

SCI Public Hearing
Juvenile Violence/Neighborhood Gangs
September 26, 2018
Opening Remarks
Executive Director Lee C. Seglem

Good morning.

One of the SCI's main duties is to investigate and report on the criminal underworld in all of its disturbing dimensions. Our mandate as an independent watchdog agency is much broader than that, of course – we also expose waste and abuse of tax dollars. But it is in the criminal arena that the SCI clearly and historically has distinguished itself over five decades as a unique instrument of government and as a valuable adjunct to law enforcement.

We have repeatedly put New Jersey on notice about the changing nature and threat posed by different criminal groups and by weaknesses in the criminal justice system. We were among the first, for example, to chart the emergence of brazen, highly organized criminal street gangs against the backdrop of a diminished Mafia. We showed how these rising gangsters subverted our gun laws and our prisons. How they spurred the heroin epidemic. How they and others exploited and abused a broken bail system.

Today, you will hear how the landscape of criminality has shifted yet again – to the detriment of public peace and public safety, and in ways that are severely testing the system's ability to respond.

As we speak, communities across this State are confronting a resurgence of street violence – but not at the hands of adult gang-bangers in known and readily identifiable groups like the Bloods or the Crips. They are still part of the scene, make no mistake. But we are here to talk about something different. More to the point, we are here to talk about children. Children as young as 12 or 14 years old. Children who are picking up guns to kill and maim each other and anyone else who might get in the way.

This is the dark and ruthless world of neighborhood gangs and juvenile gun violence.

As you will hear, it is a drug-fueled world where the slightest personal affront, even a perceived insult, can trigger mayhem. Where teens and pre-teens almost routinely settle adolescent tussles with deadly weapons. Where social media serve as electronic billboards for distinctly anti-social activity – used to pick fights, display weaponry, recruit new members and threaten the police. And where adults exploit children to do their criminal bidding.

It is a chaotic world where law enforcement is struggling to catch up, and it is a world where kids grow up expecting to die in violence.

While it is true that the crime rate in general has dropped or at least remained static in recent years, what is happening within and among this particular social subset defies that conventional wisdom. As anyone who is close to the action will tell you – and you will hear from them today – juvenile violence, widely splintered and highly volatile, whether linked to gang activity or not, has only grown more chaotic, more complicated and more threatening with the passage of time.

In a State that has worked hard to get its juvenile justice system in order in recent years, coming to grips with this phenomenon presents daunting challenges. Although New Jersey, on the tail end of the problem, has made considerable progress in developing alternatives to incarceration of juvenile offenders, law enforcement officials report that at the front end, at street level, youth violence has mushroomed to a crisis point.

With this hearing, our goal is not only to put a public spotlight on a serious problem. We also hope this forum will spur a statewide conversation on creative and effective ways to address it. This is the first step in a process that will culminate with a comprehensive report taking into account information, perspective and recommendations from everyone at every level who must deal with these issues on a daily basis – law enforcement, the judiciary, the juvenile justice system and the community at-large. At stake is nothing less than the safety of our communities and the frightening prospect of yet another generation being lost to violence on our streets.

Please call the first witness.