

Mayor Sylvester Turner
One Safe Houston: Mayor's Public Safety Initiative to
Combat Violent Crime
Wednesday, February 2, 2022

I want to thank everyone for joining us today for an announcement that addresses violent crime in our City. We have sought input from council members, community leaders and Crime Stoppers.

Joining me today as speakers are

- **Chief Troy Finner**/Houston Police Department
- **Noe Angel**/Alcohol Tabaco and Firearms
- **Richard Collodi**/FBI Houston Special Agent in Charge
- **Minal Patel Davis**/Director, Mayor's Office of Human Trafficking and Domestic Violence
- **Rania Mankarious**/ Crime Stoppers Houston -
- **Council Member Abbie Kamin**/District C, Chair of Public Safety Committee

○ **State Rep. Ann Johnson/District 134**
Houston

The City of Houston, like most major cities across the country, is experiencing a surge in violent crime. There are no easy answers and no singular initiative standing by itself that adequately addressing rising crime. but the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be ignored and requires a holistic and comprehensive approach and strategy.

Other factors contributing to the nationwide spike in violent crime include widespread social anxiety, economic uncertainty, mental health concerns, the increased presence of illegally owned firearms, and a strained court system plagued by criminal case backlogs that impact the pretrial release and prosecution of violent offenders.

As your mayor, is my responsibility to focus on the City of Houston.

Last year, the city launched a **Violent Crime Initiative** that resulted in the reduction of crime in many identified hot spots. By the end of the initiative, all violent crime categories were reduced except homicide.

Unfortunately, the increase in homicides during the first month of 2022 including assaults on police officers and citizens is a sobering reminder that we must collectively strive for excellence as a community to combat our increasing crime challenges.

Houstonians, it is time to take our city back.

Every Houstonian deserves to feel safe. Safe at home, safe at work, safe while driving down the street, safe while shopping and safe with their families in our parks.

Since the beginning of the year, our city has felt anything but safe. At times, we have felt like a city under siege because of a violent crime wave that is sweeping across the country and impacting us in Houston.

Let's be clear: Violent Crime is a public health crisis made worse by the pandemic and too many guns on our streets. Domestic violence cases have more than doubled since 2019 and more people are experiencing mental health distress leading to interactions with police resulting in dangerous or deadly outcomes.

Last week, three Houston police officers were shot and wounded by a suspect carrying a “fully automatic” weapon, who fired multiple rounds in a busy neighborhood. The gunman, who was wanted on a felony warrant at the time of the shooting, was not concerned about the lives of law enforcement or the families living nearby.

It is understandable that many in our community are frightened and outraged because these violent crimes shock the conscious of our city and shake the foundation of a city that is known as a safe place to live, work and raise a family.

As I said at on the day the three officers were shot last week, we are living in inherently

dangerous time. And it's going to take all of us working together to keep our city safe.

Police officers cannot do it alone and it is important that we give them the tools to work with and join them in creating a comprehensive and holistic approach to combat violent crime.

To realize this vision, we are launching the **One Safe Houston** crime reduction initiative, which focuses on four (4) key areas:

- Violence Reduction and Crime Prevention
- Crisis Response Teams
- Youth Outreach Opportunities
- Key Community Partnerships

One Safe Houston is a comprehensive violence reduction initiative that links research-based strategies to improve public safety and reduce the harms caused by violent crime.

In this public safety ecosystem, HPD is a vital stakeholder. We appreciate our police officers, and we want them to safely return home to their families.

They are on the front line. As we add more police through our cadet classes, we will also

- We will begin by putting **More Boots on the Ground now**. I have authorized HPD to add an additional **125 officers per day on overtime**. These additional officers will be deployed primarily based on data driven, evidence-based analysis of when and where the most violent crimes are occurring and to provide more visibility toward crime deterrence and rapid response to crimes in progress. We have allowed **\$5.7 million** to this initiative.
- To compliment HPD, the City will invest **\$1.9 million to increase the number of park rangers by 15**. They will work as partners with local law enforcement. We are committed to keeping our parks safe.

- There is no question there are too many guns on the streets. The City will invest **\$1 million in a robust gun buyback initiative** to remove more illegal or unwanted firearms from the street that could ultimately be used as crime guns.

- **Identify Top Hot Spot Crime Neighborhoods.** We will focus on the most dangerous neighborhoods to address crime. HPD will provide added safety to our shopping areas, synagogues, mosques and other faith-based institutions. As a city, we must collectively condemn antisemitism and islamophobia. We must also collectively condemn violence against Asians, people of color, members of the LGBGQ+ community and other targeted groups. If not, our silence makes us complicit to these acts of violence.

- **Identify and address Nuisance Locations**

Investigative Divisions within HPD and other city departments will work together to address night club and convenience stores where repeated crimes of violence have occurred.

As an example, on January 28, 2022, the City filed a common nuisance lawsuit against the operator of MVP Food Store at 4718 Lockwood, the property owner, and the property itself under state law, Chapter 125 of the Texas Civil Practices & Remedies Code (“Chapter 125”). The City’s lawsuit alleges criminal activity at MVP Food Store including rampant drug dealing, aggravated assaults, and shootings over the past year. MVP Food Store is a known drug haven located close to Kashmere Gardens Elementary School and has significantly impacted the health and safety of the community. The City’s lawsuit seeks injunctive relief

and asks the court to compel the Defendants to abate the criminal activity at MVP Food Store.

Chapter 125 has been an effective tool in helping the City and HPD combat criminal hot spots where property owners and operators fail to take reasonable measures to address the criminal activity on their property. Even with pandemic restrictions, this past year alone, the City successfully closed 8 massage parlors with suspected human trafficking activity where 4 lawsuits were filed and have ongoing lawsuits with Chapter 125 claims against 2 sexually oriented businesses. The City will continue to use every available tool to rein in crime with its limited resources.

It is imperative that we continue our efforts to reduce crime at local business through increased crime prevention through environmental design. To that

end, the Administration has asked the City Attorney to draft an ordinance for council approval requiring security cameras on certain classes of businesses where the increase in crime is concentrated.

These cameras will survey the immediate and surrounding public areas.

- **Court Backlog.** Each major city faces similar challenges, but Harris County has the greatest number of backlogged court cases than any other city in Texas with more than 100,000 cases. It is undisputed that several factors have negatively impacted portions of the Harris County Criminal Justice process. In 2017, Hurricane Harvey caused major damage and disruption to the operation of our local court system and thus the ability of our local criminal justice system to adjudicate cases expeditiously.

This unfortunate situation coupled with the global pandemic that followed has created a criminal court backlog.

- The City of Houston is poised to work collaboratively with the District Attorney's Office to address these challenges; but the fact remains that the criminal court backlog is impacting the County's ability to bring violent offender cases to completion. Accordingly, it is imperative that all criminal justice stakeholders work together to design a plan to clear the criminal case backlog, especially those involving offenders charged with violent crimes and who pose the greatest risk of harm to our community.
- **The city will do its part. To that end, the City will provide \$1.5 million in additional funding to the Houston Forensic Science Center to address backlogs. But**

the simple facts are, we need more criminal courts, judges and staffing.

- **Bond Company Protocols and Best Practices.** The Criminal Justice System does not operate effectively, efficiently or in the interest of victims when any part of the system is not functioning as designed. It is incumbent for us to recognize that the backlog of criminal justice cases and the delay in the adjudication of violent offenders can also be exacerbated if bail bond amounts are reduced to a nominal level. Bail bonding companies are in some instances now requiring substantially less than the customary 10 percent required to post bond.
- I have instructed the City Legal Department to draft an ordinance for the consideration by the Houston City Council which would require that a bail

bond company charge a premium which is equal to at least ten percent of the amount of the bail bond set by the court. This would require that the cost of a bail bond be equal to what the public generally believes to be the cost of a such a bond rather than some lesser amount. I also call upon the Harris County Bail Bond Board to adopt a regulation requiring that all companies issuing bonds within Harris County charge a premium equal to at least ten percent of the amount of the bond. If the Bail Bond Board were to adopt such a standard for the entire county, then the City would consider it unnecessary to move forward with the passage of the proposed ordinance. Otherwise, the City must act.

Crisis Intervention, Response, & Recovery. The Community has an active role to play.

- The City will allocate **\$2.5 million** for the implementation of the **CURE** Violence program in targeted communities. The Cure Violence model trains and deploys outreach workers and violence interrupters to mitigate conflict on the street before it turns violent.
- These credible messengers are trusted members of their communities and use their street credibility to model and teach more effective methods to community and resolve conflicts.
- **Community Re-Entry Network Program.** This program is designed to help formerly incarcerated individuals reintegrate into the community by providing access to workforce development tools, mental and behavioral health resources, housing, and other basic needs. To date, The Houston Health Department's (HHD) reentry program successfully reduced recidivism to 4.2% as compared to the state recidivism rate of 21.4%. To expand the

program's footprint, HHD will collaborate with Harris County to implement these interventions and partner with community-based organizations to support program expansion. **The City will further invest \$1 million to increase the number of program participants from 500 to 750.**

Domestic Violence Focus

- There are numerous studies noting the increased prevalence of domestic violence because of the pandemic, with many incidences later leading to homicides. The year over year statistics from HPD on Aggravated Assaults with “impeding of breath” incidents has increase 113 percent from 2019 to 2020.
- My office had previously used CARES Act dollars to stand up these programs, and when that funding was exhausted, the City of Houston began using ARPA funding for these services. They are already deployed and already making a difference.

- But what we are seeing with increasing domestic violence incidents, which can quickly lead to lethal confrontations, needs more. **Today, I'm announcing an additional \$3 million effort to provide more services for survivors and prevention efforts to combat domestic violence.**

Those programs supporting survivors include:

- Forensic Nurses directly contracted with HPD. These medical forensic exams provide critical history about the survivor that can be helpful for community-based advocates and counselors who are supporting their recovery and contribute to the preparation of an evidence-based criminal charge to be presented for criminal prosecution.
- Emergency Sheltering for victims of domestic violence, after the forensic

medical exam is completed, survivors are offered emergency housing and other supportive services at no charge to ensure survivors' continued safety and long-term stabilization

Additionally, the City of Houston will look to prevent domestic violence by investing in education and outreach to targeted communities. We will hear more in a moment from Minal Patel Davis.

CONCLUSION

This is a public health crisis and as a City, we will and must address the crisis through law enforcement, public health practitioners and community partners working together. **NO ONE CAN ESCAPE ACCOUNTABILITY.**

The strategy we outlined today is a blueprint for the City that can guide us beyond 2022.

With the collaboration of all stakeholders, including business owners, faith-based leaders, and organizations that work with those

experiencing family violence and mental illness,
I am confident that we will reduce violence and
emerge as **One Resilient City – One
Unified City – One Safe Houston.**