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MAYORS' CALL FOR IMMEDIATE FEDERAL ACTIONS TO STEM VIOLENCE IN CITIES

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After years of decline, some cities currently are seeing an uptick in homicides and other violent crimes. Cities that had a record low number of homicides in 2014 are experiencing spikes this year, even with the same strategies in place. While the exact causes are unclear, officials have identified some common threads:

- Some cities are reporting an increase in gun recoveries, but at the same time are seeing an increase in the number of guns, particularly those with large-capacity magazines, which are on the streets.
- When shootings occur, more guns, particularly those with large-capacity magazines, are being used and more rounds are being fired, leading to more victims shot, some of whom are children and other innocent bystanders.
- Many people involved in these shootings, both as perpetrators and victims, are under supervision – on pre-trial release, probation, or parole.
- Synthetic marijuana has become prevalent in some cities and has led to violent behavior among some users. People under supervision are not being screened for these drugs and the formulae change so rapidly that such testing is difficult.
- While many non-violent drug offenders serve long sentences, many violent gun offenders with multiple violations do not and are quickly released.

While overall crime rates have continued to decline, homicides and other violent crimes have increased recently in some cities. The Major Cities Chiefs Association has compiled data that compares the number of homicides from January 1 to early July of last year with the same period this year in certain cities. For example, in Baltimore homicides increased from 105 to 155, in Chicago from 198 to 235, in Milwaukee from 39 to 85, in New Orleans from 84 to 103, and in St. Louis from 64 to 94.

Any solution to these problems requires reforms and actions by all components of the criminal justice system. The vast majority of courts, judges, prosecutors, probation and parole authorities, and jails and prisons are at the state and local level. Reform and changes among them are needed, but will take time. Mayors and police chiefs feel a sense of urgency now and see a need for quick action. They are, therefore, calling on the federal government – both the Administration and Congress – for immediate help:

Administrative Actions:

1. **Guns:** The FBI should notify local authorities immediately when an individual trying to purchase a gun fails a background check.
2. **Personnel:** Local police departments should be able to supplement their personnel with federal agents (FBI, DEA, ATF, Secret Service, Marshall's Service) for cases involving high value targets.

3. **Prosecution:** U.S. Attorneys should work in partnership with local prosecutors to strengthen prosecutions when suspects can be charged with federal crimes. The Justice Department should establish minimum expectations for US Attorneys' prosecutions, particularly relating to illegal gun possession and illegal gun trafficking in the secondary gun market.
4. **Pre-trial Practices:** The Justice Department should provide guidance to improve pre-trial practices so that persons charged with gun-related and other violent crimes are not inappropriately released to the streets. When such suspects are released to the streets they should be closely monitored, potentially through the use of ankle bracelets or other practices.
5. **Drugs:** Federal authorities should provide up-to-date field tests for synthetic drugs currently being developed and used. Those on probation or parole should be regularly tested for these drugs.
6. **Evidence:** Police departments should be able to request the assistance of federal crime labs in evidence analysis so that they are able to clear major cases more quickly.

Congressional Actions:

1. **Personnel:** Congress should provide continued and increased funding for COPS hiring grants and other federal programs that enhance the ability of local police departments to do their jobs.
2. **Reentry:** Congress should provide continued and increased funding for Second Chance programs so that when prisoners are released to the community they have a greater likelihood of being drug free and having the education, skills, and support needed to succeed and not commit further crimes.
3. **Sentencing Reform:** Congress should revise federal sentencing laws to reduce the incarceration rates among low level drug offenders and increase them for persons who have committed repeated violent crimes, particularly those involving guns.
4. **Guns:** Congress should strengthen the background check system, including its coverage of potentially dangerous mentally ill persons; enhance prosecution and penalties for crimes in which guns with large capacity magazines are involved; and enhance penalties for gun trafficking crimes.
5. **Technology:** Congress should provide support for the development and use of technology that will assist police in solving cases, including cameras – real-time surveillance and body-worn cameras – license plate readers, and facial recognition software.

On August 11, Conference President and Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake conducted a conference call with a small group of mayors whose cities are experiencing spikes in homicides and other violent crimes. This paper was developed during and following the call and reviewed by the mayors who participated in it.