



Hon. Pedro R. Pierluisi
Statement and Questions
Oversight Hearing on the U.S. Department of Justice's
Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (the COPS Office)
House Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security
February 29, 2012

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

To begin, I would like to thank Director Melekian for his testimony this morning. I would also like to thank him for meeting with me earlier this month to discuss the grant funding, training and technical assistance the COPS Office has provided to law enforcement agencies in my jurisdiction, Puerto Rico.

Before I pose a few questions to our witness, I want to articulate a full-throated defense of the COPS Office. The Office was created as a result of the *Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994*. I was Attorney General of Puerto Rico at the time, and I lobbied hard for this law. From where I stood, the need for that legislation could not have been more evident. In the early 1990s, Puerto Rico—like so many other U.S. jurisdictions—was suffering from a wave of violent crime. In the five-year period between 1989 and 1993, the number of homicides on the Island more than doubled, from about 460 to over 950. In 1994, there were nearly 1,000 homicides in Puerto Rico. Indeed, my own family was touched by this violence. Director Melekian: in your testimony, you note that, as police chief in Pasadena, you had to tell too many

parents that their child was not coming home. For me, as for you, violent crime is not an abstract problem. To the contrary, it is profoundly, intensely and undeniably personal. I believe that the most solemn duty of our government—whether it be federal, state, or local—is to safeguard its citizens. The COPS program is rooted in that simple but powerful premise. Thus, while this Subcommittee should ensure that the COPS office is effectively performing its mission to advance public safety, it should not question the overriding importance of the mission itself.

After the *Crime Act* was enacted, violent crime in Puerto Rico began to fall. Between 1994 and 1999, the number of homicides on the Island was cut almost in half—to well under 600. Of course, the programs created by the *Crime Act* were not the only factor behind this reduction in violence, but I do believe they were a major contributing factor.

Since the program's inception, over \$160 million dollars in COPS grants have been awarded to law enforcement agencies in Puerto Rico. These grants have put more than 3,500 new police officers on Puerto Rico's streets. Over \$6 million dollars has gone to improve safety for students and teachers in the Island's schools. About \$9 million dollars has been awarded for crime-fighting technology. Nearly every one of Puerto Rico's 78 municipalities has benefitted from COPS grants. These statistics are heartening, but they do not tell the whole story. The number of lives saved, the number of crimes prevented, and the number of families spared the pain of losing a loved one are beyond calculation.

However, as both the Director and the Members of this Subcommittee are well aware, violent crime in Puerto Rico, as well as in the neighboring U.S. Virgin Islands, has been on the rise again since 2000, even as violent crime nationwide has decreased substantially. The number of homicides in Puerto Rico exceeded 1,000 in 2011 for the first time ever. And the murder *rate* in

both Puerto Rico and the USVI is approximately six times the national average and nearly three times higher than any state. There are a number of factors that have contributed to this spike in violence, but perhaps the most important is geopolitics. As the U.S. government has increased resources along with Southwest Border and provided substantial funding to Mexico and Central American nations with the Mérida Initiative, drug trafficking organizations have returned to familiar routes through the Caribbean to get their products to market. According to some estimates, three-quarters of the murders in Puerto Rico and the USVI are linked to the drug trade.

This leads me to my questions.

- Director Melekian: the President's budget requests about \$290 million dollars for the COPS office for Fiscal Year 2013. \$257 million dollars of that amount is requested for the hiring program, which funds officers to support the efforts of state and local law enforcement agencies to keep communities safe. This is a welcome change from fiscal years 2006 through 2009, where the White House did not request any funds for the hiring program. Can you explain the methodology the COPS office uses in awarding hiring grants? I understand that these grants are competitive, but does your office take into account the level of crime in a jurisdiction in deciding whether and where to award grants? Obviously, I want to make sure that resources are being allocated to where they are most needed.
- Director, as you and I discussed during our meeting, many cities have had success in reducing violent crime—particularly youth crime linked to the drug trade—by adopting creative crime-fighting strategies that require law enforcement officers to be proactive, rather than simply reactive. One prominent example is Operation Cease Fire, although

there are many others. These strategies include elements that can be fairly described as “community policing.” Can you explain how the COPS office, through its various programs, can support a local law enforcement agency that is implementing creative crime-fighting strategies of this sort?