



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Floor Statement As Prepared For Delivery
“The Need for Increased Efforts to Recruit and Retain Federal Law Enforcement Officers”
May 25, 2011

Mr. Speaker:

Government’s most solemn obligation is to protect the people it serves. Since 9/11, our government has rightly placed much of its attention on defending the American people from terrorism. But we should not forget that government has a responsibility to safeguard the public from all forms of violence, including violent crime.

Violent crime exacts a terrible price. Its costs are measured not only in the number of lives lost, but in the number of citizens who live in fear that they, or someone they love, might be the next victim.

Data released on Monday show that violent crime in the United States has fallen over the past few years. However, we cannot become complacent. Despite the positive national trend lines, certain American communities have become less—rather than more—secure.

The federal government has a particularly strong duty to protect its citizens from violence when that violence is linked to a crime that crosses state or national borders. That is why our government has worked hard to stem the flow of drugs entering the United States through Mexico and to combat drug-related violence along the Southwest border.

But these efforts, while essential, are not enough. To protect the American people, we must protect the full length of our southern border. As federal programs like the Mérida Initiative choke off drug routes through Central America, narco-traffickers have increasingly turned to the Caribbean, including Puerto Rico. Because of Puerto Rico’s role as a key transit point for drugs destined for consumption in the 50 states, the Island has one of the highest murder rates in our nation.

Given the unacceptably high level of violence in Puerto Rico—and its close connection to the drug trade—one would expect that most federal law enforcement positions on the Island would be filled. But that is not the case. Over 50 percent of authorized ATF positions, 22 percent of ICE positions, and 17 percent of DEA positions are vacant. Puerto Rico has 31 federal law enforcement officers for every 100,000 residents, well below the national average of 36.

The mismatch between the severity of the problem in Puerto Rico and the scale of the federal response prompts this question: Why do federal law enforcement agencies have such high vacancy rates in such a high-need jurisdiction?

The budget shortfall is certainly one reason. The Departments of Justice and Homeland Security are being asked to do more with fewer resources, including fewer agents.

But the problem goes beyond money. Fewer workers are entering law enforcement than in the past. Those who do seek to enter the profession are more likely to be disqualified by health problems, such as obesity or substance abuse. And military recruitment, which has risen in recent years, is competing with law enforcement for the same talent.

In the face of these challenges, the federal government is not without tools. For example, executive agencies can pay a recruitment incentive to a newly hired employee if the position is difficult to fill.

But our government must go beyond piecemeal efforts. It needs a comprehensive plan to recruit, assign, and retain law enforcement officers in those jurisdictions that have the highest rates of violent crime.

Puerto Rico is one example of a jurisdiction where an increased federal presence is needed. But there are many American jurisdictions with high crime rates and too few federal law enforcement agents.

The primary reason for high crime in these states or cities may be the nexus with the drug trade, or it may have different roots. Regardless of the cause, the harm that results is the same. In communities beset by violent crime, residents become hostage to fear—fear that makes you think twice before walking to the store to buy milk, fear that makes parents hug their kids for an extra moment before sending them off to school, fear that prevents children from using the neighborhood playground.

It is imperative that the federal government reduce personnel shortages in federal law enforcement agencies in high-need jurisdictions. Congressman Grimm and I recently introduced legislation to direct the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security to establish a program to recruit, assign, and retain agents to serve in locations that have experienced high rates of violent crime.

The federal government cannot be passive in filling law enforcement shortages, hoping the right candidates will volunteer. Nor can it simply expect agents to remain with the government, particularly when the private sector often pays more. Instead, the federal government must proactively address personnel challenges by dedicating staff to recruitment and retention.

I urge the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security to take action now to make recruitment and retention a priority. Vacancies at law enforcement agencies are not a minor administrative hassle, but an urgent public safety problem. We must summon the best ideas from the field of personnel management to ensure that these agencies recruit superior talent and retain that talent. Too much is at stake to accept the status quo. For every moment we wait, we risk losing another American citizen to senseless violence.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I yield back the balance of my time.