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NO EASY ANSWER

Crime in D.C. is a complex issue, making it all the more difficult to find solutions that make the city safer

BY DAN BRENDEL | dbrendel@bizjournals.com

Kamal Ali, owner of Ben's Chili Bowl, the legendary D.C. restaurant with locations on U Street NW and H Street NE, views the increase in crime in the city on two different levels.

In one way, it has directly impacted his business. He's had two break-ins in the last year or so, and he's hired security for the first time in more than six decades and installed a camera system and lighting to deter theft in the parking lot.

He reckons such measures cost on the order of "thousands of dollars" annually, though the impact on sales and profits hasn't been "super significant."

But what has him more worried: the impact on a deeper "humanistic level."

"It affects our psyche in a greater way than it's just about business," Ali told me. To the extent young people are committing these crimes, "Why is that?" he asks. "I'm sure it's a myriad of things, includ-

ing poverty and homelessness and mental health and substance abuse, and family issues and education and everything else."

Ali is one of many business owners in D.C. grappling with an increase in crime, which has made headlines over the last year, most recently when four gunmen robbed several people outside The Wharf in an incident caught on video widely circulated on social media.

Violent and property crimes are both up year-to-date over the same period last year – some, including homicide and robbery, markedly so. The city reported 200 homicides this year by Oct. 1, the earliest such date since 1997, when the city was mired in economic and social stagnation.

So what are the ramifications for the city's businesses? Some business people and officials fear the mere perception of increased crime, let alone the reality, will damage the city's economy and hurt its post-pandemic rebound.

Kamal Ali, photographed at Ben's Chili Bowl on U Street NW, is helping form a coalition of community and nonprofit leaders called It's Time To Get Involved to think through what he called the "root causes" of crime in the city.

Retail 'ruckuses'

Of course, D.C. is a big place and crime is a complex issue, so not everyone everywhere is experiencing or interpreting it the same way. Some business owners are eager to address the issue publicly, sounding warning bells and demanding action. Others, while not dismissive of the issue, are far more sanguine. Still others – more than we anticipated, frankly – simply wouldn't talk about it.

Make of that what you will, but we expect it might mean they see crime neither as a nonproblem nor as such a huge problem they're willing to risk spooking customers, tenants or investors by sounding an alarm on the record. One thing is clear though: Perception and reality have become dancing partners, and there's increasing interest to nip the problem in the bud before it metastasizes into a crisis.

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Editor's

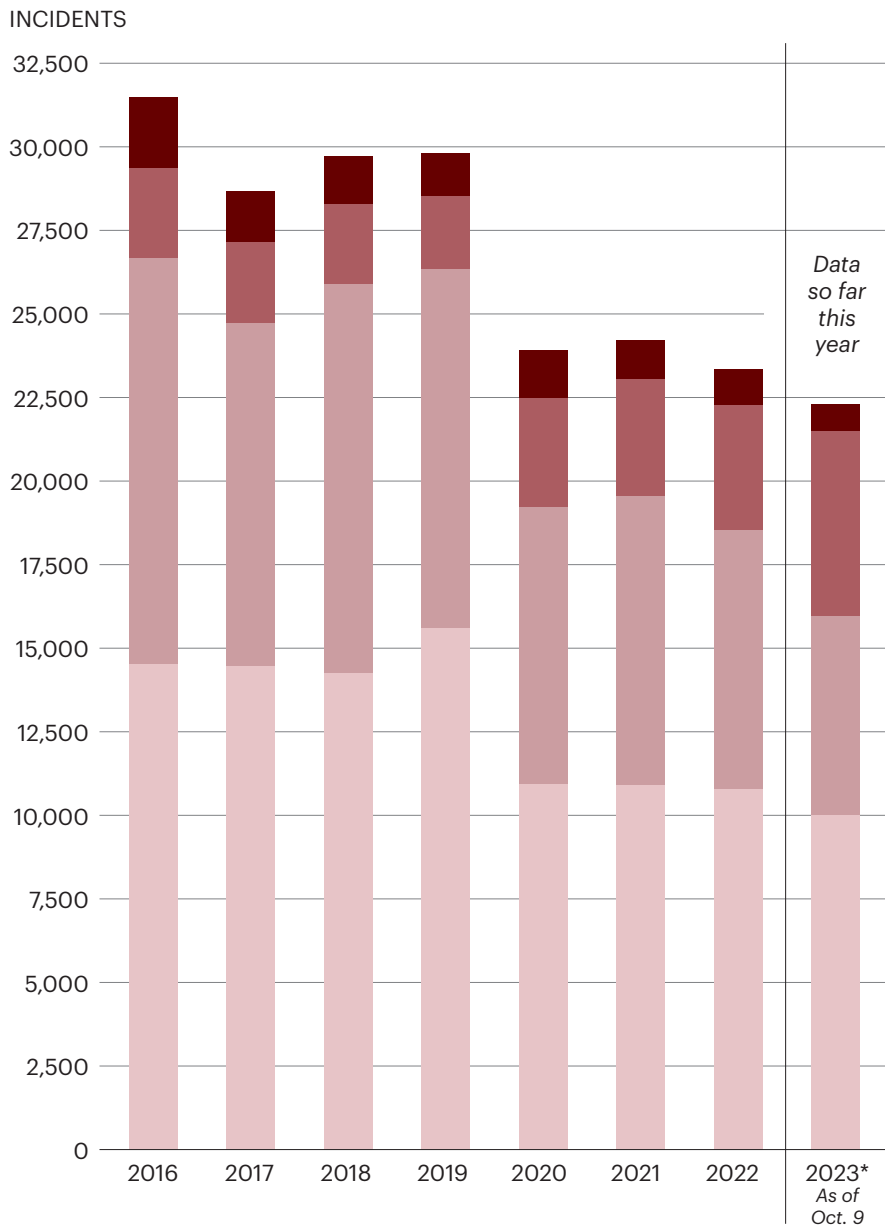
note: Data downloaded Oct. 11 from the Metropolitan Police Department's interactive crime database called Crime Cards. While that source provides the most accurate data that's also up-to-date, MPD's disclaimer cautions the data is "preliminary" and "do not represent official statistics" submitted to the FBI, and that "statistics are subject to change due to a variety of reasons, such as a change in classification, the determination that certain offense reports were unfounded, or late reporting." MPD did not review our analysis of the raw Crime Cards data.

THE NUMBERS, OVERALL

Before this year, crime incidents overall had trended down since pre-pandemic. But with aggregate numbers so far this year still rising, 2023 marks an inflection point, largely driven by spikes in robbery and vehicle theft, according to an MPD tracker called Crime Cards (crimecards.dc.gov). 2016 is the first year for which whole-year data is available in the MPD tracker.

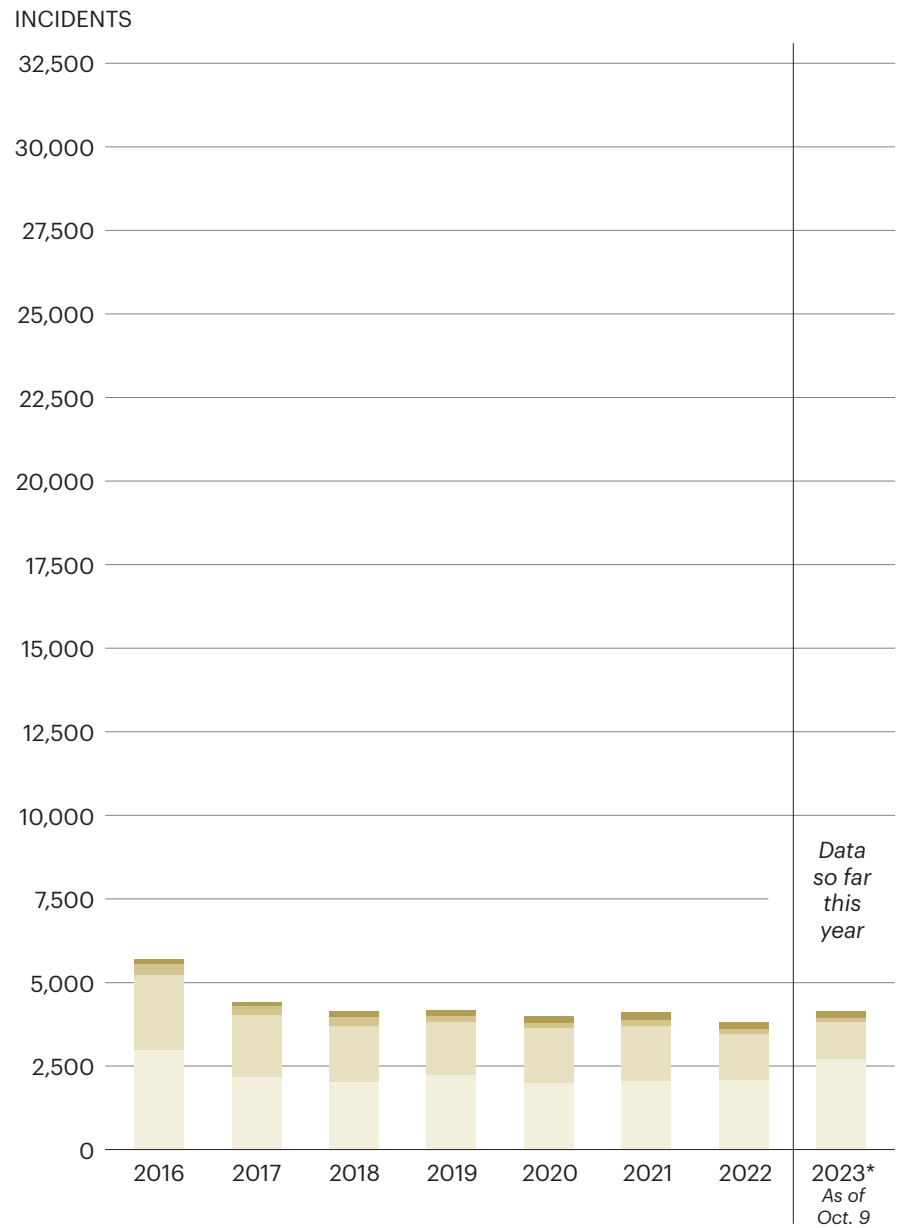
Reported property crimes

■ Burglary ■ Motor vehicle theft ■ Theft from auto ■ Theft/other



Reported violent crimes

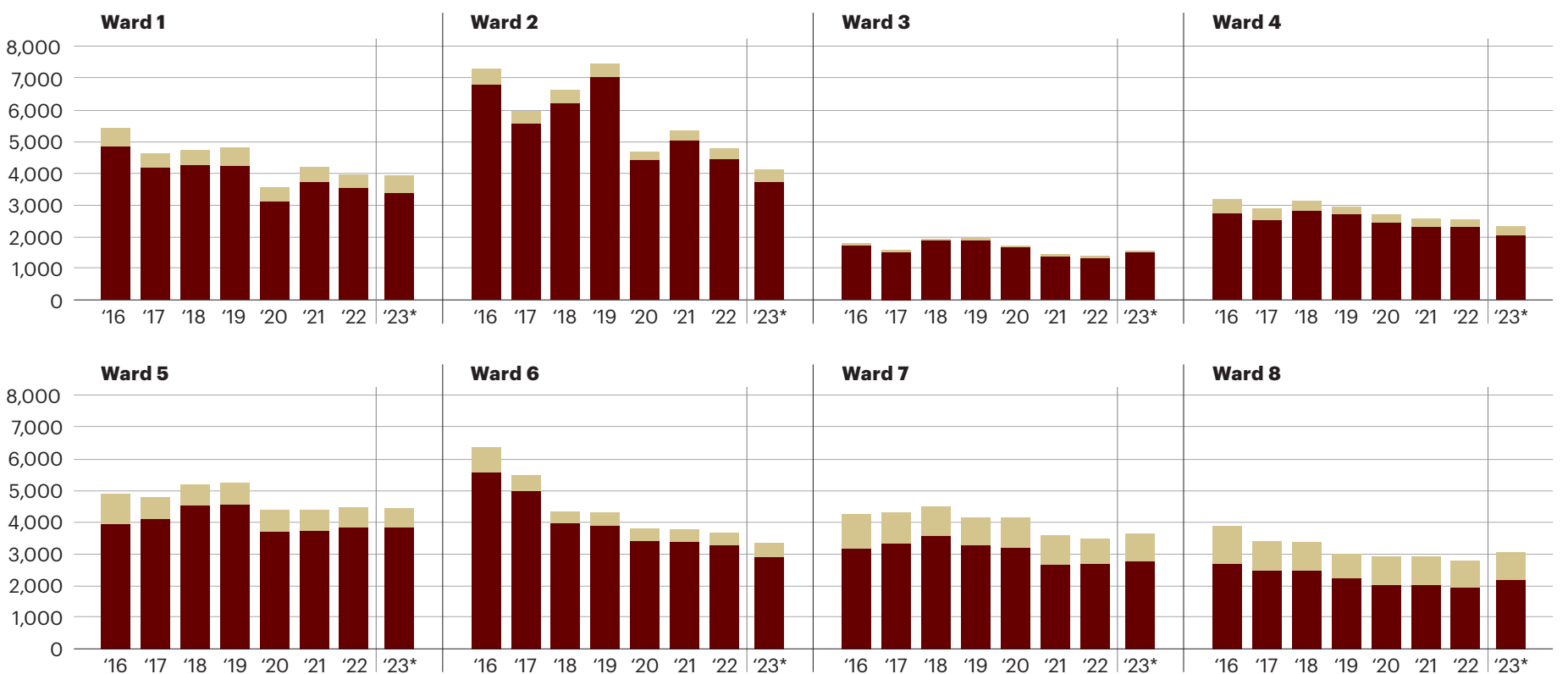
■ Homicide ■ Sex abuse ■ Assault with a dangerous weapon ■ Robbery



THE NUMBERS, BY WARD

The data for all crime and violent crime incidents are more nuanced when viewed by D.C. ward since 2016. In wards 3, 7 and 8, crime year to date has already surpassed 2022 levels.

■ All reported violent crime ■ All reported property crime



*NOTE: Data for 2023 is as of October 9

SOURCE: Metropolitan Police Department

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Steve Salis, CEO of Salis Holdings, who owns one of the region’s largest locally based restaurants groups, including Ted’s Bulletin and Kramers, spoke to the complexity of crime, warning of a city teetering on the edge.

“The city seems to be in an immensely precarious place,” Salis said.

He sees crime as a particularly in-your-face facet of a more complex socio-economic problem, noting commercial vacancies are up, homelessness is up and red tape stymies investment in new development. Add to that a looming federal shutdown and commercial mortgage turbulence. It’s all “inter-connected,” Salis said.

To illustrate his aggravation, he recounted an incident of a man in Kramers, his bookstore-restaurant-bar in Dupont Circle, knocking over a bunch of tables and then picking up a table and throwing it. In another case, someone came in and pulled shelves down. People “run in and cause ruckuses, they can’t be removed,” he said. It makes folks, including employees, feel like they have to have their heads on a swivel.

Salis said he’s added cameras and is considering hiring security guards, but that “makes it feel like it’s a fort,” which doesn’t necessarily sooth anxieties and open wallets. And increased costs also hurt the bottom line – he estimated putting security at Kramers could cost an extra \$300,000 a year, a huge bump to operating costs.

No matter what you do, it’s not great for business.

“Let me be clear, I love this city,” Salis said, adding it has “so much potential still that we haven’t even scratched.” But at the same time, under present conditions, “I can just tell you how hesitant people are to want to further invest in the city in light of this climate,” he said.

By the numbers

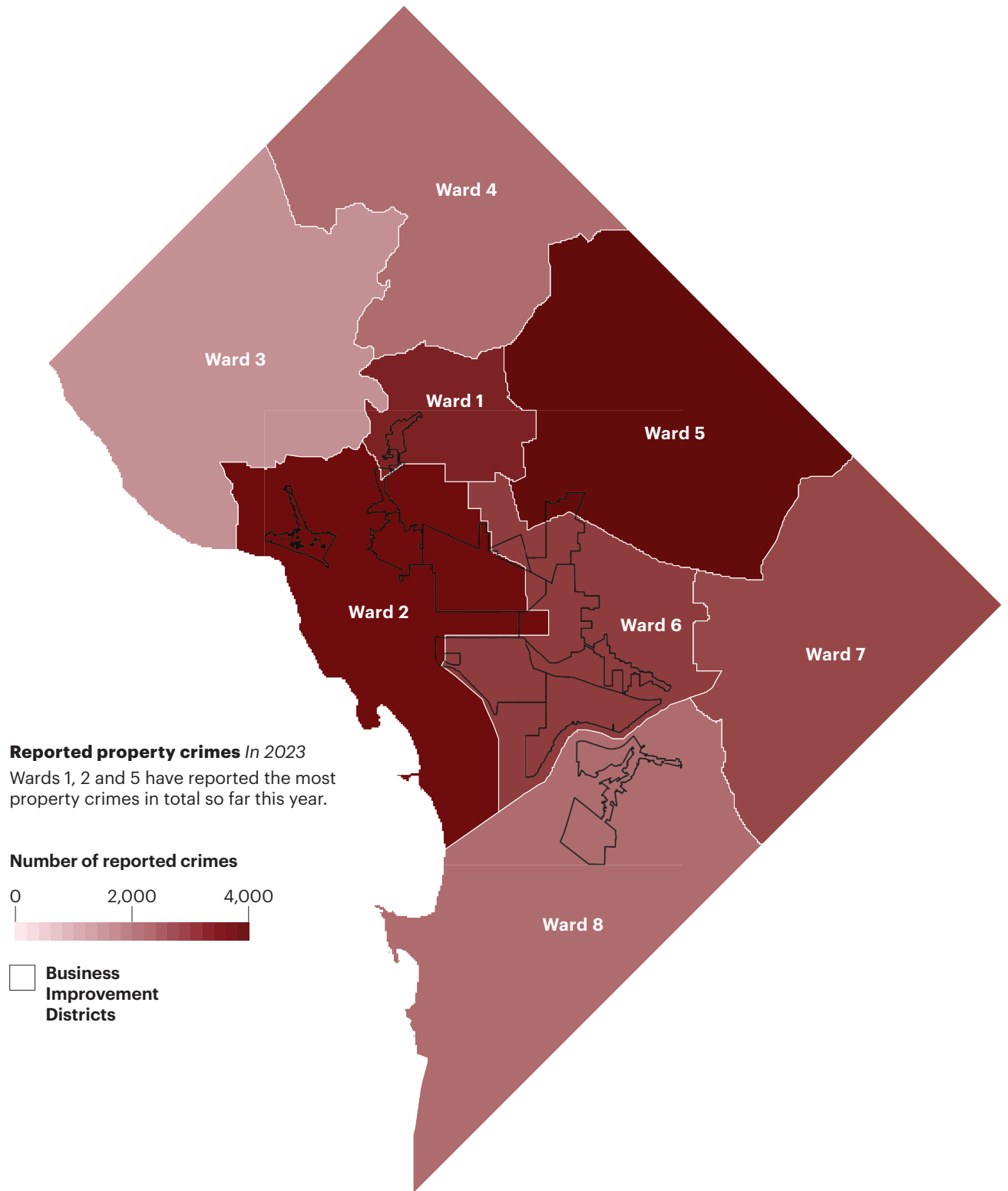
While the Metropolitan Police Department didn’t directly respond to questions about specific trends, D.C. makes a lot crime data publicly available online. Here are some observations from our analysis of data we downloaded Oct. 11.

On a citywide basis, crime is up year over year in almost every category. Homicides, at 224 as of Oct. 20, were up 34% over the same period last year, per a regularly updated city tracker. Robbery was up 68%, motor vehicle theft was up 102%.

Yet various categories of crimes have trended differently over a longer period. As of last year, murder and vehicle theft were both up on the whole, though other kinds of property and violent crime were all down. This year isn’t over yet, but

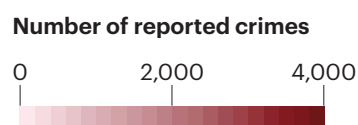
PROPERTY CRIMES IN 2023

This chart shows the incidents of property crime so far in 2023 by ward in the District of Columbia.



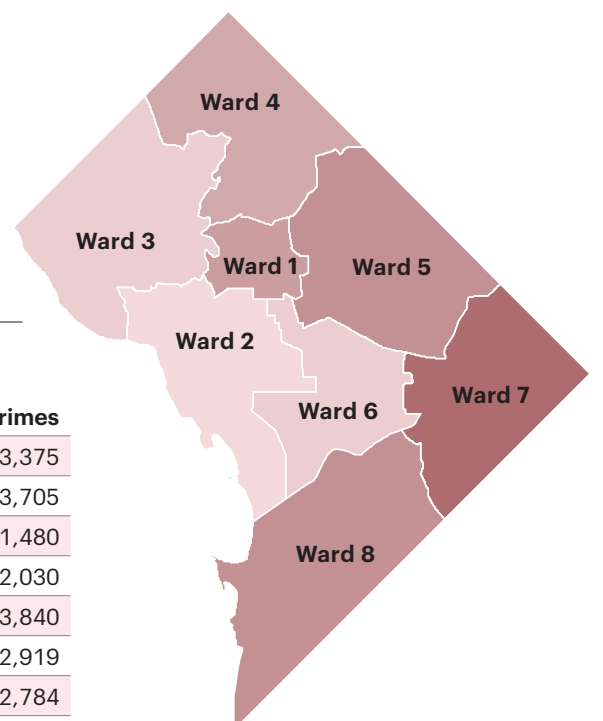
Property crimes per 1,000 businesses In 2023

Ward 7 shows the highest concentration of property crimes per 1,000 businesses so far this year.



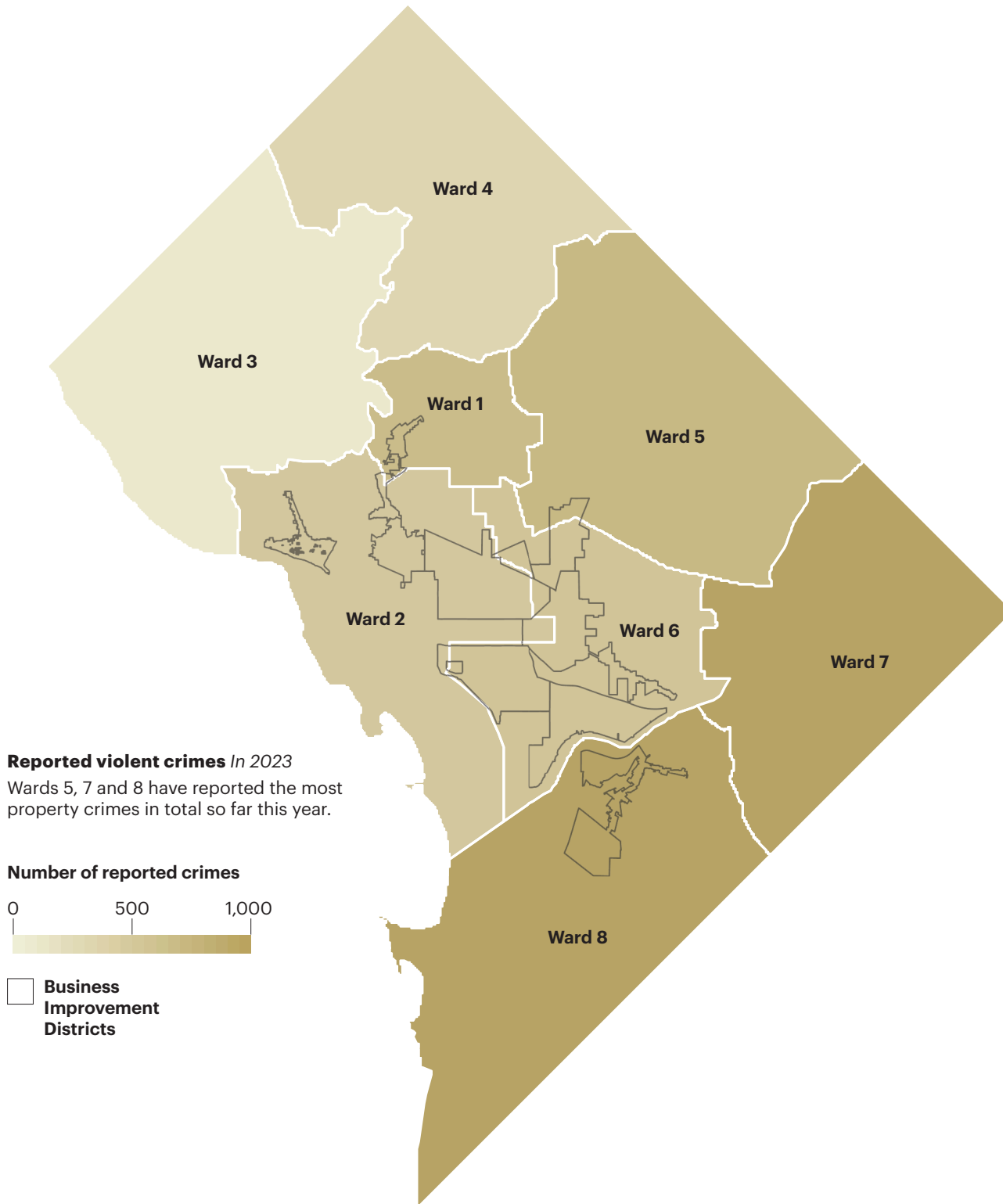
A CLOSER LOOK

Ward	Per 1K businesses	Per 1K residents	Total property crimes
1	1,393	39	3,375
2	213	41	3,705
3	484	18	1,480
4	1,166	24	2,030
5	1,465	41	3,840
6	521	32	2,919
7	2,146	33	2,784
8	1,431	25	2,177



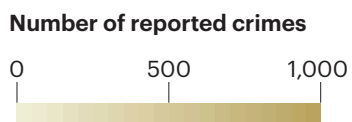
VIOLENT CRIMES IN 2023

This chart shows the incidents of violent crime so far in 2023 by ward in the District of Columbia.



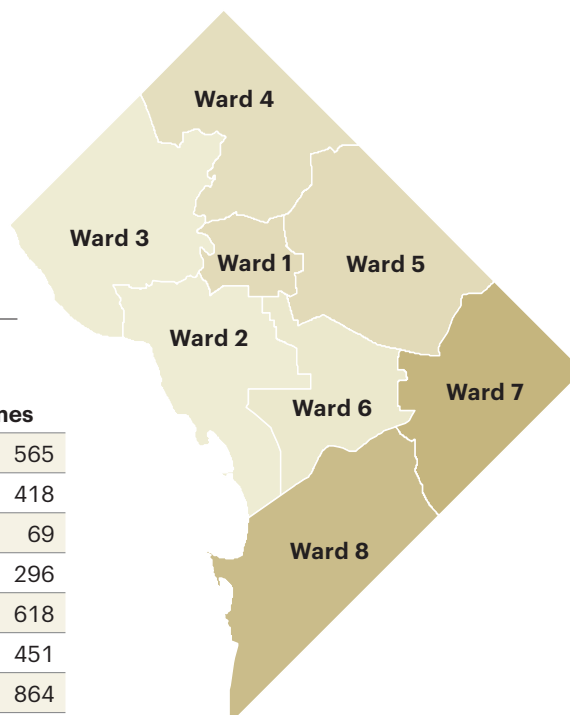
Violent crimes per 1,000 businesses In 2023

Ward 7 shows the highest concentration of violent crimes per 1,000 businesses so far this year.



A CLOSER LOOK

Ward	Per 1K businesses	Per 1K residents	Total violent crimes
1	233	7	565
2	24	5	418
3	23	1	69
4	170	4	296
5	236	7	618
6	81	5	451
7	666	10	864
8	577	10	877



SOURCE: MPD; Open Data DC; ESRI-Data Axle

in aggregate property and violent crimes to date are already on par with or higher than totals from all of last year, so clearly we’re seeing an inflection this year, at least in general. That uptick appears mostly to be driven by spikes this year in robbery and vehicle theft. By year’s end, some categories of crime – homicide and vehicle theft for sure, likely also robbery – will be up compared to 2016, though that won’t necessarily be true of all other categories.

Crime varies not only over time, but also geographically. Barrie Scardina, a regional president and head of retail in the Americas for brokerage giant Cushman & Wakefield, cautioned that D.C. isn’t a monolithic place, with some neighborhoods getting more crime focus while other neighborhoods likely “doing perfectly fine.”

It’s tough to generalize, but it’s hard not to notice that the southern and eastern parts of the city have been especially hard hit. Taken together, wards 5, 7 and 8 this year have seen more than twice as many homicides and assaults with deadly weapons, 27% more motor vehicle thefts, and about as much robbery and sex abuse as the other five combined.

Ward 8 alone has suffered about 39% of all homicides so far this year, whereas Ward 3 has experienced 1%. While some wards haven’t seen any murders in certain years since 2016, wards 5, 7 and 8 have never had a year over that period without suffering murders in the double digits.

You could parse the numbers a dozen ways and probably discern different nuances of meaning. And you could imagine a dozen additional valuable ways to parse – by category of business, by demographics, etc. – but not find publicly available data granular enough to do so. The point is, there’s no monolithic citywide story of crime, at least not quantitatively. Different businesses and people will experience or at least perceive crime in different ways, depending on specifically who and where they are. Things may look different depending on whether you’ve personally experienced crime or know someone who has, you’re a multifamily owner in Anacostia, a lobbyist or lawyer who commutes to Capitol Hill, a restaurateur in Georgetown, a hotel manager at The Wharf, a food truck operator, a commuter who parks in a gated garage or a food delivery driver who’s constantly in and out of your car on the open streets.

“The geographic disparity in crime has been in the District for a lot of years and has always been unacceptable,” Councilman Robert White, D-At large, said in an interview. Part of what’s happening now is that “everyone across the city is

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“I can just tell you how hesitant people are to want to further invest in the city in light of this climate.”

STEVE SALIS,
CEO of Salis Holdings

“Everyone across the city is feeling the increase in crime, but some communities are really feeling it for the first time in a long time... Going from virtually no crime to some crime feels startling, just like going from some crime to a lot of crime feels startling.”

COUNCILMAN ROBERT WHITE,
D-At large



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feeling the increase in crime, but some communities are really feeling it for the first time in a long time,” he said. “Nowhere near the level of communities, particularly in ward 5, 7 and 8,” he said. “But going from virtually no crime to some crime feels startling, just like going from some crime to a lot of crime feels startling.”

Ramifications for business

It’s perhaps common sense to say crime isn’t good for business – except for security companies and bouncers, maybe, though the security companies we reached out to didn’t respond to requests for interviews. Still, we haven’t discerned

Steve Salis, who owns a restaurant group in the city, is hesitant to hire security guards at Kramers in Dupont Circle, saying he doesn’t want the establishment to feel like a fortress.

a consensus opinion how bad the present situation is.

Council member Kenyan McDuffie, I-At large, captured the current mixed mood at a Sept. 29 panel hosted by the D.C. Chamber of Commerce. He cautioned against cultivating a narrative that crime is “dominating what’s happening downtown, because it’s not,” while simultaneously acknowledging “it is a deep concern of some of our small businesses, and we have to respond to those concerns.”

McDuffie said he’s heard concerns from restaurants about how a new D.C. law prohibiting retail establishments from eschewing cash might affect worker safety. Councilman White said he’s heard from two businesses, not in historically high-

crime areas, that perhaps can’t keep their doors open due to crime.

A spokesperson for Monumental Sports & Entertainment, owner of the Washington Wizards, Capitals and Mystics, told us last year the company had boosted the number of police officers it paid on game days for added security, and was seeking at the time to hire officers to patrol Chinatown, where it owns and operates Capital One Arena. The firm declined to comment for this article, but Axios reported in March that Monumental Chairman Ted Leonsis “has expressed displeasure with the safety and quality of life surrounding Capital One Arena,” citing an anonymous source.

On the other hand, despite headlines, several people we talked to

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were pretty moderate in tone.

Maura Brophy, who heads the NoMa Business Improvement District, said in an interview her organization continues “to see a boom when it comes to leasing activity, to new businesses opening, despite the challenges that we’ve seen.” In large part, she credited densification putting “many more eyes on the streets,” citing a 130% increase in pedestrian traffic and nearly a doubling of residential units in the area since 2018. All that despite the NoMa BID so far this year having experienced among the most carjackings of the city’s BIDs, while only ranking in the middle of the pack, in terms of geographic size.

Gerren Price, president and CEO of the DowntownDC BID, declined

to comment. But a BID report shows hotel occupancy and “entertainment attendance” have rebounded to above 90% of their pre-pandemic levels, and destination dining and luxury shopping have surpassed 100%, per a July 26 press report.

Scardina, the Cushman & Wakefield executive, called the D.C. retail leasing market “very strong,” saying “we have more leasing work than we actually have bandwidth at this moment.” She acknowledged D.C. has seen its “share” of rising retail crime, but not in an “outsized” way compared to certain other cities nationwide.

The way forward

Kamal Ali recently helped stand up a coalition of community and non-

profit leaders called It’s Time To Get Involved, not formally structured as yet, to think through what he called “root causes,” recognizing “we have to take an active role, that it can’t be the government alone solving these problems,” he said. He espouses no precise prescription, but, in general, believes businesses should “get directly involved” – that is to say, “participate in discussions” and “with your young community, as well, whether that means jobs or internships, or you’re helping to support some of the organizations that support those communities. All of it helps.”

Strictly from a business perspective, some firms are hiring security or removing name-brand items from shelves to deter theft – you might notice in your local supermarket that even mundane things like bar soap and laundry detergent are behind the customer service counter or under lock and key. Retailers, who are “super focused on safety for the holidays,” Scardina said, are “using predictive analytics, they are using CCTV, AI, robots going through malls and identifying locations where there are groups of people that could be about to do something.” But she cautioned “those expenses are going to have to go someplace at some point,” meaning on to consumers.

RCKRBX, a D.C.-based real estate data analytics firm, told me “safety and security” ranks second among things Greater Washington renters say most influence where they choose to live – second only to rent and fees, but ahead of other concerns like location, building amenities and proximity to work, transit and restaurants and shopping. The company reported 70% of renters say an apartment building having a certification demonstrating it meets the highest physical and cyber security standards would influence their decision to live there.

MPD referred me to Sept. 27 comments from acting Chief of Police Pamela Smith about her thoughts on reducing crime. Addressing a council committee, she talked about certain immediate approaches, such as an initiative that “focuses additional resources in the areas and at times when our robberies, carjackings and shootings occur” and the upcoming installation of new CCTV cameras. She also spoke of addressing sociological factors, such as by focusing deterrence efforts and supports “at-risk youth and their families” and “bringing resources and services directly to the community” in what she called a “whole-of-government approach.”

“Increasing public safety and reducing crime is Mayor [Muriel] Bowser’s No. 1 priority,” Lindsey Appiah, D.C.’s deputy mayor for public safety and justice, said in an emailed statement, adding that city “must fill the gaps in our current public safety legislation.”

At Bowser’s request, the Safer Stronger Amendment Act was introduced in June. Among other things, it would increase penalties for illegal gun possession, grant courts greater discretion to hold defendants previously convicted of a violent crime pre-trial, as well as “provisions that allow individuals to petition for early release to ensure the voices of victims and community receive proper consideration,” according to a May letter from Bowser to the D.C. Council.

It joins a raft of other crime-related legislation recently adopted or introduced.

The council passed a temporary emergency crime bill in July, incorporating some of Bowser’s earlier proposals.

In September, Council member Brooke Pinto, D-Ward 2, introduced a package of seven bills, dubbed Secure D.C. Plan. They would establish “a citywide grant program to improve public safety in commercial corridors with funding for lighting, patrols and other interventions,” per a press release.

In October, White introduced the Whole Government Response to Crime Act. It would establish positions with duties including coordinating public and “community-based” services and resources for crime victims and their families and assessing the “educational, workforce development, housing, behavioral and physical health care, and family needs of emerging adults and youth offenders before commitment, while in District or federal care or custody, and upon re-entry.”

On Oct. 23, Bowser introduced another piece of crime-related legislation, the Addressing Crime Trends Now Act, which would allow police to step up efforts to shut down open-air drug markets and stem organized retail theft. It would also allow police more discretion in whether to pursue a suspect in a chase and use their body camera footage to write their reports.

Bowser announced a hiring bonus increase in April toward “getting MPD back on the path to 4,000 sworn officers,” per a press release at the time, plus a new hiring bonus in June. D.C. currently has about 3,300 sworn staff, down from a recent high of about 4,100 in 2008 and long-term high of nearly 4,900 in 1990, according to city council staffing reports.

Whether to have more or fewer police has of course been a lightning rod political issue in cities nationwide, especially since George Floyd’s murder in 2020. Though it’s worth noting that feelings about police and feelings about crime aren’t one and the same. People who “believe that there are deep flaws in how we police” and people who want to feel safer in the city “aren’t two different people or two different sides of the coin – those are the same people,” White said. ▮