



PRESS RELEASE

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Policy Matters reports point the way for Cleveland officials to reimagine public safety

Two reports released today by Policy Matters Ohio examine the city of Cleveland's police budget and explore proven alternatives for responding to certain emergencies and building safe communities.

Senior Project Director Wendy Patton shows that 56% of the city's \$665 million General Revenue Fund (GRF) — which is funded by local taxes — goes toward the Department of Public Safety, including the fire department, police, animal control and other divisions. The Cleveland Division of Police (CDP) is the largest part of the Public Safety Department budget, at \$218.2 million in 2021. The CDP budget alone is one-third of the GRF - the single largest allocation.

“The safest communities are ones with great schools, parks, well-paying jobs, good public transit and easy access to medical care,” Patton said. “Too many families and neighborhoods in Cleveland lack these basic ingredients. City officials have seen the police as the key to public safety, but different investments are needed – particularly given that the CDP has a troubled history in Black and brown neighborhoods.”

Patton said city officials can use American Rescue Plan funds to lay the foundation of neighborhood public safety. “City council members should work with their constituents on plans to restore health and safety, particularly in neighborhoods most affected by violence,” she said.

Patton found that two-thirds of uniformed CDP officers are white while two-thirds of city residents are Black or brown. Cleveland is the only city in the nation that has signed a consent decree with the Department of Justice (DOJ) twice for excessive use of force: in 2015 and in 2002. Since 2010, the city has paid a total of \$46.9 million for judgements and settlements due to police misconduct, Patton found, with a few increasingly large settlements driving the costs in recent years. Under the current consent decree, the city has so far reached operational or general compliance with just 37% of 255 monitored provisions. City officials and the DOJ extended the timeframe for compliance from 2020 to 2022.

The consent decree is forcing CDP to be more accountable to the public, but some community groups want the city to go further. Citizens for a Safer Cleveland, a local coalition that includes families of people killed by the police, collected signatures for a November ballot issue that would make the consent decree's Community Police Commission (CPC) permanent and independent, and exercise ultimate oversight on police discipline and policies. The ballot issue would also give more power to the Office of Professional Standards, which investigates complaints against police officers, and the Civilian Police Review Board, which recommends discipline. The

Cuyahoga County Board of Elections recently certified the signatures ensuring the issue will go to voters in the fall.

Policy Matters Researcher Piet van Lier found the city has already embraced some effective alternatives to an armed response, including a program that sends mental health professionals to certain calls along with police officers. Cleveland nonprofits also operate crisis lines and mobile teams for people experiencing mental health crises and homelessness. Yet the city still relies on armed police officers to respond to emergencies, even though van Lier's analysis of CDP data suggests that as many as one-third of emergency calls could be handled by unarmed responders. CDP used force in only 1% of calls involving people experiencing mental health crises and only in fewer than 3% of those calls the person had a gun or knife.

“Across the country, and even in Cleveland, we are seeing proven strategies for dealing with people in crisis that don't include an armed response,” van Lier said. “In Oregon, the cities of Eugene and Springfield dispatched teams of medical staff and mental health workers to 24,000 nonviolent calls in 2019 – only 311 needed police backup. Other, larger cities are implementing similar approaches. The consent decree on its own won't transform policing, and Clevelanders are demanding a different direction. It's time for our city leaders to take a new approach to building safe, vibrant communities.”