

**INVESTING IN COLLABORATIVE SAFETY SOLUTIONS IN DC**

**Statement of**

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**before the**

**Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety,**

**Council of the District of Columbia**

**EXPLORING NON-LAW ENFORCEMENT ALTERNATIVES TO  
MEETING COMMUNITY NEEDS:  
PUBLIC OVERSIGHT ROUNDTABLE**

**December 17, 2020**

\* The views expressed are my own and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. I thank my colleague Jesse Jannetta for help in preparing this testimony.

Councilmember Allen and members of the Judiciary Committee:

My name is Leah Sakala, and I am a senior policy associate in the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute, a nonprofit research organization in Ward 2. My expertise focuses on a wide range of justice and safety issues on the state and local levels. I'm also a resident of Columbia Heights in Ward 1, and am active in my community in several ways.

I am here to recommend that the Council move toward building a robust public safety system in DC that prioritizes prevention, treatment, and expanding opportunity for DC residents over reactive strategies that rely on criminalization and punishment.

Research shows that cities with a higher concentration of local organizations focusing on community well-being have greater reductions in both property and violent crime.<sup>1</sup> Organizations that facilitate engagement and connections between community members can make neighborhoods stronger.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, strategies that rely on punishment and surveillance, which are particularly concentrated in communities of color and low-income communities, contribute to trauma and harm. Police contact itself is associated with an increased likelihood of future justice involvement for youth.<sup>3</sup> Responses that do not involve contact with police and other parts of the legal system are more effective for addressing issues such as homelessness<sup>4</sup> and for offering support to people who experience mental health disorders.<sup>5</sup> And, as this Council knows, these responses can work for violence prevention, too.<sup>6</sup> But such strategies must have sufficient funding and community collaboration to work.

My research has found that communities around the country are finding creative ways to build—and fund—public safety systems that recognize community-based service providers, grassroots leaders, and other community members as critical partners in keeping neighborhoods safe and secure.<sup>7</sup> From giving Department of Corrections dollars to reentry service providers in Colorado, to allocating New York City executive budget resources for restorative justice programs in schools, to awarding grants to local service providers through San José, California's Gang Prevention Task Force, city governments

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Sharkey, Gerard Torrats-Espinosa, and Delaram Takyar, "Community and the Crime Decline: The Causal Effect of Local Nonprofits on Violent Crime," *American Sociological Review* 82, no. 6 (2017): 1214–40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122417736289>

<sup>2</sup> Nan Lin, "Building a Network Theory of Social Capital," *Connections* 22, no. 1 (1999): 28–51.

<sup>3</sup> Juan Del Toro, Tracey Lloyd, Kim S. Buchanan, et al., "The Criminogenic and Psychological Effects of Police Stops on Adolescent Black and Latino Boys," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 116, no. 17 (2019): 8261–68. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1808976116>

<sup>4</sup> Samantha Batko, Sarah Gillespie, Katrina Ballard, and Mary K. Cunningham, *Alternatives to Arrests and Police Responses to Homelessness: Evidence-Based Models and Promising Practices* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Henry J. Steadman, Joseph P. Morrissey, and Travis W. Parker, *When Political Will Is Not Enough: Jails, Communities and Persons with Mental Health Disorders* (Delmar, NY: Policy Research Associates, Inc., 2015)

<sup>6</sup> John Jay College Research Advisory Group on Preventing and Reducing Community Violence, *Reducing Violence Without Police: A Review of Research Evidence* (New York: John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Research and Evaluation Center, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Leah Sakala, Chelsea Thomson, and Samantha Harvell, *Public Investment in Community Driven Safety Initiatives Landscape Study and Key Considerations* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2018); Samantha Harvell, Chloe Warnberg, Leah Sakala, and Constance Hull, *Promoting a New Direction for Youth Justice: Strategies to Fund a Community-Based Continuum of Care and Opportunity* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2019).

across the country are adjusting their budgets to support robust community-based public safety systems. Just last month Los Angeles County voters approved Measure J,<sup>8</sup> which dedicates 10 percent of locally generated and unrestricted county funds to social services and community development efforts, and prohibits spending it on prisons, jails, or law enforcement.

In the District, this work must happen hand in hand with DC residents, following the lead of communities that face the most acute harm related to both violence and overpolicing, surveillance, and incarceration.<sup>9</sup> You are hearing from many of them today, and I particularly encourage you to work with youth in DC—our next generation—to address priorities that are most salient for them. A growing number of communities are developing creative participatory safety strategies, and DC can learn from this work. For example, New York City’s NeighborhoodStat initiative engages public housing residents, including young people, to identify their own safety priorities; and also works with government agencies to address those priorities. Many NeighborhoodStat sites use participatory budgeting to allocate funding to the projects that residents identify.<sup>10</sup> In another example from Detroit, a team of organizations held a Restorative Justice Youth Design Summit to generate ideas about how to spend the money allocated for two new proposed jail facilities.<sup>11</sup>

We are at an unprecedented moment. The COVID-19 pandemic has meant that resources are more precious than ever, and our public investments directly reflect our priorities as a District. Both COVID-19 and overpolicing are most fatal for DC’s Black residents.<sup>12</sup> Now is the time to recommit to growing and expanding the critical supports and services that keep DC residents across all eight wards safe and healthy.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions from the committee.

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<sup>8</sup> For a high-level summary, see Jaclyn Cosgrove, “L.A. County Voters Approve Measure J, Providing New Funding for Social Services,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 3, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Leah Sakala and Nancy La Vigne, “Community-Driven Models for Safety and Justice,” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 16, no. 1 (2019): 253–66. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X19000146>

<sup>10</sup> Betsy Pearl, “NeighborhoodStat: Strengthening Public Safety through Community Empowerment,” Center for American Progress, October 2, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> *Restorative Justice Youth Design Summit* (Detroit: Detroit Justice Center and Designing Justice + Designing Spaces, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Jenny Gathright, “D.C.’s Black Residents Make Up Less Than Half the Population, 80% of COVID-19 Deaths,” NPR, May 11, 2020; Marisa M. Kashino, “Police Killed These Seven Washingtonians. Here Are Their Stories, and the Family Left Behind,” *Washingtonian*, September 6, 2020.