about how firearms cases are handled in the Philadelphia Municipal Court. I spent time watching preliminary hearings in cases in which a firearm was involved, but no one was shot or killed.

In order to learn more about the judicial process, I sat next to Judge Moss regularly over the summer as he heard cases and my staff regularly visited his courtroom. I learned and observed the benefits of the process implemented by the court. My experience was invaluable in compiling the following set of recommendations to address gun violence both inside the courtroom and outside on the streets.

Similar to my experience bringing young people together through youth sports, successfully addressing gun violence should be a coordinated, team approach. Every branch of government, in addition to the private sector, the media, and our residents, play a role in tackling this crisis and making our city safer. No one party is solely responsible for our current situation, just as no one party can solely fix it.

When we work together, we get results.

In service,
Isaiah Thomas
Philadelphia Councilmember At-Large

ADDRESS SYSTEMIC FAILURES

Philadelphia is one of the poorest big cities in America. **Without deep investments in the city's most underfunded neighborhoods, the gun violence crisis will continue its cycle.** The data¹ constantly shows that investments in blight removal, community beautification, and neighborhood security will reduce gun violence. We need to invest time and resources into the communities hurting the most in a way that meets people where they are.

- People are feeling alone and scared. It is the government's responsibility to bring people together and provide supportive resources. The Philly Counts office was created for Census outreach and then constantly pivoted to meet the needs of the moment. Their record of community engagement, paired with City Council's resources dedicated to addressing these systemic failures, could lift Philadelphians out of poverty. **We recommend a \$2M investment in Philly Counts to lead regular, in-person community engagement in Philadelphia's most distressed zip codes.** (19144, 19141, 19120, 19124, 19140, 19134, 19133, 19132, 19121, 19131, 19104, 19139, and 19143)². By meeting constituents where they are at with tangible resources, city agencies can make an immediate and systemic positive change.
- New technology will give law enforcement more tools to protect Philadelphia's streets. Surveillance technology provides resources for Philadelphia Police as well as contributes to a perception of security. **We recommend a \$5M investment in cameras³ in Philadelphia's most distressed zip codes.**
- We need to invest in blight removal. **We recommend a \$2M investment into existing CLIP programs + a \$2M investment into existing PHS programs that beautify neighborhoods, reduce crime, and showcase the best parts of Philadelphia.**
- Finally, City Council has allocated substantial resources toward gun violence prevention and intervention programs. **We recommend an evaluation of how the Administration spent these gun violence prevention dollars and the effectiveness of the programs.**

¹ <https://www.apa.org/pubs/reports/gun-violence-prevention>

² <https://6abc.com/feature/philly-gun-violence-solutions-stopping-community-efforts-to-stop-crime/11869399/>

³ https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/27556/412403-evaluating-the-use-of-public-surveillance-cameras-for-crime-control-and-prevention_1.pdf

PUSHBACK THE PERCEPTION OF LAWLESSNESS

Gun violence and the possession of guns have skyrocketed in Philadelphia. While deep investments in our communities and stricter gun laws are necessary, there is also a perception of lawlessness. Residents believe that the government is not being responsive to crime and this creates a narrative⁴ that Philadelphia is unsafe. In addition to investments and policy, we must address the narrative around law enforcement and prosecution.

- While city officials meet regularly within their branch of government, gun violence stems from complicated and deep-rooted factors. Without an immediate and coordinated approach, residents are unlikely to see immediate changes in their neighborhoods. **We recommend a 100-day working group to propose and enact an immediate response.** This working group, composed of City Council, the Mayor's Administration, the Philadelphia Police Department, the District Attorney's Office, and the Attorney's General Office, will meet weekly (with a monthly update) for 100 days to share data, policies, resources, etc. At the end of the 100 days, the working group will announce their plan, disband, and enact their coordinated plan.
- When enacting new policies, open data is essential to ensure that goals are being met. Data can be misconstrued or misunderstood, so openness, transparency, and accessibility are critical in sharing data. **We recommend the District Attorney and Philadelphia Police and Administration share all relevant crime data with local and federal partners and the public in a transparent and accessible way.** While a portion of data is being shared, open data is vital for bringing the public into the plan and ensures that local and federal partners can properly receive all data⁵.
- The perception of lawlessness is further exacerbated by reporting gun crimes as trends and problems rather than human stories and solutions. **We recommend the media apply a people-centered, solution-oriented journalistic approach to gun-related news.** This can be achieved in part through regular in-person press conferences to assist in people-centered and solution-oriented reporting.
- Police Department vacancies and low officer morale are contributing to the perception of lawlessness. **We recommend the Mayor's Administration work with the Fraternal Order of Police Lodge #5 on officer morale, recruitment, and retention to address officer issues and bolster the force to match the department's funding levels.**

⁴ <https://www.cbsnews.com/philadelphia/news/philadelphia-officials-divided-claims-lawlessness-south-street-mass-shooting/>

⁵ <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2022/06/14/what-did-fbi-data-say-about-crime-in-2021-it-s-too-unreliable-to-tell>

COORDINATED COURT REFORM

In response to the historic rise in gun-related crimes, a specific courtroom was dedicated within Philadelphia Municipal Court to hold preliminary hearings for crimes involving a gun (no discharge or homicide). This type of responsiveness and immediacy is necessary and must be replicated by all branches of government. However, while this court is laudable, it is still not enough, and a coordinated approach to court reform will make this initiative even more successful.

- The current perception of lawlessness, combined with the rise in shootings, sends a message to victims and witnesses. We need to better protect victims and witnesses⁶ in order to get them safely to and from the court in an effort to clear more cases. **We recommend \$3M in victim protection and witness services.**
- When arriving at court, the system for check-in and tracking of police could be made easier and more modern. **We recommend \$1M in fingerprinting technology to expedite administrative processes and bureaucracy.**
- Younger and less experienced attorneys are being hired to prosecute complicated, gun-related cases to fill immediate vacancies. **We recommend modifying prosecutor training with respect to education around firearm-related laws.**
- Police Department vacancies and low officer morale are contributing to the perception of lawlessness. **We recommend the Mayor's Administration work with the Fraternal Order of Police Lodge #5 on officer morale, recruitment, and retention to address officer issues and bolster the force to match the department's funding levels.**
- To further account for vacancies, senior Assistant District Attorneys observe a younger, newer attorney who acts as the lead prosecutor. **We recommend that senior prosecutors argue gun cases while training lawyers to observe; we recommend a recurring group of prosecutors rather than a revolving door for varied but similar cases.**
- In addition to victims and witnesses failing to appear in court, the absence of Philadelphia Police officers accounts for the second leading cause of case dismissals. The majority of officer no-shows is a result of administrative and/or human resource clerical errors. **We recommend better coordinating officer schedules for court appearances with updated technology and prioritizing the court appearance in a way that does not conflict with other public safety responsibilities.**

⁶ <https://www.inquirer.com/news/philadelphia-homicides-shootings-victim-witness-relocation-krasner-20210920.html>



Office of Isaiah Thomas, Councilmember At-Large | City Hall Room 330 | (215) 686-3446



@CMThomasPHL



@councilmanthomas_jobresources



@CMThomasPHL



PHLCouncil.com