

## **From Oversight to Overreach: The Evolution of DC Home Rule**

Washington, DC residents want what every American city expects: safe streets, strong schools, affordable housing, individual liberty, reliable city services, and accountable leadership.

The question is straightforward: **Has DC Home Rule delivered?**

For much of its history, the District operated under direct congressional oversight through Article I, Section 8, Clause 17 of the Constitution. While no system is perfect, that structure produced measurable results, particularly in fiscal discipline, public safety, and accountability (U.S. Constitution; Congressional Research Service).

By the mid-20th century, Washington, DC had become a national center of Black excellence and upward mobility. Neighborhoods such as LeDroit Park, Shaw, and the U Street corridor, often called “Black Broadway,” thrived as vibrant cultural and economic engines (DC Office of Planning). Upper 16th Street NW, known as the “Gold Coast,” along with Brookland and Hillcrest, were home to physicians, attorneys, educators, and senior government officials - symbols of achievement and stability.

But the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 marked a turning point. The riots that followed resulted in 13 deaths, approximately 1,000 injuries, over 6,100 arrests, and more than \$27 million in property damage (National Archives; Washington Post historical archives). Over 900 businesses were damaged or destroyed, leaving long-term economic scars across major commercial corridors.

Amid this upheaval came increasing pressure for “local control,” culminating in the District of Columbia Home Rule Act of 1973.

President Lyndon B. Johnson framed this transition as a “civil rights advancement.” Critics, however, have argued that the expansion of local governance also carried political implications that contributed to the consolidation of power within a single-party structure that persists today (Brookings Institution; AEI).

### **The Aftermath of Home Rule**

Following Home Rule’s implementation, Washington entered a new era defined not only by local control, but by long-term governance challenges.

Crime trends illustrate part of the shift. Homicide rates, which ranged between 4.5 and 5.1 per 100,000 residents in the 1950s–60s, rose to 9.8 by 1973 and peaked at over 10 per 100,000 in the early 1990s (FBI Uniform Crime Reports). While crime has fluctuated, federal interventions have often coincided with stabilization periods.

The crack epidemic further destabilized communities. Figures such as Rayful Edmond III led drug networks generating millions in revenue, contributing to widespread violence and addiction. At the same time, political scandals, most notably involving Mayor Marion Barry, further eroded public trust in local leadership, contributing to the city's reputation at the time as the nation's "Murder Capital" (DOJ records; court filings).

Political corruption compounded these challenges. The 2014 campaign finance scandal involving Jeffrey E. Thompson, who admitted to illegally funneling approximately \$3.3 million to at least 28 candidates, highlighted ingrained weaknesses in transparency (U.S. Department of Justice).

Economic and institutional indicators also shifted. Small and minority-owned businesses declined in key corridors, while the government expanded significantly, creating duplicative agencies and scattering accountability (DC Auditor reports; GAO).

Federal intervention has repeatedly been required:

- **1995:** DC Financial Control Board established to address fiscal crisis (Congressional Research Service)
- **2023:** Congress overturned DC criminal code overhaul (Congressional Record)
- **2025:** Crime emergency triggered National Guard involvement (news reports)
- **2026 sewer collapse** released 243 millions gallons of untreated sewage into the Potomac (DC Water reports)
- **2026 snowstorm failures** left schools closed and roads impassable for weeks (local reporting)

Public education outcomes remain concerning. Despite among the highest per-pupil spending in the nation, DC continues to face chronic absenteeism and performance gaps (National Center for Education Statistics; DC PSCO reports).

Failures tied to the DC Department of Buildings' inspection and enforcement processes, combined with rising housing costs and increased reliance on voucher programs, have raised serious concerns about safety, accountability, and the city's ability to protect vulnerable residents (HUD data).

The erosion of civil society has also played a role. Research on the "crowd-out effect" shows that increased government spending can reduce private charitable activity, weakening community-based support systems (National Bureau of Economic Research).

The result: Home Rule has insulated leadership from meaningful accountability while vastly expanding bureaucracy beyond control.

### **A Path Forward: Restoring Accountability**

Under the Constitution, Congress retains ultimate authority over the District, and the responsibility to act when governance fails.

A reimagined model should prioritize safety, stability, accountability, and liberty for the people it serves:

#### **The Trifecta**

##### **1. Structured Federal Oversight**

A formal liaison system connecting residents with Congress, the Executive Branch, and an independent oversight body.

##### **2. One & Done**

Early intervention for juvenile offenders focused on accountability, mentorship, and long-term outcomes.

##### **3. DC DOGE**

Independent audits and efficiency reforms to eliminate waste, duplication, and corruption - through existing federal mechanisms.

#### **Conclusion**

The promise of Home Rule was freedom. For many residents, that promise has failed.

Restoring safety, education, economic opportunity, and accountability will require structural reform grounded in constitutional responsibility and the principles of liberty.

Washington, DC does not lack potential.

It lacks a system that consistently delivers on it.

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