

Statement from District Attorney Satana Deberry:

The past few days in Durham have been scary and disheartening. We have experienced the type of violence that makes us all feel unsafe, whether we have been directly impacted or not. We have been made to feel afraid of even the most mundane things – like the places we usually go and the routes we usually take home at the end of the day.

I'm often asked about the role of the District Attorney's Office in reducing and preventing crime. Unfortunately, our office only gets involved after something bad has already happened; our authority begins after arrest. However, the Durham County District Attorney's Office is working alongside law enforcement and community organizations to create a safer community in several ways.

When I took office in January, I restructured the office to prioritize serious crimes in which members of our community have been harmed. We have put our resources into prosecuting homicides and violent crimes, and as a result our office has secured convictions in 22 homicide cases so far this year.

I also recognize that until we address easy access to legal and illegal guns, we will still see violence in our country and in Durham. Our office has made it a practice to seek the surrender or destruction of firearms used in the commission of a violent crime, firearms that were illegally possessed, and firearms that belong to people convicted of domestic violence offenses.

We have improved coordination and communication with local law enforcement. This ensures that our office is aware of individuals who repeatedly come to the attention of police – including those who are gang-involved. We confer with law enforcement before homicide charges are filed to ensure there is sufficient evidence to move forward. I believe our office now has a better working relationship with the Durham Police Department and the Durham County Sheriff's Office than before.

We're also working to stem repeated criminal justice involvement in lower-level, nonviolent cases. In these cases, our prosecutors look for dispositions that make victims whole without creating a criminal record for the defendant, especially if that person is young. This saves limited court resources for serious offenses, and ensures people aren't blocked from success by the many collateral consequences of a criminal record. In some cases, prosecutors pursue alternatives to traditional court involvement that focus on accountability and changing behavior. This might be restorative justice, a victim-centered process that tries to repair harm, or cognitive behavioral intervention, which connects people with a mental illness to counseling.

Solutions to the gun violence Durham is facing are complex and involve more than policing, prosecution and incarceration. We must invest in the education, economic opportunities, and well-being of our residents. The reactive and punitive approach this country has taken to crime for decades has not worked. We need new approaches that are community-led, data-driven and trauma-informed. I have seen firsthand how often cycles of harm, violence, and instability underpin the cases that come to our office. We need to stop those cycles rather than perpetuate them. Together, as a community, we can.