ABELL FOUNDATION

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PART 1

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What Can Be Done To Improve Police-Community Relations In Baltimore?

Exploring the experiences and perspectives of Black residents

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Executive Summary

Baltimore City has a history of tumultuous relations between the Police Department (BPD) and its Black citizens. As such, our study was aimed at better understanding experiences, attitudes, and perceptions among Black Baltimoreans with respect to the BPD. Between 2021-2022, we conducted interviews and focus groups with 93 Black residents in Baltimore City. Residents comprised a wide swathe of the Black community and varied in socioeconomic status, gender, age, employment, criminal justice history, community ties, and housing status. Our study also aimed to identify tangible recommendations from our participants about how the BPD could improve and how funds should be invested to improve public safety and wellbeing. Finally, our study also explored how Black Baltimoreans felt about the "Defund the Police" social movement. Notably, qualitative methodology is not applied to explain statistical trends or patterns. Rather, insights gleaned from our interviews and focus groups are useful for understanding the perceptions and first-hand experiences of participants in our study.

Consistent with other research into Baltimore City residents' attitudes in the years since BPD entered into a federal consent decree, our study found that the department's current reform efforts have not altered perceptions among Black Baltimoreans.

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Key Findings

Key findings from the study are as follows:

- A perception shared by nearly all participants was that the police are largely **ineffective** and struggle to curb crime and ensure public safety. Notably, there were exceptions to this, and many could point to times when they either observed or experienced a police officer acting "effectively." However, this remained the general sentiment about how the BPD is functioning as a whole. In particular, participants expressed frustration with police officers sitting in their patrol cars or standing by as crimes—especially drug trafficking—occurred.

- Experiences and perceptions of **racialized policing** was another dominant theme. Participants felt that police treated Black citizens with less respect – including being more likely to use excessive force – and treated Black citizens with more suspicion. They also noted that racial dynamics of policing depended on the demographic composition of the neighborhood where encounters occurred (e.g. predominantly Black vs. predominantly white) and on the race/ethnicity of officers.

- Most participants were **reluctant or opposed to calling the police**. These feelings largely stemmed from being concerned police would escalate the situation, not

safeguard their identities from public knowledge, or that they would simply be ineffective (e.g., not solve the crime). Further, while participants relayed that they would be more likely to call for situations like an accident or drug overdose, they were less likely to call to report violence for fear of retaliation.

- Participants wanted police to receive **more training on "people skills"** so they could effectively communicate and interact with members of the community. It was common in our interviews and focus groups for people to recall nostalgically a time when police were more embedded in the community and interacted more informally with citizens. Our participants expressed a desire for police to do more of this and show that they care about the needs of the community.

- Finally, more than half of participants connected the damage of shutting down y**outh recreation centers** to broader community/public safety. There was a call among participants to invest more in youth programming and in recreation centers in particular. These facilities were perceived as critical to getting youth off the street, protecting them from potential victimization as well as from potential arrest and imprisonment.

Introduction

There is a history of troubled relations between the Baltimore Police Department (BPD) and its Black citizens. The 2015 death of Freddie Gray in police custody ignited national outcry and widespread protests, especially in major cities. The Gun Trace Task Force indictments and convictions in 2017 revealed systemic corruption and management issues in the BPD. In response to these problems, a federal consent decree was imposed in 2017, requiring the BPD to meet certain standards and to focus their efforts in specific ways (e.g., community-oriented policing). It also required them to collect and provide certain types of data, and for their activities to be monitored.

In one such report by the Monitoring Team in collaboration with the University of Toronto and The Global Justice Lab, 70 individuals were interviewed in 2019 who were arrested and detained by BPD (Fogelsong et al., 2019). A little more than half (54%) thought the police were doing a "bad" or "terrible" job. Using a mixed-methods approach, most respondents perceived that policing had not gotten worse or better in recent years. Few believed that the police "never" engage in racial profiling, and the modal response was that they "sometimes" do. Most participants said they wanted the police to show more engagement in the community and to listen to its members.

In another report by the BPD Monitoring Team, in tandem with Morgan State University, survey and interview data were collected for a sample of 400 adult Baltimoreans, which included approximately 61.6% Black and 22.2% White residents, as well as members of traditionally "hard-to-reach" populations including individuals where English is not their primary language, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, individuals struggling with homelessness, and adults who squeegee to earn their income (Pratt-Harris and Winbush, 2023). While results indicated that most residents felt "somewhat safe" in Baltimore City, most disagreed that the BPD could ensure public safety. Trust and satisfaction levels with the police were also low; however, many participants reported that they felt comfortable communicating with the police "if and when they had to" (2020: p.3). More than half of respondents (58%) indicated that they had observed the BPD engaging in racial profiling, and, likewise, more than half (53%) indicated that they had personally observed officers engaging in excessive force. Notably, this research did not disaggregate findings across subgroups, so it is also possible that perceptions and experiences varied across race, age, or gender.

In 2020, Open Society Institute (OSI) and Johns Hopkins conducted surveys of city residents (Webster et al., 2020; Foglesong et al., 2020). Similar to findings noted above, Webster and colleagues found mostly negative perceptions of police, including perceptions that the police

are disrespectful, doubts that police would be held accountable if complaints were filed, and reluctance to call the police. In the OSI survey, the top priority identified by residents for BPD was to improve community relations, which held across demographic groups.

Across all three sources there is a consistent finding of a strained relationship between police and community and a desire for the BPD to engage in efforts to improve these relations. All studies highlighted negative perceptions and attitudes, including those related to racial profiling, being treated with respect, trusting officers, and calling the police. Next, we detail our current study and how ours builds on these prior investigations.
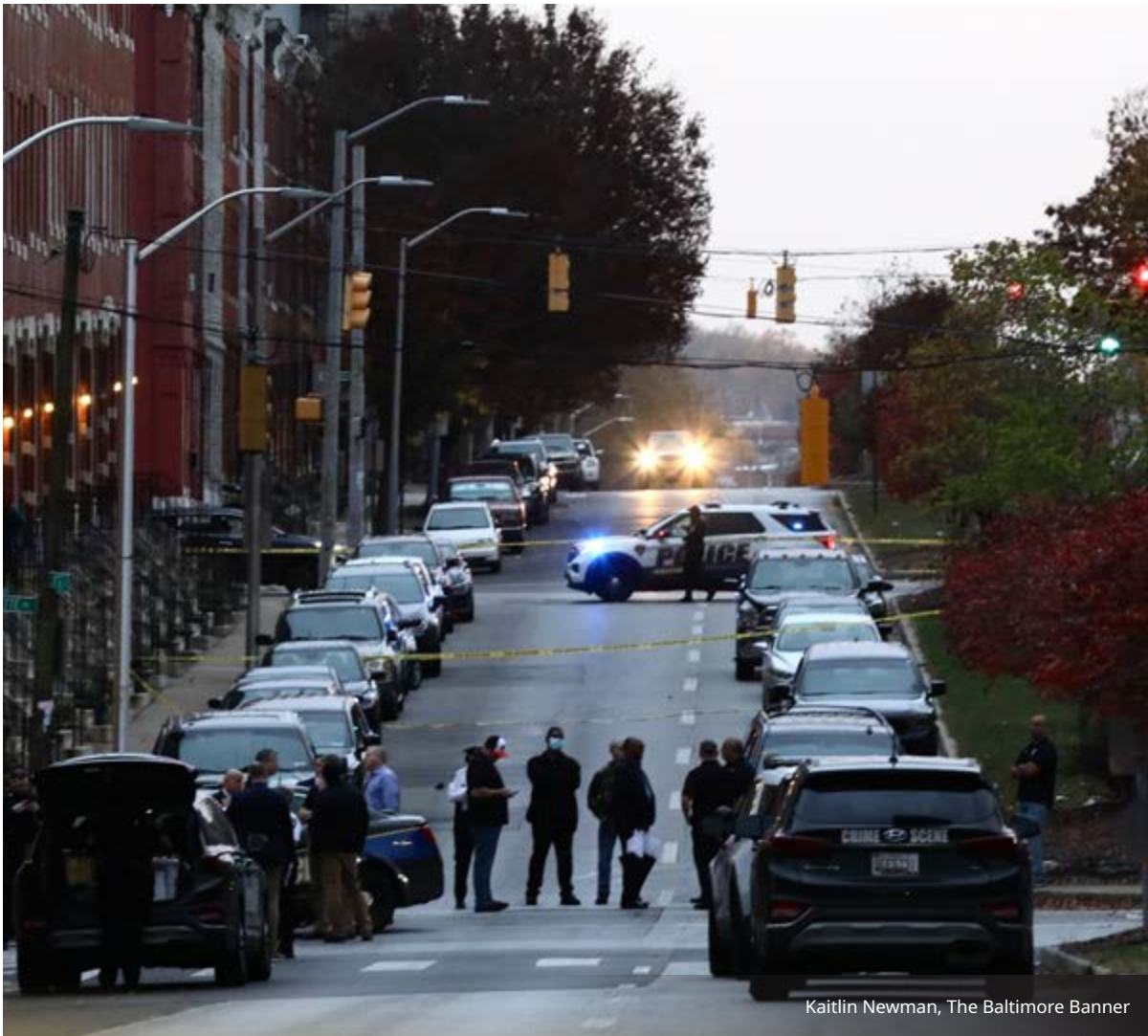
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The Current Study

The goal of this study is to help the BPD better understand what it can do to increase trust among Black residents. We focus specifically on Black residents not only because they are the demographic-majority in the city with the most police contact, but also because we recognize that Black Americans are not a monolithic racial/ethnic group. As such, we sought to capture important qualitative nuances and diversity within this group (i.e., within-group phenomena) by interviewing Black residents across age, socioeconomic status, gender, parental status, criminal justice history, and neighborhood. This strategy yielded 93 in-depth interviews with Black residents throughout the city, wherein we learned about current police practices that troubled them and what they wanted the police to do differently.

It is important to note that this current study is situated in a broader, robust literature on Black attitudes towards the police. Negative encounters with and attitudes toward police remain a pressing criminological concern, and public ratings of police legitimacy and trustworthiness reached a record low in recent years (Ortiz, 2020). The overarching view of police as threatening and racially biased toward Black individuals is well supported, with race consistently being the strongest predictor of perceptions toward the police (Bass, 2001; Cobbina et al., 2016).

Approximately half of Black civilians would rather be robbed or burglarized than have unprovoked police contact (Pickett et al., 2022). Fear of police contact contributes to what scholars deem an exasperated racial chasm between Black and White individuals' opinions on police (Graham et al., 2020), with noticeable differences compared with Hispanics and Asians (Nadal et al., 2017). Black Americans as a group generally are more distrustful of police (Chambers et al., 2020), fear police (Smith & Robinson, 2019), are less willing to cooperate (Gaskell & Smith, 1984), and hold more negative attitudes toward police relative to other racial groups (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004).

We also build on existing studies on Baltimore City by more deeply probing Black residents on specific police behaviors/activities they have observed (including those perceived as positive and negative), situational contexts under which residents will or will not call the police, shifting attitudes toward Defund the Police, and also by asking residents to be specific about the kinds of changes they wanted to see either with respect to police reform or other types of social reform. Thus, our study builds upon prior research discussed above. However, our study delves into the experiences and dynamics that fuel those perceptions, as well as gathering data on recommendations from, and needs of, the community.

We utilize interviews and focus groups as our methodological tools because these approaches are well-suited to gather rich perceptual data. For example, by conducting interviews as opposed to collecting survey data, we can explore how Black residents experience or perceived the BPD in their own words. We can also understand broader or deeper contexts around perceptions, such as whether those who report relatively negative experiences also report relatively negative attitudes. Our interviews allow us to follow the interpretive processes and attributions of residents, such as how they connect vicarious and personal experiences with broader attitudes and perceptions of the BPD as a whole. In addition, while there is always going to be some disjuncture between perceptions and reality, these gaps may point to opportunities for improved communication between the BPD and community.

Our study also focuses on a new movement throughout the nation to decrease police contact with residents in stressful situations. This involves using non-police personnel to respond to some categories of 911 calls that do not involve crime and relate to behavioral health problems. We analyzed the experiences of three cities that were advanced along the path of 911 call diversion. We found that the program's structure, goals, and performance measures varied in each city. None had encountered serious operational problems.

This analysis helped us as we examined Baltimore's 911 Calls for Service over the period 2015-2023 to identify categories that could be diverted away from BPD and estimated the potential savings in terms of officer time. Fully implemented, the program could save roughly 60 FTE officers. For a police department with a chronic shortfall in recruitment, this could provide an important boost to its capacity to suppress crime through more active investigation and patrol. This work is reported in a companion Abell Report.

This report concludes with a short set of conclusions and recommendations for next steps in improving the relationship between the BPD and the Black citizens of Baltimore. More extensive versions of all the components of this study are available online.

Perceptions and Experiences of Black Baltimoreans

We interviewed 93 Black residents of Baltimore to learn their views of policing in the city and what they perceived police did well versus poorly. The interviews, either individual, dual, or in small focus groups (three to five participants), included discussion of their own experiences with the Baltimore Police Department and their views on how it could be made more effective. Details of the procedures and the sample are contained in Appendix A of this report.

Before the in-depth interview, we also asked participants to fill out a short questionnaire to gather data including demographic information, criminal justice contact, and perceptions of police. Below, in Table 1, we display these characteristics of our sample. We note that our final sample was fairly evenly split with regard to sex, slightly favoring females. The average age of our sample was 50 years old, although this is positively skewed due to a handful of participants who were significantly older (80+) than most other participants. The age range allowed us to better probe perceived eras of, and changes in, policing as well.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Full Sample

Variable	n	Mean or Prop	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Male	93	0.462	0.501	0	1
Age	93	50.67	15.35	18	86
Completed HS/GED	93	0.785	0.413	0	1
College Graduate	93	0.183	0.389	0	1
Baltimore Residence length (years)	91	42.90	18.55	1	81
Neighborhood Residence length (years)	84	17.38	17.62	.1	64
Criminal Justice Contact					
Pulled Over	92	0.185	0.390	0	1
Stopped/Questioned	93	0.613	0.489	0	1
Searched	92	0.543	0.501	0	1
Detained	92	0.489	0.503	0	1
Arrested	93	0.538	0.501	0	1

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Variable	n	Mean or Prop	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Assaulted by Officer	93	0.258	0.440	0	1
Served time	92	0.522	0.502	0	1
Called to Report	92	0.185	0.390	0	1
Thought about Calling, But Didn't	90	0.333	0.474	0	1
Perceptions of Police (1=strongly disagree, 4=strongly agree)					
"Police respect me."	89	2.65	0.767	1	4
"Police are here to protect me."	90	2.82	0.856	1	4
"Police are more willing to threaten me than most other people."	88	2.45	0.919	1	4
"Police sometimes allow crime to occur without stopping it."	91	2.95	0.947	1	4
"Police do their jobs well."	88	2.32	0.766	1	4
"Police sometimes use abusive language with people."	88	3.00	0.982	1	4
"I feel comfortable when I see the police on the streets."	87	2.42	1.02	1	4
"I don't really think about the police."	90	2.69	0.895	1	4
"I worry that the police I see on the streets might bother me or my friends."	90	2.61	0.869	1	4
"I worry about being arrested."	90	2.29	0.974	1	4

We also found that a criminal justice contact was fairly common in our sample, with approximately half of participants saying they had been detained by the BPD without being arrested, another 54% report being arrested by BPD, and an astonishing 26% report being physically assaulted by a BPD officer. In addition, a little more than half of our participants had served time in jail or prison. Perceptions of police were gathered on a 1–4 scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree, where participants were not given a "neutral" option. Thus, resultant mean values reflect disagreement between agree and disagree, rather than neutral feelings. The two items that yielded the most consistently negative perceptions were whether police sometimes allow crime to occur without stopping it and whether they sometimes use abusive language. More participants agreed or strongly agreed on these items compared to others.

Police Ineffectiveness

Next, we detail some of the main themes that emerged from qualitative interviews.

There was consensus among participants that police ineffectiveness in Baltimore was exacerbating crime and police-civilian tensions. Participants perceived that police were most ineffective at a) curbing open-air drug markets, b) preventing shootings, and c) solving homicides. Some cited examples of officers arriving "too late" or after a crime had already occurred, appearing incompetent when responding to calls for service, not adequately addressing cultural/community needs after a violent incident, or not apprehending suspects following a crime.

On drug use and sale, several participants reasoned that the problem was "bigger than" the BPD and cited police efforts such as patrolling and "posting" in hot spots to prevent drug activity. Participants generally felt that while such efforts curbed crime in those specific hot spots, it pushed crime to adjacent neighborhoods:

> *"[In the Western District] ...the crime and all the drugs that used to be sold in front of this one store, they actually set [up] a [police] car there all day. [...] It helped, because once [the officer] start[ed] sitting there, the riffraff that was on the corner left and the riffraff that was on the block left. [...] But [criminals] do migrate. Because when [the criminals] first left from in front of the store, they came on my block [instead]."* **—57-year-old male**

Coupled with this sentiment, many participants felt that officers were simply less interested or not interested in controlling drug activity:

> *"[Police] just do so much (crime prevention) [but] don't make [crime] no better 'cause it's like a high crime (area), ...a lot of drug activity right there. But I feel like sometimes [officers are] just there to just... That might be [their] post. I feel like, of course, [police] don't stop no drug dealers. I feel like [police are] just there so don't nobody get killed right there."* **—35-year-old female**

Below was a typical account by participants:

> *"I have seen where the police sit there in their cars and actually watch them still sell drugs in front of them."* **—62-year-old male**
>
> *"Yup, and don't do nothing."* **—61-year-old female**
>
> *"They don't do nothing."* **—62-year-old male**

This perception was mostly related to drug activity. Behaviors and perceptions that were associated with police being ineffective at solving homicides or preventing shootings were complex, since many participants saw it as related to community members not cooperating with police and not trusting the police. Indeed, not talking to the police was the norm among participants, creating a difficult dynamic for crime solving, as explained by the following 41-year-old female:

"A lot of cases probably could be solved and people may know stuff, but then you have to think about it. Like, okay, [if] I tell, they're going to want me to testify. Then my name is in there. My picture's in there. Then people in the neighborhood is going to think, 'oh this is a snitch. This person is telling, they talk to the police.' Like who would really want to put they self in that situation?"

This is a difficult dynamic to unpack since a lack of cooperation and trust is fueled in part by negative or sometimes traumatic experiences with the police. Also, participants perceived (or experienced) that police would not preserve their anonymity if they did cooperate or would not solve the crime regardless of any cooperation. Several participants had lost a loved one to gun homicide in Baltimore, and many of those cases remained unsolved. Sometimes participants felt this way about the entire BPD and other times pinpointed it to the inaction of individual officers:

"Like I said, you have some good ones. You have some bad ones. You have some that do their job. You have some that don't. [...]

A perfect example. [Mentions a specific officer's name] Now some murderer's cases get solved, some don't. [The murder of the officer's] brother...got solved. His brother's got [media attention]. ...if you found out who killed his brother, why you can't do it for everybody else that has gotten killed? Why you can't give some other families closure, just like you gave their family closure?" **—60-year-old female**

It is difficult to conclude that most participants felt that most Baltimore police officers were ineffective. While nearly all held perceptions and experiences of police being ineffective, there was a lot of variation in how widespread they interpreted this problem in the police force. Further, many perceived variations in police ineffectiveness depending on their social location or neighborhood (poor vs. affluent; predominantly Black vs. not predominantly Black) or the race of the officer (Black vs. white persons). In the next section we delve into participants' perceptions of racialized policing, which is inexorably tied with police ineffectiveness.

Racialized Policing

Participants held nuanced perspectives surrounding race and racialized policing in Baltimore. Considerable data suggest that Black attitudes toward the police are homogenous or wholly negative, particularly in low-income, urban communities. Some scholars shed light on intragroup variations in Black perceptions of police, even among

those who are involved in the criminal justice system (Brunson & Miller, 2006; Hitchens et al., 2023; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). We found that perceptions of the police were differentially shaped by participants' background (e.g., age, gender, criminal justice history), as well as by the nature and severity of their interactions with police (e.g., personal versus vicarious).

"Some people just see the bad side of the police. A lot of people don't see the good side, the good things they do for the city. So, you got to weigh it on both ends."

For example, despite holding considerably negative attitudes, the women in the sample relied more on vicarious interactions with police to shape their perspectives than did men. In addition, older residents were more likely than younger residents to rationalize questionable police behavior as "doing their job" or "being bad apples." Women and older residents were more likely to humanize officers beyond the uniform, or as one 59-year-old woman reasoned:

> "...at the end of the day, [officers] still got to go home. A lot of them get killed going in their house. They do. You have children, don't come over here like you a superhero because you never know what mind frame [civilians] are in."

This participant was expressing her empathy for police who are in dangerous situations in their job while trying to return home safely to their families. Interestingly though, she also notes that police should not act as if they are invincible (like a "superhero") and should use caution when approaching residents on the street. Similarly, older participants more often thought that police treat Black residents as individuals during interactions without relying on group-based racial stereotypes:

> "Well, I guess each individual [that an officer has] to treat is different. Because they might get an individual that's violent and stuff. [Police] got to handle that one different (and)

> got to treat each individual different as they come upon them. [...] but since they see so much crime all over, a lot of people, they just turn against the police. [...] Some people just see the bad side of the police. A lot of people don't see the good side, the good things they do for the city. So, you got to weigh it on both ends." —**63-year-old female**

About three-quarters of participants did not experience police use of force, but men did more often than women. Still, most participants could point to witnessing or hearing about local incidents where police used excessive force on a Black person. Many pointed to the notorious "knockers" or "jump-out boys," plainclothes officers who were known for patrolling crime hotspots while engaging in harassment and stop-and-frisk. They also cited the Gun Trace Task force and death of Freddie Gray as salient examples of BPD's abuse of power, arguing that officers commonly engage in "rough rides" with Black residents. As a 64-year-old male recounted:

> "I mean cause, when I was coming up... you'd be on the corner. [Officers] say, 'Get off the corner,' [...] and if you want to be bad, they'll come over there and slam your ass up against that wall [...] Yes, they will. Don't let the paddy wagon come...they ain't got no cushions in there nowhere, all steel. And they throw you in that. I done seen plenty of people get thrown up in that damn thing,

drunk as hell, and they'll pick your ass up. [....] Face battered up. Just being thrown in the paddy wagon. [...] You slide across that, that tear your skin all up! Oh man! It's unbelievable! [...] They slinging around the corner and all that shit...The rough ride? Yeah! That shit done happened all the damn time!"

The perception of racial bias in police treatment was an overarching theme that permeated most interviews. Interestingly, only 35% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that "police are more willing to threaten them than most other people." This percentage was considerably higher among male participants (47.5% compared to 35%). However, even though most reported that they did not personally perceive a higher likelihood of mistreatment, many participants provided examples of perceived mistreatment or bias they had either experienced or witnessed. For example, participants could often point to differences in police behavior and say they felt as though police viewed them monolithically as Black people, invoking stereotypes of race and place to justify their criminalization. As one 47-year-old-man rationalized:

"You're Black, you're on the corner, you've got to be doing something wrong. I can't be just visiting my brother just to check on him. I just got off of work. [...] But, when [police] come up on the corner, [they] don't see a concerned brother checking on his brother. [They] see two assholes out here on your corner, hustling, violating. You know what I'm saying?"

This idea of facing potential police harassment while doing mundane activities was expressed by both men and women in the sample. They pointed to examples of unexpected, negative police interactions while performing everyday activities, such as traveling to work, driving, sitting on the front steps, walking in public space, or spending time with family or friends. Many felt that police treated them with a presumption of guilt:

"Yeah, or [police] assume if you're in this area, you might not even live here, but if you're in this area, you gotta be here for drugs. [...] It's for some nefarious reason. ...you might just be passing through, you might just came from visiting a loved one. ...Everybody's not on Pennsylvania Avenue to buy drugs or buy sex. [...] We just goin' to the store." **—53-year-old, female**

"Me in my house, re-potting my flower pots out front, and I came outside, and [police] jumped out on me, thought I was somebody else. [...] 'Put your hands up.' I put my hands up. Then I put my hand down... 'Put your hands back up!' [...] I think they was tormenting me, playing around, because at the end they really knew it wasn't me. And I felt so, so bad behind that." **—55-year-old, female**

"Before me and my husband got married, we were leaving the house in a middle-class North-East neighborhood over by Morgan State, and I don't know, [the officer] was coming down the street, we were getting in a fancy red sports car, and he made us get out of the car and sit on the curb and asking all these questions. Like we're going

on a freaking date, like we work... Like, what in the world is going on? And [my husband] was traumatized, we had to go down and file a complaint... [the officer] was so racist and so disrespectful to him."
—55-year-old, female

Participants were able to identify several differences in police treatment, which were often shaped by a) the race of officers and citizens involved and b) the neighborhood where the interactions occurred. Men and women often cited examples of police treating white civilians with more compassion and respect during interactions, leaving Black civilians left unheard or disregarded:

"It's day and night. If you get into a situation or an altercation with a white person, and the police pull up, the Black person's not even heard. They instantly go to the white people. [...] It doesn't matter what happened, they are automatically the victim. It has even gotten to the point where... even if it's a situation where a person is totally wrong, I would rather avoid calling the police, because I figure in some way it's going to be my fault." **—30-year-old male**

"They're privileged, we're not. So, it shows all the time. The police seem to be more open to listening to the white person's full complaint before interjecting, whereas if it's a Black person, they're going to hear a little bit but for the most part, they're going off of what dispatch told them and that's how they're going to react."
—35-year-old female

These negative interactions were often exacerbated in predominantly white and/or commercialized neighborhoods (e.g., Federal

Hill, Fells Point, Inner Harbor, Canton)—where Black participants often were treated as being "out of place" and thereby "up to no good" (Anderson, 2015). As a 75-year-old male explained:

"You see, and the way that police treat people in Park Heights. [...] ... in Park Heights, just like Southwest, just like Sandtown...like Belair Edison. These intense Black pockets get a tremendous amount of police attention. And justice does not seem to be part of their operating procedure [...] The reason why you don't hear about the stuff that goes on in Roland Park [predominately white and wealthy neighborhood] is because the police [stop] people on the way to Roland Park. 'You ain't going into Roland Park, why you here?' [...] Above Northern Parkway is a very solid Jewish community. Below Northern Parkway is the Black community. [...] Very different policing. ...On the Jewish section of northern Parkway, they have a citizen patrol that is out there working very closely with the police. When they see some Black person...walking on Park Heights Avenue above Northern Parkway, they stop it."

A 39-year-old male echoed and explained policing as a feature of racialized social control: "They will allow [whites] to police their neighborhood, but they will never allow us to police this neighborhood."

Police are viewed to be "intolerant" of crimes in predominantly white and/or commercialized neighborhoods, while they allow crime to go unchecked in Black areas of the city:

"...it's equality for every community. [Police shouldn't] go to one community, and treat them different, because if

somebody is down Fells Point selling drugs...you're not going to sit there and watch them sell drugs. But you'll come in the hood and sit there. [...] The location determines how they're going to police."
—65-year-old male

Some participants could even recount being victimized or solicited for drugs while police were present:

"...during one of the instances...I was shot, the police was sitting right there. [...] Four [police] cars deep. And let this man pull up, jump out... Now, I understand he had an... assault rifle. I understand that he ain't see y'all sitting across the street. [...] Y'all let him shoot all of us. [...] They let [him] get away."
—39-year-old male

Calling the Police

Only 22 out of 93 Black residents we interviewed (or 24%) said they would readily call the police if they witnessed a crime.

Findings reveal variations in if and under what conditions participants would call the police. Only 22 out of 93 Black residents we interviewed (or 24%) said they would readily call the police if they witnessed a crime. On the questionnaire, 18% indicated that they called the police in the past year and 33% indicated that they considered calling but did not. The latter figure is somewhat misleading, as our interviews revealed that there are many situations in which our participants witnessed a crime or were personally victimized but never thought to call the police. As one woman said, in the Black community, contacting police is widely perceived as a last resort, even in dangerous or life-threatening situations. Much of the time, participants chose to handle situations informally, typically by relying on themselves or engaging in "self-help" strategies (Gau & Brunson, 2015).

For example, when asked how she'd respond if robbed, a 29-year-old female explained:

"I would beat them up. I would beat that sucker... I feel like I have to take care of everything myself. And it's best I be prepared to do so rather than be disappointed by a cop again."

This same participant said that she would call the police in the case of a car accident. Similarly, a 57-year-old male explained that he only calls the police when the incident seems beyond anything he can handle on his own:

"I call out of necessity, because it might be something that I can't handle. And for the most part, if I could go out there and say some words, and it could dissolve it, I ain't calling the police."

In the context of violence, trying to help the victim by calling the police was perceived as risky, since the perpetrator could then target the caller.

Another 59-year-old woman echoed that after she had been frustrated about the police not showing up for domestic violence situations, *"I'm going to tell one of my cousins or Imma tell my father so they can beat him up."*

The reluctance to call the police was connected to negative perceptions of the police, including that the police would escalate rather than de-escalate the situation (including concerns that the police would use unnecessary force). In addition, the reluctance was connected to perceptions that the police could not be trusted to keep the caller anonymous, would take too long to get there if they arrived at all, and/or that they would simply be ineffective. A 41-year-old male told us about his experience calling 911 seeking help because his partner injured him, but the police showed up and arrested him instead:

> *"The [police] say 'well she said you did something to her.'" I said, "How, when I called the ambulance for me? [laughter]."*

Domestic violence situations are notoriously and historically difficult calls for police, who typically struggle to assess the level of threat or the victim-perpetrator dynamic (Myhill & Johnson, 2016; Eigenberg et al. 2012).

However, this fear that the police would escalate a minor situation into one that leads

to the arrest of the caller or of a person (typically a black male) who should not be arrested was a common concern. One 30-year-old male explained this problem:

> *You know, it might be a situation whereas though...I just want somebody to just go. I just want them to leave. I think, 'Damn if I call the police they'll...' You know what I'm saying? I just wanted them to leave, but they might find a reason, and now they jammed up, might slam them on the ground and all this stuff, you feel me?*
>
> Interviewer: *Like escalate, yeah.*
>
> *Yeah. You know what I'm saying? I'm trying to deescalate the situation, not intensify.*

Nevertheless, 41% of the sample (N=38) reported specific situations in which they would call the police, the most common of which was if their own safety or welfare or that of their family was in jeopardy. For example, one participant, an 81-year-old woman, said she would call the police *"if I'm laying on the floor, lying, dead, about to die..."* and another 43-year-old male said, *"Only way I would call the police if I actually got shot myself."*

Most other situations in which participants reported that they would call the police related to the perceived severity of the crime/incident or the perceived vulnerability of the victim or persons endangered.

For example, eight participants specifically noted overdoses as reasons to call the police and a handful of participants said they would call if the incident involved a child (e.g., kidnapping, missing child, molestation). It is also important to note that these incidents do not present a clear threat to residents calling 911 in terms of being labeled a snitch and risking retaliation. In contrast, violent incidents elicited mixed responses from participants. For example, one 71-year-old black male noted that he would call in the case of a bad car accident where someone may need help but when asked about something like a shooting or a fight, he indicated that he would not call because *"the criminals are watching."* A 76-year-old woman said she was not sure what she would do if she witnessed a violent crime:

> *"I might mind my business. I might go down, as I'm out of they sight, and call the cops. But I ain't going to let them see me do it."*

In the context of violence, trying to help the victim by calling the police was perceived as risky, since the perpetrator could then target the caller.

Kylie Cooper, The Baltimore Banner

Recommendations For Change

Police Training

In all interviews we asked participants how they thought budgetary funds should be invested to improve community safety (regardless of whether these funds are diverted from the police). In our interviews, 46% of residents identified improvements in police training as critical. Without exception, these participants made clear that they did not think police need *more* training; they need *different* training. Aptly summarized by a 37-year-old woman we interviewed: *"Stop putting the quantity, and put more quality, and they will be okay."*

The types of training desired by participants related to situational awareness, emotional intelligence and regulation, cultural competency and empathy, and personal/social skills. There was a lot of overlap between these themes, and many identified these areas because of their perceived connection to being able to de-escalate situations, avoid the use of force, and improve police-community relations and interactions with people who have mental health/substance use issues.

One 45-year-old woman commented that the Baltimore police just need *"people skills. A lot of them just don't have people skills,"* while a 42-year-old man contended that police needed to figure out how to *"discern and diffuse"* interactions among residents. Our participants also perceived the current train-

ing of the BPD to be focused on how to use force (rather than how to avoid it) and how to survive their shifts. A 47-year-old male with a long history of criminal involvement shared:

> *"I think they train in a manner to make it home at night, as opposed to resolving a conflict or resolving a crisis without resorting to violence."* He later went on, *"What about how to get to know a person, how to communicate, healthy communication, stuff like that?"*

There was a strong desire from participants for police to try to relate to the communities in which they serve and to engage respectfully and humanely with those they encounter. A 65-year-old man and community leader described, *"Right now, the uniforms separate us. But you can build quality relationships. So [they] need some courses."* A 37-year-old woman also suggested that they should spend more time in the communities before they ever get assigned to patrol the area, and a 45-year-old man argued that training should be *"focused on the needs of the people in the community."*

Related to these points, participants perceived the police as not reading situations well and therefore responding in ways that were not only inappropriate but also counterproductive or immensely harmful.

One participant called this skill *"discernment."* He further gave an example of differences across age groups, saying a police officer should respond differently to a teenager versus a middle-aged person since *"there's a little bit of logic built into that 35-year-old that they've developed versus this teenager."*

A handful of participants specifically mentioned programs like cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), arguing that such training would help police learn *"how to pause,"* and *"how to acknowledge a situation, rather than being drawn into that situation."*

Invest in Youth Programming

There was a near-unanimous call among our participants to invest in neighborhood youth, whether it be their education (i.e., schools), vocational training, or in recreational or social programming. As a 65-year-old female participant relayed:

"See, that's another thing, long as they got something for the kids to do and keep their mind occupied, that's a big help. But then they got the ones that's older now that don't go to school, not working, don't have nothing to do. So you look for them to be in trouble because they have nothing to do all day long."

"As much as we did not like the police, we loved those police that came [to the recreation center]."

Among the participants, 56% discussed the important role they think youth recreation centers play in reducing or preventing crime in Baltimore City. In the 2000s, Baltimore City experienced a dramatic reduction in its recreation center availability due to a series of budget cuts and political decisions (Bustad & Andrews, 2017). While many shut down entirely, others curbed their hours or started to charge a fee for certain programming available. Notably, since 2021, Baltimore City has opened four additional recreation centers and is planning on opening several more. In 2019, recreation centers also began to extend their hours again. However, the curbing of recreation centers in the 2000s was perceived as directly related to a perceived increase in youth criminal and disorderly activity. As one 60-year-old female said, *"You wonder why there's crime, you taking away stuff for the kids to do."*

These participants discussed the crucial role that recreation centers play in the community, but there was also some variation in the ways in which participants describe this role.

In sum, participants highlighted three main conduits by which recreation centers improve the safety and wellbeing of youth in particular - as well as of the community as a whole. Recreation centers provide (1) a space for pro-social activities for youth, (2) a safe and reliable place for youth to go, and (3) a setting for police to build relationships with youth.

With respect to centers as a space for pro-social youth activities, a 31-year-old woman in our study recollected the following:

> *"I just remember as a kid, coming home from school, we didn't have much to do. We'd go to the rec center. We'd go play basketball... We had a lady there after school that would come to the rec center and do arts and crafts. People don't do that anymore."*

Engaging youth in supervised, prosocial activities is an established protective factor for criminal activity (Weinstein et al., 2014; Osgood et al., 2005). The after-school hours are an especially crucial window for this type of engagement, as many youths are transitioning out of one supervised setting, but it may be hours until parents return home and offer in-home supervision.

A 41-year-old male described how recreation centers "saved [his life]":

> *"[The recreation] centers saved us. Cause after school, we went straight there. We was at the school - we get out like 3pm, get home like 4pm, we at the PAL center or the rec center by 6 and we in there from 6 to 8pm, 6 to 9pm, So that little block of time saved our lives."*

Similarly, participants remarked that the recreation centers were instrumental for the community in terms of being safe and reliable. They were always open, free, and the geographic location did not change.

Parents and children alike could count on these spaces being available. Importantly, the cost associated with recreation centers also represents a disjuncture between the perceptions of some participants and the actual operations of these facilities. Recreation centers in Baltmore City do not charge admission, although several mothers in our sample remarked on how, in an economically distressed city, charging admission was problematic because "some parents don't have the 4 or 5 dollars." However, certain programs such as athletic leagues may charge a fee. The 41-year-old male participant quoted above also remarked on the Police Activities League (PAL) centers, which were managed by the BPD and offered a space for police to engage in recreation with local youth. Of those who spoke about recreation centers, 20% highlighted the utility of improving police-youth relations in this way. A 33-year-old male described the experience when he was younger:

"You were able to talk to the police. They don't have their police uniforms on. They're out there with their sweatpants on being regular people, you know what I mean? And then you get to know them. And then they're, like I said, embedded in the community."

A 39-year-old male also described how interactions with police inside the recreation center were disconnected from the street interactions or experiences. The recreation centers provided a different setting or space in which youth and police could interact as people rather than as police and "delinquents" as many felt they were perceived by police in the street context. One respondent aptly summarized:

"As much as we did not like the police, we loved those police that came [to the recreation center]."

Ulysses Muñoz, The Baltimore Banner

Concluding Comments

It is hardly surprising that Black residents of Baltimore have great concerns about the quality of policing in the city. However, we believe that these interviews provide useful guidance about the nature of those concerns and what citizens believe can be done to address them. On the one hand, many residents see the police as too passive about crime, particularly drug dealing. On the other hand, substantial percentages of our participants reported interactions in which they felt the police treated them harshly because they were Black and would have acted differently if they were white. Notably, perceptions of police engaging in excessive force, acting disrespectfully, and in ways that were racially disparate largely mirrored other recent studies in Baltimore, with most of our participants indicating these problems either in the questionnaire or during the interview.

Building on prior studies, our in-depth interviews explored the complexity of these perceptions and the lived experiences of Black individuals in Baltimore, many of whom detailed negative personal encounters with the police. Yet, attitudes were not wholly negative – across or even within individuals – even for those who reported experiencing violence at the hands of police. For example, some participants attributed those experiences to the actions of one or two police officers, whereas others generalized to the police department as a whole or saw these experiences as part of a systemic issue. There was also a wide-

spread frustration in our sample for police to "stop sitting in their cars" and to do more to protect the community. At the same time, there was apprehension or fear about what "doing more" could look like. That is, participants wanted police to act – but not to act unconstitutionally, unfairly, or aggressively.

Another parallel with prior research was the common reluctance to call the police. In addition, both Foglesong and colleagues (2019) and we found that participants were less likely to call the police for a violent crime than for less serious issues. Indeed, our results echoed the same concerns related to fears that the police would not protect information of the caller/witnesses and that there would be retaliation from the community.

Similar to prior research on policing in Baltimore, most of our residents held a strong desire for police to engage more with the community and build positive relationships with the neighborhoods in which they are (or should be) embedded. Given the mostly negative attitudes toward the police at the same time, this may indeed be a tall order for the police to undertake. However, most participants understood that policing was a difficult task and that many officers aimed to do their job well and to protect the community. They believed that police should engage in training that focuses less on enforcement and more on the human side of the job and how to respect and effectively communicate with civilians. We also note that, in general, the

residents we spoke with had little to no knowledge of training content for BPD officers. Therefore, although the BPD may be engaged in training along these dimensions, there may be a disjuncture between what the BPD is doing vs. what members of the community are experiencing – or thinking. These disjunctures could provide valuable intervention points for the BPD to improve communication and information sharing with the community.

This is one of the key contributions of our study, which was to explore potential avenues for reform. In addition to differential training, our results suggest investment in youth programs was perceived as critical by Black Baltimoreans. However, this finding may also be an area where perception does not neatly map onto the reality of the current landscape in Baltimore City. Namely, many of our participants perceived that recreation centers were currently charging admission fees and were not aware of the city's efforts to open new recreation centers. Thus, getting this information out to residents could improve perceptions of the city and also increase participation in these centers.

In sum, responses of residents in our sample suggest the need for police reform, but also a need to focus elsewhere to enhance public safety and community wellbeing.

Ulysses Muñoz, The Baltimore Banner

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