

Top Hampden County law enforcement officials speak on street violence after Holyoke shootout kills baby

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Holyoke officers cleaning up the scene on Oct. 4. Photo by Irene Rotondo

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HOLYOKE — The fatal shooting of an infant in utero last week punctuated a violent year in Hampden County, leaving law enforcement officials considering what they've done right and what still remains to be done to stem the carnage.

The killings — in addition to many more nonfatal shootings — have left law enforcement

officials at their wits' end, despite what seem to be their best efforts: stepped-up patrols; targeted stings in crime-ridden neighborhoods; and more emphasis on diversion programs designed to save young offenders from a lifetime of crime, state prison or death.

A spokesman for District Attorney Anthony D. Gulluni said there have been 33 homicides in the county this year: 27 in Springfield, four in Holyoke, one in Chicopee and one in West Springfield. Springfield's numbers have hit an all-time high for the last 30 years.

During a meeting with The Republican's editorial board on Friday, Gulluni said members of his office are angry and frustrated, but not dispirited.

"From my standpoint, we regroup and reset. We're going to keep doing what we're doing and continue to fight," Gulluni said. "No one deserves to hear gunshots at night on a regular basis. No one deserves to have their kids walk by a drug deal on a corner. So, we're really working to achieve that for people."

While the 29-year-old expectant mother riding the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority P21E bus midday from Holyoke to Springfield's Union Station was hit by a stray bullet, other law enforcement officials say most of the region's homicides are far more calculated. A local legislator whose eye is on the pending gun control bill says one of the most dangerous developments in illegal street guns are "Glock switches," a legal item to buy that turns conventional guns into fully automatic weapons.

The woman, Selena Santana, is no longer in critical condition, according to authorities.

Police arrested two men in the case — Alejandro Ramos, 22, and Johnluis Sanchez, 30, both of Holyoke — and are in pursuit of a third. According to an official, that third man also was shot, went to the hospital for treatment and then took an Uber away from the medical center. He is still at large.

Gulluni said investigators believe two men — an uncle and nephew — had an ongoing beef with a third man, and stalked him to a bodega. A fight broke out outside the store initially with fists and feet. Two brandished guns, shots rang out, and the baby died despite doctors' efforts to safely deliver him.

Holyoke Mayor Joshua Garcia did not respond to a request for comment for this story, but he marched in a community rally against gun violence over the weekend.

Meanwhile, Ramos was arraigned Thursday on a charge of murder in Holyoke District Court for his suspected involvement in the shooting. He is being held without the right to bail.



Likewise, Sanchez was arraigned Friday over Zoom in Holyoke District Court. He has been charged with murder and also ordered held without bail. His bail was revoked on an open firearms case out of the same court.

Additional charges are expected, according to the District Attorney's Office.

Hampden District Attorney Anthony D. Gulluni speaks to reporters after testifying before a Massachusetts House panel on a bill making changes to the state's gun laws on Tuesday, Oct. 10, 2023 (MassLive photo by John L. Micek).

State House testimony

Gulluni was among those who testified at the State House Tuesday as legislators considered a gun violence reduction bill — or “An Act Modernizing Firearm Laws — that is up for debate. He focused on three key components of the bill: controlling the proliferation of “ghost guns,” or at-home assembled weapons that are unregistered; tighter laws around shootings that hit buildings or homes; and “extreme risk protection orders,” for domestic violence defendants who possess firearms.

“As we all know, domestic violence incidents often include the use of firearms, which exponentially increases the risk of irreversible tragedy. Domestic violence incidents are uniquely emotionally charged, and the availability of a firearm in these situations turns things from bad to worse,” Gulluni testified.

The bill would create a violence prevention commission and mandate warrants to seize firearms.

‘Pendulum has swung’

During his meeting with Republican staff, Gulluni connected today's rise in crime to the political and social activism that boiled over during the pandemic, when calls echoed to defund police departments.

“When you look at the immediate history, since 2020 in Massachusetts and nationally, the pendulum has swung. There were obviously issues and flaws that needed to be corrected. So there was this reckoning. But I think what’s happened now is we have a situation where we’ve sort of overcorrected,” said Gulluni, the county’s chief law enforcement official for nine years.

He added that he believes police departments have been “demoralized and dismantled,” and departments including Springfield’s, are struggling to attract quality recruits. Among the reasons, officials say there is a newfound aversion to wearing a badge.

“I think now is the time, locally and in other places, where we have to say: How are we funding? How are we resourcing? How are we providing tools to law enforcement to make sure that law-abiding people in our communities are safe?” he said.

The district attorney also noted that many of the more horrific murders could be neither predicted nor prevented. For instance, the murder-suicide on Berkshire Avenue that occurred in August. Upstairs neighbor Victor Nieves embarked on a days-long cocaine binge that apparently led him to grab his girlfriend’s lawfully owned gun and shoot a grandmother, two young girls and a dog downstairs.

One of the children survived. The grandmother, a family pet and a 10-year-old died. Nieves turned the gun on himself and died by suicide before police arrived. First responders found the children huddled and bloodied in a bedroom closet. In a tragic postscript to the case, the mother of the children, Stephanie Croteau, died in a car crash on Parker Street on Friday morning.

No common thread

Of the other two dozen murders in Springfield, there seems to be no common particular thread, according to Springfield Police Department Capt. Trent Duda, head of the detective bureau and homicide unit.

“Violent crime offenders become high-risk victims. There is this movement against incarcerating people, but sometimes keeping them locked up can save their lives,” Duda said.

There is a kill-or-be-killed mentality among some of the most active criminals in the city, which constitutes a very small percentage of the population but wreaks the most damage, Duda added.

Gulluni estimates the number of “high impact” offenders represents 1 or 2% of the criminal population.

To that end, he has created a diversion program for young offenders named Emerging Adult Court of Hope, in an attempt to nudge at-risk youth away from criminal lives. Among the approximately 15 young people in the pipeline, one is set to graduate in November and now works at a computer company in Southwick. Before he was caught in the net of the diversion program, he had amassed some gun and drug offenses.

“He was going to jail, no question about it. And God willing, he makes it through these last several weeks and does the right things. There’s been a progression. ... Those are the types of things are important to us. Those are the kinds of things that we’ve introduced, that make a difference for our community and for public safety,” Gulluni said.

Specialty courts, cheap drugs and the gun bill

Gulluni also cited a specific court devoted to troubled combat veterans, plus another for defendants who are clearly driven by drug use, with prosecutors solely devoted to drug and gun crimes in the

District and Superior courts. Community policing also is something of a priority, at least in Springfield. A gun court established several years ago failed because of inefficiency.

Gulluni has said previously that, despite a movement in certain corners of society, he encounters inner-city residents every day who want more police presence instead of less.

Also fueling gun violence is the availability of cheaper drugs in Western Massachusetts compared to nearby states such as Vermont — which also has seen an uptick in violence, he said.

“You have kind of this perfect storm, where you can get heroin in Holyoke or Western Massachusetts for two, three bucks a bag and up in Vermont, you sell it for eight, nine, 10 bucks a bag. So, the people here are unfortunately smart enough to say ‘hey, I’m going to take that stuff out there and sell it for a huge profit.’ And what’s abundant in Vermont? Guns,” Gulluni said.

The bill that has been moving through the House of Representatives has been hailed by some as a salve for gun violence, while others say it has no teeth.

“The gun bill is feel-good legislation typical of Massachusetts lawmakers. It doesn’t do anything for the people who don’t follow the rules. It has no bite,” Duda said.

The bill focuses primarily on so-called ghost guns and registering previously unregistered components of guns with no serial numbers, as they are assembled from anonymous pieces available for order on the internet.

It’s enough to threaten Second Amendment advocates, who have pushed lawn signs bucking the legislation. The Gun Owners Action League, which chooses to call the bill the “Lawful Citizens Imprisonment Act,” has distributed the opposition signs across the state throughout the summer via firearm stores and training facilities.

The signs have popped up primarily in suburbs, which have little to fear from street crime.

‘Glock switches’

State Sen. John C. Velis, D-Westfield, said there is another version of the gun control legislation afoot in his chamber of the Legislature.

“I can’t give you a timeframe, but I can tell you there are some gaps we need to fill in a state that has among the lowest rate of gun violence in the country and the toughest laws,” Velis said. “We are in active discussions over it.”

The senator is particularly focused on “Glock switches” that can turn a conventional gun into a much deadlier weapon, essentially making it automatic. Velis said he has visited the Springfield Police Department and firearms detectives let him listen to ShotSpotter echoes from guns with Glock switches.

“What does it sound like? It sounds like Afghanistan,” said Velis, an Army National Guard soldier who did two tours there.

The switches in and of themselves are not illegal in Massachusetts, but no one uses them as paperweights, Velis said.