REIMAGINING PUBLIC SAFETY IN PITTSBURGH AND ALLEGHENY COUNTY:
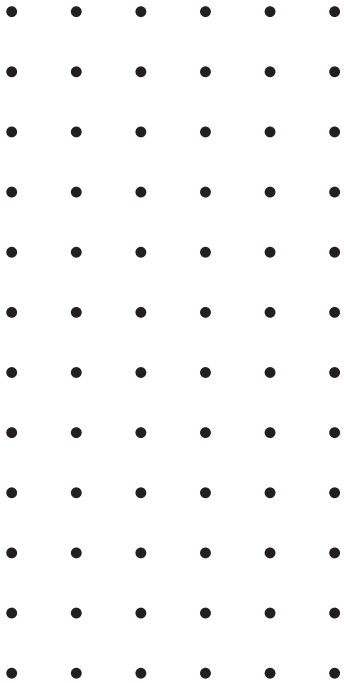
A Community Vision for Lasting Health and Safety

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This community vision, co-created by the Coalition to Reimagine Public Safety, with lead writer Jesse Wozniak, PhD, summarizes the need to reimagine public safety by developing a model that builds safe, healthy, and thriving communities. The model will center community members and their needs and further develop strategies to eliminate the use of force, overcriminalization, and over incarceration. The report includes information obtained through research, coalition working sessions, and town hall meetings with national partners.

ALLIANCE FOR POLICE ACCOUNTABILITY (APA)

1HOOD MEDIA

The mission of the Alliance for Police Accountability (APA) is to bring the community, institutional stakeholders, and government officials to a working relationship to put an end to racial profiling, police brutality, and injustice within the criminal legal system through advocacy, education, and policy.

The mission of 1Hood Media is to build liberated communities through art, education, and social justice.
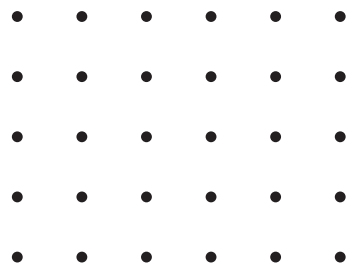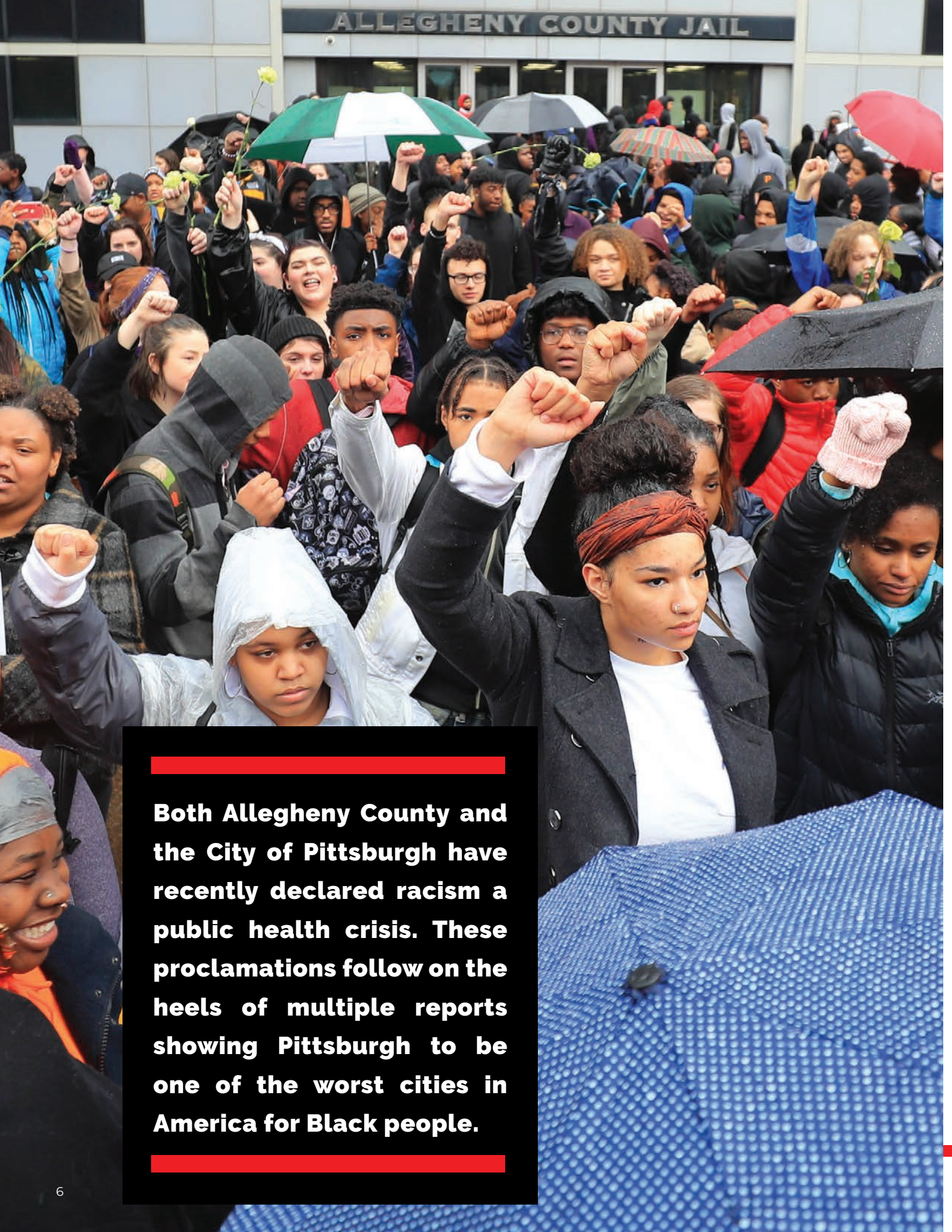
Executive Summary

As acknowledged by the City of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County, racism is a public health crisis in this region. Yet, rather than addressing the needs of the most oppressed citizens, the city and county continue to pour excessive funds into the police, who have played a central role in creating a fundamentally unsafe and unhealthy space for Black residents. We must decenter the police from the lives of Black people. Through steep cuts to police personnel and funding, the city and county can instead use those funds to meaningfully support the health and safety of communities. Rather than sending armed agents to respond to people experiencing crises, we should respond with unarmed, trauma-informed responders trained in conflict resolution, de-escalation, and harm reduction. Rather than waiting for neighborhood conflict that is an all but inevitable response to the public health crisis of racism, we must support peacebuilders and healers in our communities. We must go beyond crisis intervention to address the long-term needs of our communities through decentralized community service centers that bring together holistic responses to the diverse needs that underlie crises. Instead of trying to reform institutions that have created the public health crisis of racism in the first place, we must reimagine the concept of public health and safety.

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Both Allegheny County and the City of Pittsburgh have recently declared racism a public health crisis. These proclamations follow on the heels of multiple reports showing Pittsburgh to be one of the worst cities in America for Black people.

INTRODUCTION

Both Allegheny County[1] and the City of Pittsburgh[2] have recently declared racism a public health crisis. These proclamations follow on the heels of multiple reports showing Pittsburgh to be one of the worst cities in America for Black people. For every dollar a White man in Pittsburgh earns, a Black woman earns 54 cents[3]. Black children are suspended from Allegheny County schools 7.3 times as often as White children[4]. White Pittsburghers live eight years longer than Black Pittsburghers, and death rates from cancer, heart disease, and overdose are significantly higher among Black residents[5]. A recent study declared Pittsburgh "arguably the most unlivable city for black women."[6]

Another way to look at this public health crisis is to see that Black people in Pittsburgh are fundamentally unsafe and that ⅓ of the total City budget[7] goes to the Department of Public Safety and more than 20% to the police. As an expression and continuation of the struggle for Black Lives both locally and nationally, this report is our offering to reimagine public safety, particularly for Black, Brown, and poor White people in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County.

It is crucial to define racism and its relationship to public safety and policing. Racism creates a hierarchy of certain kinds of bodies over others, allowing one group to carry out systematic discrimination through institutional practices and policies. In America, racism is integral to the State, a repressive formation designed to produce a society with a European-descended ruling class at the top and an African-descended class at the bottom. The police serve to protect and defend any challenges to the State and its racist power.

We cannot effectively respond to the public crisis of racism with an institution that has played a central role in creating the crisis. Instead, we must decenter police from the lives of Black, Brown, and poor White people; police throughout Pittsburgh and Allegheny County must be disempowered, disarmed, and ultimately disbanded for the sake of public health.

There must be steep cuts in funding and personnel to the Pittsburgh Police Department and police departments throughout Allegheny County. This money should instead be used to create crisis response teams who are not police but instead unarmed, trauma-informed responders trained in mental health, substance use, conflict resolution, de-escalation, and harm reduction. These funds must also address the needs of our communities before they reach the level of crises by establishing and supporting decentralized community care centers in every neighborhood. In many neighborhoods, there are people and organizations already doing the work to keep our communities safe and healthy. We should lift them up and provide support to expand and reinforce these efforts.

The criminalization of those experiencing homelessness, mental health issues, engaging in drug use, experiencing violence, and engaging in survival behaviors helps no one and exacerbates existing problems. Rather than reform the institutions that have created this public health crisis, we must reimagine the concept of public health and safety. We must build institutions that center Black and Brown people to create the conditions necessary for healthy and safe communities.

HOW THIS VISION WAS CREATED

The Reimagining Public Safety process began in October of 2020 with the decision of the Alliance for Public Accountability (APA) and 1Hood Media to convene a Black community-led process to offer a vision for how mental health, violence, homelessness, and drug use could be addressed through community organizations, particularly those that are Black-led, and less reliant on police. The project, managed by Allyce Pinchback-Johnson of Pinchback Consulting LLC, was engaged by a coalition of the following people and organizations: Ashley Comans, Brandi Fisher, and Jesse Wozniak of APA; Miracle Jones and Jasiri X of 1 Hood; Saudia Durrant, Dolly Prabhu, and Robert Saleem Holbrook of the Abolitionist Law Center (ALC); Michelle Kenney of the Antwon Rose II Foundation; Robert Lawrence of East End Therapists; Leon Ford of Leon Ford Speaks; Bonnie Fan of the Coalition Against Predictive Policing (CAPP-PGH); Aaron Arnold and Alice Bell of Prevention Point Pittsburgh; and Fawn Walker Montgomery of Take Action Mon Valley.

In concert with Allyce Pinchback and the steering committee that met in between coalition meetings, Justin Laing of Hillombo LLC developed agendas for and facilitated five three-hour visioning sessions in which the coalition shared their imaginings for the above-named areas. The steering committee consisted of Brandi Fisher, Jasiri X, Ashley Comans, Leon Ford, Miracle Jones, Michelle Kenney, and Jesse Wozniak. Our work was greatly aided by work done nationally and locally, including "*Apartheid Policing in Pittsburgh: Why Defunding the Police Can't Wait*" by ALC, the work of the Policing in Allegheny County Collective, and their report *"Alternatives to Police: A Resource Guide for Implementing Alternative Public Safety Programs,"* and a coalition of national stakeholders who developed and are now operating programs prioritizing alternative policing models. Our work did not need to start from "scratch."

After three visioning sessions, and with the support of Justin Laing in framing and writing, Jesse Wozniak began using the ideas being developed in those sessions to write the final document presented here, receiving feedback and suggestions from almost the entire group throughout the writing process. Additionally, the coalition held a town hall to present the work of national organizers Tim Black of CAHOOTS, Vinnie Cervantes of Denver Alliance for Street Health Response (DASHR), Nikkita Oliver of No New Youth Jail, Shaun Glaze of Inclusive Data, and Dominique Johnson of Center for Policing Equity, followed by a community session in which people were presented a draft of the report and invited to give feedback. Tim Black and Vinnie Cervantes joined the coalition for our fifth visioning session to share their experiences with implementation and provide critical feedback on the report. In all, more than 100 people locally and nationally were engaged in the process that shaped this report and our recommendations.

> **This report lays out a short history of why police actually exist and how they are not designed to produce public safety, but to monitor and control Black, Brown, and poor White people.**

As the birthplace of the Fraternal Order of Police, Pittsburgh plays a central role in the development of American policing. Yet as the home to Freedom House Enterprises, Pittsburgh also plays a central role in the reimagining of public safety, demonstrating how community responses to health and safety are far more effective. We then highlight four major areas in which policing actively harms our communities. Finally, we lay out our holistic vision of how public safety can be achieved and maintained without the police.

OUR VISION FOR REIMAGINING PUBLIC SAFETY

Steep Cuts to Policing Budgets and Investments in Our Communities

An immediate cut of **$50 million from the Pittsburgh police budget** and a cut of **$100 million in policing throughout the county**.

- Immediately reduce the size of the police from **31 officers per every 10,000 residents to 19 officers per 10,000 residents**, which is in alignment with the national average for mid-size cities and would result in a cost savings of **at least $24 million**

- **Transfer duties that do not require police officer certification and training to civilian employees outside of the bargaining unit**, which is permissible per Section 18, subsection I on "Civilianization" in the contract between the FOP and the City of Pittsburgh

- Maintain the current **hiring freeze**

- Reduce the police force by the nearly **200 officers who are eligible for retirement**

- Immediately **fire all officers with more than two complaints** against them

REIMAGINING THE WAYS WE RESPOND TO PEOPLE EXPERIENCING VIOLENCE

The first step in reducing violence in our communities is to decenter police from the lives of Black people.

- **Remove police from our schools** and direct these resources to support the health and well-being of students

- End the constant **arrests of Black people in Allegheny County for low-level and petty crimes**

- **Ban the use of force practices in ACJ** such as restraints and stun guns

- Give money and resources to the **individuals and groups within our communities** who are addressing violence through practices of **restorative and transformative justice**
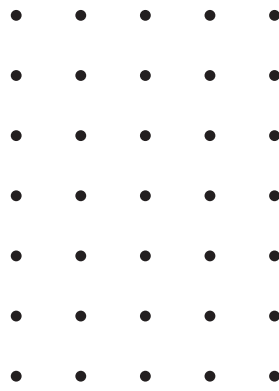
REIMAGINING THE WAYS WE RESPOND TO PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

To address the conditions that lead to homelessness, we need to look beyond overly restrictive "official" definitions to recognize that the term homeless applies to all who are without safe, consistent, stable, long-term housing.

- **End the practice of police responding to 911 calls from businesses** where the outcomes of these interactions are more focused on moving people out of sight than providing meaningful services

- **End the criminalization of panhandling** and other survival behaviors

- **Prohibit police from targeting people** in shelters and service centers

- **Increase the number of 24/7 shelters in the county** for people experiencing homelessness

- Provide facilities for people experiencing housing instability to **safely store their possessions and take care of other basic hygiene necessities**

- Improve the **coordination and tracking** of available shelters and warming centers

- **End exclusionary requirements** such as being unhoused for a specific amount of time or completely abstaining from alcohol and other intoxicants to be admitted to a shelter or service center

- **Adequately fund frontline service workers and provide comprehensive training** to prevent issues escalating into police involvement

REIMAGINING THE WAYS WE RESPOND TO PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS

The only thing criminalization of drug use has achieved is allowing police to stop and search people on flimsy premises and harass and arrest people for non-violent drug use.

- **Increase the resources being directed at Black communities** to prevent opioid deaths

- **Prohibit the arrests** of people engaging in **non-violent drug use**

- Provide **holistic pre-crisis interventions** for those who do need assistance addressing problems related to their drug use

- Implement a **harm reduction approach to drug use**, treating the use of drugs as a public health issue, not a criminal justice issue

- **Decriminalize the possession of small amounts of drugs and any amount of paraphernalia**, along with **full pardons** for all who have been convicted of **nonviolent drug offenses**

- Immediately **end the practice of police responding to overdose calls** and instead have them fielded by unarmed, non-police responders trained in crisis

REIMAGINING THE WAYS WE RESPOND TO PEOPLE EXPERIENCING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Police must no longer respond to calls involving people experiencing mental health issues, and the city and county must decriminalize mental health.

- Train **mental health workers in trauma-informed and evidence-based treatment** to respond to people experiencing mental health issues

- **Reinvest funds into our communities to address community needs** and to work to repair the rightful distrust of institutions built over generations of abuse, neglect, and mistreatment

- Attend to mental health issues not just for individuals, but by **addressing social and economic conditions and community trauma,** which lead to mental health problems

- Reinvest within our communities and **lift up the people and organizations in affected communities already doing this work**

ACCESSIBLE, DECENTRALIZED, COMMUNITY-BASED SOLUTIONS TO PUBLIC HEALTH AND SAFETY

Central to overcoming these problems is to understand them as community issues that must be addressed by the community, not crimes to be resolved by policing.

- Direct resources away from harmful policing practices to **decentralized, neighborhood-based services**

- Recognize and support **existing spaces that serve as unofficial community centers; safe neighborhood spaces** already utilized by those in the community

- Develop services **in conversation with neighborhood residents** about the problems they face and what would help

- Support the creation of **decentralized community centers built on the principle that crisis response and prevention require a range of supports**

WHY POLICE EXIST

The central myth of policing is that police forces arose as a response to crime and that their purpose is to protect us from danger. However, even a basic understanding of the history of policing in America reveals that their primary function has always been the monitoring and and controlling Black and Brown people and poor White people[8].

When police forces first formed in America in the 1700s and 1800s, it was not in response to a wave of crime or danger. Rather, they were developed primarily for two reasons; in Northern states not enslaving African people, they were largely concerned with managing the new waves of immigrants and the growing working-class laboring in the new factories of the time. In Southern states, police were squarely focused on monitoring and controlling the movements and activities of enslaved people.

Widely regarded as the first modern police force in America, the Charleston City Watch and Guard was formed in the 1790s specifically to manage the movements of enslaved people who worked outside of major plantations. The Watch and Guard were the first of many of what was generally termed Slave Patrols, which served to prevent enslaved people from forming reading groups or promoting literacy among Black people, chase and capture enslaved people, and put down revolts and rebellions.

After the abolition of slavery, many of these Slave Patrols were simply institutionalized as public police forces[9]. But even as their official mandate moved from explicitly monitoring and controlling the lives of Black, Brown, and poor White people, these new public police forces still had little focus on public safety. From slavery to Jim Crow to the civil rights movement to the current movement for Black lives, whenever Black people have tried to find ways to make themselves safe, police were employed to disrupt and prevent them.

Police were not established to keep ordinary people safe from crime and danger. They were created to ensure that Black, Brown, and White poor and working-class people did not disrupt or challenge the systems which left them starving, homeless, and second-class citizens. In other words, they were created to keep us unsafe. This is pivotal to understanding why reforms have not been able to improve the police and why reform will never be able to prevent the rampant abuse of our communities at the hands of the police.

POLICING IN PITTSBURGH AND ALLEGHENY COUNTY SOURCE OF PROBLEMS, VISIONS OF SOLUTIONS

The city of Pittsburgh occupies a central role in the history of American policing. In 1915, two Pittsburgh police officers founded Fort Pitt Lodge #1 of the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP). The FOP has grown to essentially become the labor union for police officers and has incredible political clout. Many of the problems of policing in the city, county, and throughout America can be traced to the actions of the FOP, which was born right here in the city of Pittsburgh.

The FOP has a long history of racist political activism, having invited segregationist politicians like George Wallace to speak at its national convention and endorsing right-wing "law-and-order" candidates like Richard Nixon, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump. Outside of political campaigns, the FOP is highly active in lobbying for laws that grant police nearly unlimited powers and prevent meaningful oversight or public control.

The FOP throughout Pennsylvania has regularly lobbied against any effort to amend Act 111, the legislation which allows police to overturn disciplinary actions. This act makes firing officers so difficult, as even officers convicted of crimes are regularly reinstated through the arbitration process. An investigation conducted by the Philadelphia Inquirer of police misconduct cases from 2011-2019 found that arbitrators erased or reduced penalties 70% of the time[10].

But Pittsburgh is also the birthplace of arguably the first major modern initiative to reimagine public safety by divorcing important functions from the police and investing resources into the community. The Freedom House ambulance service, originated by Black Pittsburghers in the late 1960s in the Hill District[11], serves as a model example of how impacted communities can better understand and solve the issues facing them.

Prior to Freedom House, transporting patients to the hospital was seen as a police duty and took place in the back of police wagons. Wait times for patient transfer were significantly longer in Black neighborhoods, and many people were reluctant to call for ambulances because they did not want to call the police.

Freedom House Enterprises stepped up with an innovative solution in response to substandard and often non-existent emergency medical care. After receiving federal funds to help train underemployed people for menial jobs, they realized that they could instead train people to drive ambulances and provide medical care.

Most of the first class of Freedom House recruits were unemployed; several were returning Vietnam War veterans who experienced their drug and alcohol use issues, and many were recruited directly off the street. These initial Freedom House ambulance drivers received over 300 hours of medical training, doing rotations in emergency rooms, operating rooms, obstetrics, and x-ray, all while many of them were taking their GED exams.

The Freedom House ambulance workers quickly became known for their high standard of care and were frequently requested by emergency callers in place of the police. In their first year of operation, they responded to 5,800 calls for service and saved at least 200 lives. While beforehand slow or non-existent service to Black neighborhoods had been a major point of tension in the city, Freedom House paramedics had a response time of fewer than 10 minutes to most neighborhoods.

Freedom House ambulances went far beyond basic emergency medical care to address larger community issues with compassion and expertise. When a deadly surge in heroin use spread across the city, Freedom House paramedics contacted local drug dealers to provide information on how to identify signs of overdose. They notified users that Freedom House would provide emergency medical assistance without legal repercussions, leading to a significant decline in Pittsburgh's number of overdose deaths.

The Freedom House Ambulance Service was so successful it became a model for emergency medical services (EMS) throughout America and worldwide. However, in expanding throughout the nation, certifications, professional requirements, and institutional bias served to systematically exclude Black people from the profession. As the EMS program went national, it was stripped of what made it most effective, and moved from being a community-driven program that offered skill-building and jobs to affected communities to instead underpaid and thankless work supporting exclusionary for-profit healthcare systems.

As a result, many of the original problems Freedom House sought to address began to creep back in. Police have once again inserted themselves into emergency medical services, using them as a pretext to criminalize overdose, run warrants, and harass and arrest those seeking medical care. We need to return to the Freedom House ethos and once again get police out of emergency services and return them to the community.

Freedom House stands as a testament to how this can be done, how Black communities are the best source for generating solutions to the challenges posed by racism, and how defunding and disempowering the police creates safer and healthier communities.
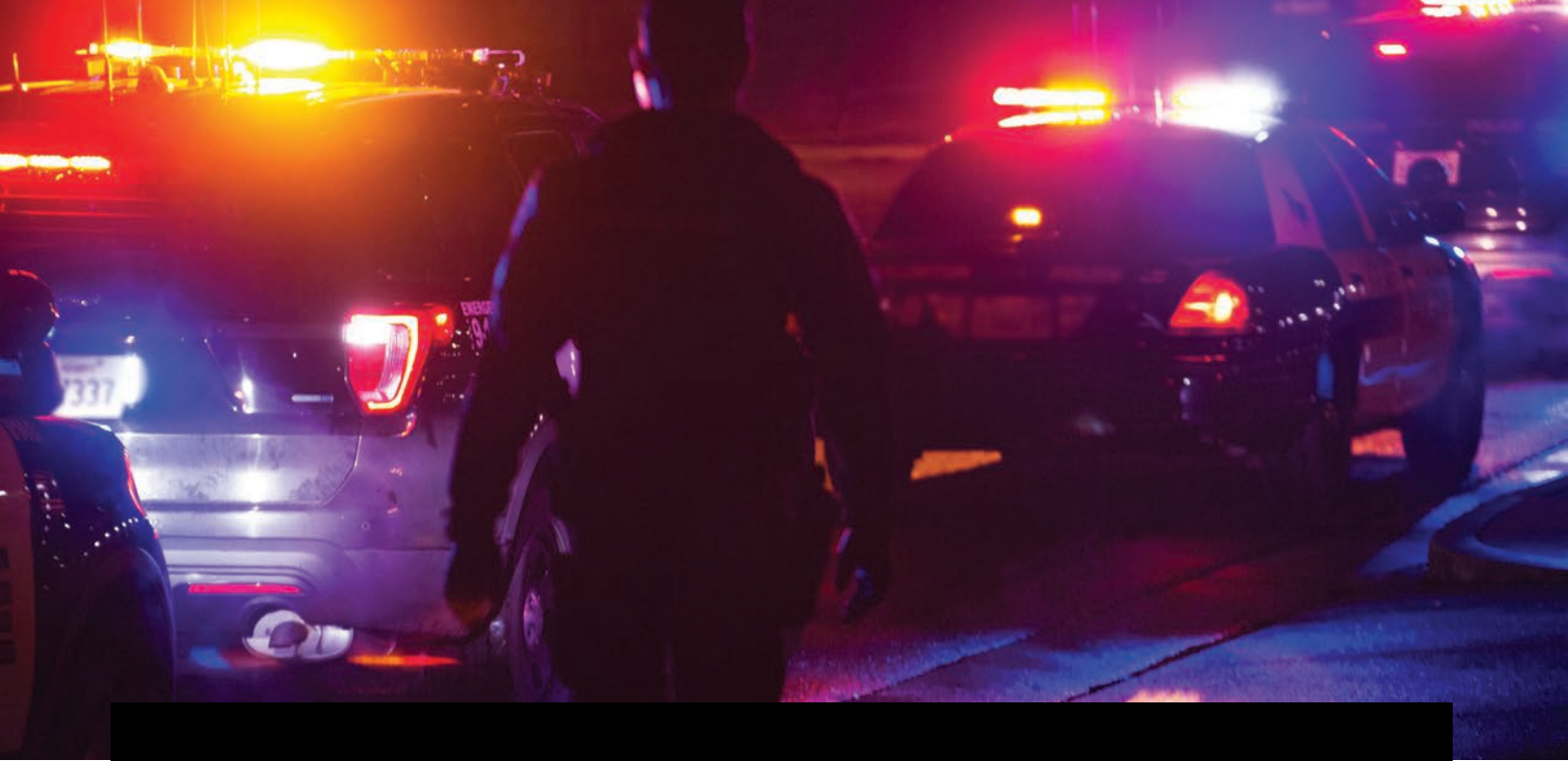
POLICE DON'T KEEP US SAFE

Probably the most common misconception around defunding the police is that police keep us safe and need large amounts of public funds to do so. But neither the size of a police force nor its level of funding makes it any more likely to prevent or solve crimes[12].

For many reasons, including a strong distrust of the police, less than half of all crimes are even reported. But even among reported crimes, very few are solved by the police. A recent study of 50 years of national crime data reveals that only 11% of all serious crimes result in an arrest, and only 2% end in a conviction[13]. Nationally, only about 1% of 911 calls concern violent crime, and police in general, spend less than 4% of their time dealing with violent crime[14].

Instead of spending their time preventing, investigating, or solving serious crimes, the majority of police enforcement tends to focus on more minor, nonviolent crimes. Nationally, about 80% of all criminal cases are for misdemeanors, which are low-level offenses[15]. In Pittsburgh in 2019, over 60% of all reported crimes were "Part II Offenses," including forgery, fraud, embezzlement, and public intoxication. Violent crime accounts for only 6% of reported crimes in Pittsburgh, and murder constitutes only 0.1% of reported crimes[16].

Aggressive policing of misdemeanors and low-level offenses not only fails to deter crime but actively harms our communities. Last year the City of Baltimore stopped prosecuting drug possession, prostitution, minor traffic violations, and other low-level offenses and saw a 20% decline in violent crime and a 36% decline in property crime[17]. A recent study found that not prosecuting people for low-level nonviolent crimes like petty theft and drug possession made that individual 58% less likely to commit another crime in the future[18]. According to one of the authors of the study, arresting and prosecuting people for these types of nonviolent crimes "actually decreases public safety[19]."

Nearly 12% of Pittsburgh's Black male population was arrested in 2020, a rate six times higher than for White males[21]. Black women were arrested more than four times as often as White women.

In addition to this relentless focus on low-level, nonviolent crime, much police time is spent on monitoring and harassing Black people. According to a recent report by the Abolitionist Law Center[20], Black Pittsburghers account for 43.6% of all individuals involved in traffic stops, despite making up only 23.2% of the city's population. More than 60% of the time force is used; it is used against Black Pittsburghers. Black Pittsburghers comprise 71.4% of all frisks, 69% of all warrantless searches and seizures, and 63% of all arrests conducted by the Pittsburgh Police.

Nearly 12% of Pittsburgh's Black male population was arrested in 2020, a rate six times higher than for White males[21]. Black women were arrested more than four times as often as White women. Rather than work to end these disparities, a recent Associated Press investigation found that hundreds of Pittsburgh-area police take to a private Facebook group to share racist posts and mock victims of police brutality[22].

Police pose a direct threat to our safety, severely injuring or murdering members of our community regularly and with impunity. Antwon Rose II, Romir Talley, Bruce Kelly, Leon Ford, Jonny Gammage,

Jordan Miles, and countless others, have had their lives inalterably changed or ended by police in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County. When people took to the streets this past summer to protest police killings and police brutality, they were met with riot gear-clad police using rubber bullets, pepper spray, and tear gas to break up peaceful demonstrations.

There are currently 101 Pittsburgh police officers who have faced at least ten allegations of abuse or misconduct, with 22 of them having five or more such accusations sustained, meaning the Office of Municipal Investigations (OMI) determined the allegations to be true. One Pittsburgh police officer alone has been the subject of 119 allegations of misconduct since 2010[23].

Little is being done to address the misconduct of these officers. Of the 3,950 allegations of misconduct leveled against Pittsburgh police officers from 2010-2020, OMI only sustained 10.6% of the allegations[24]. Yet even sustained allegations do not necessarily mean the officer will receive any discipline, with the matter often left to the discretion of their superiors.

STEEP CUTS TO POLICING BUDGETS AND INVESTMENTS IN OUR COMMUNITIES

Minor reforms and "culture change" will not stop the racist abuse meted out by police. The only way to address these issues is to stop allocating so many of our resources to the police and instead put them towards addressing the needs of our communities. There must be an immediate cut of $50 million from the Pittsburgh police budget and a cut of $100 million in policing throughout the county.

In the past six years, the Pittsburgh police budget has increased over $40 million, representing a 60% increase. The department grew from 857 officers to 985 officers over the same time span[25]. Spending on "public safety" is 33% of the city's budget and police alone account for 20% of all city spending. Spending on county police has gone up over 40% during this same time span[26], and spending on police throughout Allegheny County tops $340 million per year[27]. This is not how a healthy society should be spending its tax dollars.

The Northeastern University School of Law Health In Justice Action Lab has developed a unique tool to assess how much a city prioritizes spending on police and punishment against social needs like housing and human welfare. The Carceral Resource Index (CRI) is designed to measure a government's fiscal commitment to carceral systems[28]. On a scale from -1 to +1, a CRI score of -1 represents a city's fiscal prioritization of carceral systems to the complete exclusion of health and support, while a score of 1 represents fiscal prioritization of health and support systems to the complete exclusion of carceral expenditures. According to the Health In Justice Action Lab's calculations, Pittsburgh's 2021 budget has a CRI score of -0.46, meaning the city is investing significantly more in punishment than any form of health or support systems.

Pittsburgh and Allegheny County are over-policed. Allegheny County has 111 distinct police departments with a maze of overlapping jurisdictions[29]. A recent Post-Gazette investigation found that in many departments throughout the county, officers receive no further training on the job after completing state-mandated basic training, rely on less experienced and less trained part-time officers, have no policies or procedures for critical use of force incidents, and that there is no audit process to assure smaller municipal forces meet any professional standards[30]. There are 31 police officers in Pittsburgh for every 10,000 residents, a number which is almost twice the national average for middle-sized cities of 19 officers per every 10,000 residents[31].

What has this dramatic rise in police spending gotten us? What demonstrable impact has there been on public safety? How has this helped our communities?

In short, it simply hasn't. We need to immediately reduce the size of our police force and invest these resources in our communities.

We must minimize interactions between the police and the public whenever possible. Police and the safety and well-being of Black bodies are inherently opposed. The most immediate way to improve the health and safety of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County residents, especially the Black residents, is to dramatically reduce the number of interactions between police and the public.

The first step in minimizing interactions between the police and the public is to significantly reduce the police's size. Doing so is not nearly as difficult as city leaders have suggested – simply reducing the police force to the size found in most comparable cities would result in immediate savings of nearly $24 million every year[32]. Consolidating smaller municipal police departments throughout the county would free up significant resources to direct to community needs.

The City of Pittsburgh's current contract with the FOP explicitly allows for the transfer of duties away from police. Section 18, subsection I on "Civilianization" reads, "The City shall be permitted to transfer any duties which do not require police officer certification and training to civilian employees outside the bargaining unit, even if currently performed by police officers[33]." Nothing in this document would require a renegotiation of the city's agreement with the FOP.

While there is currently a hiring freeze in Pittsburgh, simply not expanding the size of the police force is not enough. Nearly 200 Pittsburgh police officers are eligible for retirement, which means the force could be significantly reduced in size without necessitating layoffs[34]. However, retirements are not enough. The Pittsburgh police employ a large number of individuals with patterns of abuse and harassment. Officers with more than two complaints filed against them must be fired immediately.

Instead of continuing to pour a disproportionate amount of our tax dollars into the police, this money should be invested in our communities. It should be directed to the people and organizations already doing the actual work of building safe communities and creating new, community-led institutions and programs to address the root causes of violence and poverty and create meaningfully lasting public health and safety.

Divesting from policing to invest in communities is happening across the nation. Cities from Seattle to Ithaca to Denver to Austin to Oakland to Portland and many others have already begun transforming public safety through decentering police from the community and instead funding those who are genuinely doing the work to foster safe and secure communities.

We believe Pittsburgh should join them. In the following sections, we outline four important problems our communities face that are only exacerbated by criminalization and police involvement. In place of policing, we offer our vision for how a reimagined response to these problems will produce safer and healthier communities.

REIMAGINING THE WAYS WE RESPOND TO PEOPLE EXPERIENCING VIOLENCE

To truly address the impact of violence on our communities, it is essential to understand that violence is far more than just crime. Rather, violence is an experience that limits or diminishes peoples' capacity to survive. Unemployment, inadequate housing, lack of access to medical care, subpar public education systems, food insecurity, and racism are all violence. Violent crime within our communities is often a response to these forms of structural and systemic violence. We will not solve it without addressing these larger forms of violence plaguing Black, Brown, and poor White people in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County.

Police are central to the violence enacted on Black Pittsburghers. Police directly harass and brutalize our communities with impunity, and they protect and defend the systems and structures which create the conditions where violence flourishes.

When Black people experience fatal violence in Pittsburgh, the police offer little help. In the five years from 2010 to 2015, Pittsburgh police investigated 311 homicides, and only 163 of them were cleared through arrest. 85% of the victims in these homicides were Black, and a staggering 97% of unsolved homicide cases involved a Black victim[35].

The first step in reducing violence in our communities is to decenter police from the lives of Black people. Police enforce the law with violence, respond to our communities with violence, and protect their power with violence. This begins at a young age with police in our schools, as police regularly enact violence upon children for what are normal childhood behaviors. These actions inculcate the idea within our children that violence is an acceptable way to resolve disputes. Police do not make our children feel safe in schools and do not make schools safer[36]. We must remove police in our schools that push our children into the school-to-prison pipeline; instead, these resources should be directed to support the health and well-being of students, addressing physical and mental health needs and the root causes of the issues they face.

The police harm our communities through constant arrests for low-level and petty crimes, disrupting the lives of those arrested, the lives of their families, and the fabric of the community. Once arrested, Black defendants in Allegheny County are significantly more likely to be assigned bail, and their bail is likely to be a higher amount than similar White defendants. 67% of people currently incarcerated in the Allegheny County Jail (ACJ) are Black despite Black people only making up 13% of the county's population[37]. Black people sent to ACJ will spend, on average three weeks longer in detention than their White counterparts[38].

ACJ enacts more violence on those within its walls than most any other jail in Pennsylvania. ACJ guards use force at a rate twice as high as the average rate in PA jails, place people in restraints at three times the state average, and in 2019 used stun guns 146 times, accounting for half of all stun gun uses in all 67 Pennsylvania jails that year[39]. Enacting this level of violence in our communities is not making anyone safer or healthier.

The State's police, jails, and prison response does not reduce or prevent violence in our communities. We need to lift up the individuals and groups within our communities who are addressing violence through practices of restorative and transformative justice.

"Restorative justice" seeks to move beyond the simple retribution of our criminal legal system to repair the harm caused by violence. This approach brings together perpetrators, victims, and the wider community to address the issues at hand in ways that strengthen our community instead of visiting harsh punishments upon perpetrators. "Transformative justice" goes further in recognizing that the traditional framing of justice as something provided by the criminal legal system is inherently flawed and that we need to find new ways of bringing about justice.

REIMAGINING THE WAYS WE RESPOND TO PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

To address the conditions that lead to homelessness, we need to look beyond overly restrictive "official" definitions to recognize that the term homeless applies to all who are without safe, consistent, stable, long-term housing. Official definitions require people to have experienced extreme situations like a year without housing before they are assisted. In contrast, a more common experience of homelessness is housing instability, such as "couch surfing" – hopping from place to place without any stable housing of one's own. This type of transient living is not recognized as homelessness by federal programming.

Nearly one out of every three Pittsburghers is subsisting at 200% of the poverty level or less, putting them at grave risk of experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness in the near future. Over the last six years, an average of 13,700 evictions was filed by landlords every year in Pittsburgh[40].

As of January 2020, Allegheny County officially reported 887 people experiencing homelessness[41]. Black people comprise 55% of those experiencing homelessness, despite comprising only 13% of the county's population. These numbers are certainly underrepresenting the true amount of people experiencing homelessness in the region but still represent an increase from 2019 and are likely to continue increasing due to the economic impact of COVID.

People who are, or are perceived to be queer, trans, or gender nonconforming are often subject to displacement and homelessness due to a lack of legal protections and economic opportunities. People with criminal convictions, substance use challenges, or mental health challenges, are often forced into homelessness due to unwilling landlords and onerous "compliance" requirements within subsidized housing and shelters. Children are hit especially hard by homelessness, as unstable housing disrupts education, and substandard living conditions directly impact physical and mental development[42].

People experiencing homelessness and housing instability are often treated by the city and county as a police matter, whether through demands for their removal from particular places under the pretext of public safety or through inspections at shelters and service centers. Youth without stable housing are regularly subject to police encounters when at school or during welfare checks.

Rarely do these encounters aid those without stable housing. Using the police as the response to homelessness must end. Police should not be responding to 911 calls from businesses where the outcomes of these interactions are more focused on moving people out of sight than providing meaningful services. We must decriminalize panhandling and other survival behaviors. Police should not target people in shelters and service

centers. This aggressive enforcement of minor ordinances and misdemeanors aids no one and serves to further stigmatize already marginalized people.

Current responses to homelessness in the city and county have significant limitations. While there is a 24/7 shelter under construction, this will be the only one in the county, which is not nearly sufficient. All other existing shelters are only for overnight stays, leaving those who work the third shift with no shelter options. As shelter space is increased, we need to prioritize support to continue living situations for children and families. Unhoused people do not have to choose between shelter and remaining connected to their loved ones. There is also a great need for services beyond shelter; the city and county should provide facilities for people experiencing housing instability to safely store their personal possessions. Similarly, there needs to be facilities for bathing, washing clothes, and other basic hygiene necessities

We need to immediately improve the coordination and tracking of available shelters and warming centers, making this information available in a way accessible to both service providers and those experiencing housing instability and homelessness. Shelters and service centers need to end exclusionary requirements such as being unhoused for a specific amount of time or completely abstaining from alcohol and other intoxicants. These serve as unnecessary barriers to getting necessary resources and services to those experiencing homelessness; shelters and services should accept people as they are.

To end the over-policing of those without stable housing, we need to radically reimagine what is considered adequate compensation, training, and staffing levels for service providers. Those actually doing the frontline work to address housing instability are not paid equitably or provided enough training in mental health first aid and de-escalation skills. Police are called into shelters and other places providing services when they are past their capacity to deal with the situation. We need to adequately fund frontline service workers and provide comprehensive training to prevent issues escalating into police involvement.

REIMAGINING THE WAYS WE RESPOND TO PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS

From its inception, the War on Drugs has been rooted in racism and White supremacy. John Erlichman, an aide to President Richard Nixon who was central in crafting the modern drug war, openly admitted "the Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people…We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course, we did. [43]"

Beyond the blatant racism of the War on Drugs, it is important to note that it has caused catastrophic harm. Tens of billions of dollars spent and millions of arrests made have had no meaningful impact on drug usage or drug trafficking. The only thing criminalization of drug use has achieved is allowing police to stop and search people on flimsy premises and harass and arrest people for non-violent drug use.

Black Americans are significantly more likely to be arrested and imprisoned for drug possession than any other racial group, despite all racial groups using illegal drugs at roughly the same rate[44]. Even though Pittsburgh police officers now have the discretion to give a non-arrest summons rather than arrest people in possession of small amounts of cannabis, cannabis-possession arrests have increased, with Black Pittsburghers making up 71% of those arrested for cannabis possession[45]. Black people within Allegheny County are significantly more likely to die of an overdose than White people. The resources dedicated to preventing opioid deaths are being directly largely at White communities.

The constant arrests of people engaging in non-violent drug use harm our communities in a number of ways. Saddling people with criminal histories hurts their ability to find employment, housing, and multiple forms of government assistance. Spending time in jail forces people who are physically dependent on drugs into withdrawal and leaves them at a significantly higher risk of overdose when released.

Most people who use drugs do not have an addiction[46], and many have no other drug-related problems, but interactions with the police and wider criminal justice system create problems for them. On any given day in Allegheny County, over two dozen people are arrested for simple possession and other misdemeanor drug charges. District Attorney Stephen A. Zappala, Jr. seeks prosecution on over 90% of such low-level cases, putting him starkly out of line with DAs in many other cities. The latter are increasingly declining to prosecute such cases[47]. These convictions saddle our community with millions of dollars in fines and court costs, resulting in probation revocation, driver's license suspension, or incarceration for thousands of people every year.

When drug use does become a serious social problem, it is often a result of other issues we are trying to address in reimagining public safety – issues like inadequate housing, unemployment, and substandard healthcare create more harm than drug use itself. We need holistic pre-crisis interventions for those who need assistance addressing problems related to their drug use. Current systems tend to funnel people into either mental health support or drug use support as if these are completely separate issues and not often strongly linked.

We must employ a harm reduction approach[48] to drug use, treating the use of drugs as a public health issue, not a criminal justice issue. Central to this is the decriminalization of possession of small amounts of drugs and any amount of paraphernalia, along with full pardons for all who have been convicted of nonviolent drug offenses. We must immediately end the practice of police responding to overdose calls. By using these as a pretext for surveillance, evidence-gathering, and arrest, police make people hesitant to call 911 when experiencing an emergency. Instead, these calls should be fielded by unarmed, non-police responders trained in crisis intervention.

REIMAGINING THE WAYS WE RESPOND TO PEOPLE EXPERIENCING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Similar to violence, homelessness, and drug use, few people experiencing mental health issues are helped by police intervention. In the best-case scenario, police may direct people to relevant service providers. Still, a lack of knowledge surrounding mental health and available resources means encounters with the police are often quite dangerous. Individuals with untreated mental illness comprise at least 1 in 4 and potentially as many as half of all people killed by police officers[49].

Police must no longer respond to calls involving people experiencing mental health issues, and the city and county must decriminalize mental health. Police responding to mental health issues creates a level of distrust in the community, making people hesitant, fearful, or unwilling to reach out for help, making it more difficult for service providers to reach our communities. Mental health providers' reliance on the police for assistance and transport traumatizes those who are simply seeking help. Police overuse their power of involuntary commitment, traumatizing individuals, sowing distrust, and deterring people from seeking assistance.

Instead, these calls should be responded to by mental health workers trained in trauma-informed and evidence-based treatment, who can provide referrals and access to necessary inpatient and outpatient care.

Often people with mental health issues are not experiencing a "crisis." The framing of "crisis" is used by police to justify their intervention and punitive responses when the police intervention itself creates the crisis. For example, people with undiagnosed mental health issues are treated as defiant and non-cooperative rather than in need of assistance. We need to stop the policing of behavior that is considered "abnormal" but which is not harming anyone.

We need to reinvest funds into our communities to address community needs and to work to repair the rightful distrust of institutions built over generations of abuse, neglect, and mistreatment. We need to attend to mental health issues not just for individuals, but by addressing social and economic conditions and community trauma which lead to

mental health problems. Mental health issues are strongly linked to violence, homelessness, and poverty. Jails like ACJ contribute to and greatly exacerbate mental health issues among those who pass through their doors[50].

Right now, Allegheny County has resolve Crisis Services to provide emergency mental health services and crisis response. However, resolve has significant limitations which prevent it from filling the varied needs of our communities. In addition to being overutilized and lacking space for all of the community's needs, resolve is a single center responsible for the entirety of Allegheny County, making it highly inaccessible to many.

More importantly, resolve provides services but does nothing to address the earned distrust such organizations have among marginalized communities. These programs rely on a harmful carceral logic where those seeking help can end up incarcerated or involuntarily committed. Hospitals should be the option of last resort when dealing with mental health issues and crises, and the association

of programs like resolve with major hospitals exacerbates community distrust. Many people report hesitancy or outright refusal to use these services due to a fear of involuntary commitment.

Rather than singular, centralized services working in conjunction with the police and other distrusted institutions, we need to reinvest within our communities and lift up the people and organizations in affected communities already doing this work. But we also need to go beyond simply responding to crises as they occur and instead empower our communities with the support and resources necessary to address these issues before they reach the level of a crisis.

ACCESSIBLE, DECENTRALIZED, COMMUNITY-BASED SOLUTIONS TO PUBLIC HEALTH AND SAFETY

While we have highlighted important individual aspects of public health and safety, none of these problems exist in a vacuum; these interconnected issues must be addressed holistically to solve the underlying causes which lead to crises of violence, homelessness, substance use, and mental health. Central to overcoming these problems is to understand them as community issues that must be addressed by the community, not crimes to be resolved by policing.

Existing non-police services in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County are largely ineffective, overly centralized, often inaccessible, and lack trust among affected communities. In place of these, we need decentralized neighborhood organizations and services that are designed and developed by those who need them. Small, community-based providers are far more likely to be successful than large, centralized providers.

Fortunately, there are already plenty of people in affected communities working on these issues. Addressing the fundamental causes of our communities' problems does not require starting completely from scratch but rather recognizing, supporting, and empowering those already doing the work. This is not about creating something new but instead directing resources away from harmful policing practices to decentralized, neighborhood-based services which actually address community needs, bringing resources into places where people will be able to utilize them.

Rather than massive expenditures to build community centers throughout the city and county, we need to recognize and support existing spaces that serve as unofficial community centers; neighborhood safe spaces already utilized by those in the community. If people go somewhere for help, that place already is a crisis center. Respecting and supporting existing trusted spaces, people, and organizations can deliver services to those who need them more effectively.

There is no one-size-fits-all model for these community centers, as each community has different needs. Services should be developed in conversation with neighborhood residents about the problems they face and what would help. These needs will also change over time, so we have to be flexible and respond to community concerns as their needs shift.

These decentralized community centers are built on the principle that crisis response and prevention require a range of supports, from financial assistance to mental health or substance use treatment to housing to medical support and beyond. These centers may not provide all forms of assistance a neighborhood might need but can

act as trusted sources to help refer people to the people and institutions that can assist them.

Responding to the mental health needs of our communities, these centers should provide direct assistance to those experiencing mental health issues and engage the wider community in conversations around mental health, trauma, and healing. These centers can help normalize different states of mental health, educating the public on how people can exist differently without posing problems or needing institutional care. Mental health first aid training can help community members understand how to assist people they encounter who appear to be experiencing a mental health crisis and what resources they can rely on instead of calling the police.

These centers could also bring together those in our community who are already doing mental health work outside of professional therapeutic practices. This kind of informal, relational mental health work is often quite effective and culturally appropriate and should be recognized and supported. By decentralizing mental health services and implementing community-based alternatives, the city and county can work past the many barriers that prevent community members from accessing mental health services.

To effectively respond to issues related to drug use in our communities, these community centers should be based on basic harm-reduction principles and include things like Syringe Service Programs, so people who use drugs are using safe equipment, and real-time drug quality testing to protect people from overdosing on unknown substances. These centers could also serve as safer consumption facilities, where people who use drugs could use them somewhere safe, out of the public, and with services on hand. Safer consumption facilities have been proven effective at reducing the spread of infectious diseases, overdoses, and a number of other negative outcomes associated with drug use[51].

Rather than responding to drug use with ineffective methods like abstinence-based treatments, a holistic response would address experiences beyond the individual's drug use. Often a more pressing need for individuals may be basic things like housing and food security. These centers should also start people who need treatment on effective medications like buprenorphine, offer basic healthcare services on-site, and help people access broader healthcare needs.

To effectively respond to inadequate and unstable housing in our communities, community centers should embrace an expansive definition that includes not just street homelessness but couch surfing and other transient forms of housing to meaningfully address the many people who fall through the cracks of restrictive official definitions. This would include lifting up and supporting organizations that already employ this more comprehensive understanding and empowering communities to create their responses to the particular forms of homelessness they are experiencing. We are encouraged by developing the homelessness co-response programming the city is beginning to fund and look forward to expanding on this pilot programming to more sustainable, long-term, community-based solutions.

To effectively respond to violence within our communities, these centers should integrate the efforts of peace ambassadors already doing the work of addressing the causes of violence. In every neighborhood, some individuals or groups effectively combat interpersonal violence; community centers can operate as a safe space for those who seek the help of these peace ambassadors. In addition to funding and supporting the on-the-ground work of peace ambassadors, the wider services offered by these centers should be rooted in the recognition that the violence within our communities is a response to violent systems that harass and degrade our communities. As peace ambassadors address the individuals contributing to violence, community centers should address the factors creating the conditions for violence.

While these community centers largely bring together people and services which already exist and simply need more funding and support, the city and county must also create an emergency call system that does not involve the police. When emergency calls come in regarding people using drugs, experiencing homelessness or mental health crises, or a wide variety of calls requiring in-depth social services, these should not be routed to the police but instead directly to informed responders who can deal with issues of healthcare, mental health, housing, food security, and the many other issues experienced by those in our communities who need assistance.

Those who need emergency services are often reluctant to reach out for fear of abuse, harassment, or criminalization, greatly exacerbating existing problems. The upcoming required implementation of 988 as an alternate emergency number[52] provides a great opportunity to implement an alternate emergency response system. Assuring the public that informed, reliable emergency services will respond instead of armed police officers will create the conditions wherein affected communities can seek help without fear of reprisal.

This emergency response program should draw from the successful practices of existing non-police emergency services from across the nation such as CAHOOTS (Eugene, OR) [53], DASHR (Denver, CO) [54], CAT-911 (Los Angeles, CA)[55], PAD (Atlanta, GA)[56] and the many other successful community-driven alternatives to policing[57]. While these models must be adapted to the unique needs of our region in communication with affected communities, these programs prove the potential for non-police emergency response, having already improved outcomes for individuals experiencing mental health issues and related crises.

These non-police emergency responders could take the form of two-person teams consisting of a medic and a crisis worker with training and experience in the mental health field. These teams would deal with a wide range of issues, including conflict resolution, welfare checks, substance abuse, suicide threats, and more, relying on de-escalation and harm reduction techniques. They would not be law enforcement and would not carry weapons but instead utilize their training and experience to bring non-violent resolutions to crisis situations.

This separate emergency call system and these decentralized, community-based service centers will save the city and county significant amounts of money by reducing the need for policing in the immediate term and drastically reducing the need for jail, probation/parole, and other forms of incarceration and oversight in the long term. Whatever startup costs are necessary to institute crisis response teams and support community centers will be dwarfed by the long-term savings of reduced carceral response.

Far more important than the money saved will be the positive impact had on neighborhoods and communities throughout Pittsburgh and Allegheny County. To achieve true public health and safety, we need to decenter the police from the lives of Black, Brown, and poor White people and from our communities.

The Freedom House Ambulance Service has already demonstrated that removing services from the police and investing in and supporting affected communities is not only possible but also produces safer and healthier communities. Our communities know how to heal ourselves; we simply need the resources and support to do so more effectively. Through defunding the police, we can fund, support, and empower our communities to address the problems we face.

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