

**REDEFINING PUBLIC SAFETY: LESSONS LEARNED FROM POLICE BUDGET
REALLOCATION EFFORTS**

**Statement of
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**before the
Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety,
Council of the District of Columbia**

**BUDGET OVERSIGHT HEARING ON THE OFFICE OF
NEIGHBORHOOD SAFETY AND ENGAGEMENT AND THE
METROPOLITAN POLICE DEPARTMENT**

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* The views expressed are our own and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders.

Chairperson Allen and members of the Judiciary Committee,

My name is Libby Doyle, and I am a research analyst in the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute, a nonprofit research organization in Ward 2. I am joined by my colleague, Leah Sakala, a senior policy associate in the Justice Policy Center. We hold expertise on a wide range of justice and safety issues at the state and local levels, and we are both residents of Ward 1. We are here to share research from our ongoing work, in collaboration with the DC Fiscal Policy Institute (DCFPI), to produce research and resources on DC's investments in public safety and policing. The views we express today are our own and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its board, or its funders.

Following the murder of George Floyd and the killings of Breonna Taylor and many other people—disproportionately people of color—by police, last summer saw historic mass uprisings against police violence. In the months since, local governments around the country developed strategies to answer the call to reduce police violence and build safety in new ways. Communities across the US, including here in DC, have demonstrated a keen interest in reallocating resources from police departments with the goal of reinvesting those funds into communities in new ways. This testimony presents a number of examples and key takeaways from cities and counties that have worked to divert resources from their law enforcement agencies and repurpose them to build new safety infrastructure. As DC leaders consider what it means to rethink public safety and build on progress made through the Neighborhood Engagement Achieves Results Act measures and other similar steps, we ask that you consider these lessons.

Cities have made new investments in the capacity of nonpolice entities by shifting some services away from police agencies. In Seattle, for example, the city reallocated \$69 million from the Seattle Police Department budget by moving services such as parking enforcement, the 911 call system, and victims' advocates to other existing or newly created agencies in the city.¹ Similarly, Austin realized \$80 million in funds to be repurposed for community-based services by proposing to redistribute some functions, including forensics science, support services, and victims' services, from police to other city agencies.² Other cities cut police budgets through hiring freezes and cuts to overtime allocations. Although cities were able to reposition essential services in separate departments designed to provide targeted responses, city leaders must ensure these new departments do not simply move funds to another department while maintaining the same enforcement structures, but rather that they begin to address the trauma and harms associated with increased interactions with the police.³ Removing functions from police departments will help shrink their overall footprint, but city leaders should be intentional about how these new departments operate.

Rethinking public safety includes funding services that reduce common entry points into the justice system and addressing systemic racism and other inequities that destabilize communities. For

¹ David Kroman, "Seattle Cuts, but Doesn't 'Defund,' Police Budget in 2021," *Crosscut*, November 19, 2020.

² Meena Venkataramanan, "Austin City Council Cuts Police Department Budget by One-Third, Mainly through Reorganizing Some Duties out from Law Enforcement Oversight," *Texas Tribune*, August 13, 2020.

³ Amanda Geller, Jeffrey Fagan, Tom Tyler, and Bruce Link, "Aggressive Policing and the Mental Health of Young Urban Men," *American Journal of Public Health* 104, no. 12 (2014): 2321–27.
[10.2105/AJPH.2014.302046](https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2014.302046).

example, research shows that people experiencing homelessness and people with mental health needs are more likely to come into contact with the police and the justice system.⁴ By investing in housing and behavioral health services, cities can begin to reduce the role of police in perpetuating a harmful cycle of justice involvement. This is an urgent priority for addressing structural inequity in DC, where gentrification—and the related police activity—are driving displacement, particularly of Black residents.⁵ Cities such as Austin have used large portions of funds divested from police departments to invest in permanent supportive housing, mental health services, and substance-use-disorder treatment.⁶ Another way to reduce reliance on police for people with behavioral health needs is to implement targeted community responder models for 911 calls to build up non-law enforcement emergency response capacity. The CAHOOTS program in Eugene, Oregon, has been operational for decades and is one such example of these types of programs.⁷ Washington, DC, meanwhile, recently implemented a program to divert some service calls to mental health counselors, and Mayor Bowser's proposed FY 2022 budget includes increased funding for housing resources; these are good first steps toward reducing reliance on police responses to mental health crises and homelessness. However, significant and sustained investment in housing and behavioral health services is critical to ensuring that such programs can successfully mitigate an overreliance on justice systems for responding to homelessness and mental health crises.

Centering the voices of community members, particularly Black and Latinx people, through participatory budgeting can generate more equitable reallocation efforts. Today you will hear from constituents who have experienced policing in DC directly; their voices and perspectives should be centered in all discussions of reallocation. Participatory budgeting is one strategy to empower community members to allocate resources through a democratic process. Many jurisdictions, including Seattle and the Phoenix Union High School District, have adopted participatory budgeting as a way to redistribute funds from law enforcement. In Seattle, the city has allocated \$30 million to participatory budgeting, with \$12 million of these funds coming from the police department.⁸ Last summer, the Phoenix Union High School District voted to end their contract with the Phoenix Police Department for school resource officers and will instead redistribute the \$1.2 million saved each year through participatory processes.⁹ Stakeholder groups, including school staff, parents, and students, will each be allocated a portion of these funds to redistribute to investment options they will develop and select to improve school safety without the use of law enforcement. Participatory budgeting ensures that people who are most affected by funding decisions have a say in determining what resources are

⁴ Sarah Gillespie and Samantha Batko, “Five Charts that Explain the Homelessness-Jail Cycle - and How to Break It,” Urban Institute, September 16, 2020; Shannon Scully, “[Criminal Justice Reform Means Reforming the Mental Health System](#)” (Arlington, VA: National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2021).

⁵ Gabriella Velasco and Oriya Cohen, “[Three Ways Local Policymakers Can Confront Development-Directed Policing in Washington, DC](#),” *Housing Matters* blog (Urban Institute), March 17, 2021.

⁶ Meg O' Connor, “Austin Will Use Money Cut from Police Budget to Establish Supportive Housing,” *The Appeal*, January 27, 2021.

⁷ Amos Irwin and Betsy Pearl, *The Community Responder Model: How cities Can Send the Right Responder to Every 911 Call* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2020).

⁸ Manjeet Kaur, “Seattle Cut Its Police Budget. Now the Public Will Decide How to Spend the Money,” *The Appeal*, January 28, 2021.

⁹ Richard Franco, “Phoenix Union Launches \$1.2 Million Community-Driven School Safety Initiative,” *Arizona Education News Service*, July 8, 2020.

supported in their communities. These examples highlight the importance of being intentional in reallocation efforts to guarantee that funds diverted from the police are redistributed to meet the needs that community members voice.

As the District considers how to allocate resources for the upcoming fiscal year, leaders should consider the lessons learned from other cities and jurisdictions that have begun to use their budgeting process to build up different types of community safety infrastructure and scale back policing. We hope that the forthcoming research from Urban and DC Fiscal Policy Institute will help stakeholders across the District begin to consider how the Metropolitan Police Department budget is allocated.

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