Engaging the Public to Re-Imagine Public Safety in Akron – Virtual Focus Groups

Summary Report

September 27, 2021

Dear President Sommerville and Members of the Akron City Council,

Below we present our summary report of the data collected from virtual focus groups with community members living or working in the City of Akron. In what follows, we provide information on the background of the project, it's purpose, our research procedure, and a summary of results including participant demographics and representative thematic quotes. Please note that this project was conducted with the approval of The University of Akron's Institutional Review Board (IRB #20210219) which protects the confidentiality of the participants by removing their names, and any other identifying characteristics, from this or any other future reports, publications, or presentations.

We thank all of the participants who took the time to contribute their stories, thoughts, and recommendations for enhancing public safety in the City of Akron. We also thank the Council for its support of this project and for the opportunity to contribute to this endeavor. We are particularly grateful for the City Council's support of student involvement in this project. These talented University of Akron students were an invaluable part of our research team and participated in both the data collection and analysis phases of the project. All members of the research team are listed below.

Sincerely,

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Executive Summary

As noted in the "Report of Recommendations" presented by the Akron City Council's Special Committee on Re-Imagining Public Safety on January 25, 2021, the Council formed the special committee in July 2020 to begin a process of participating in community conversations about policing and public safety. Following the public meetings held by the Council in Fall 2020 and the release of the report with initial recommendations, the focus turned toward additional means of public engagement. With the approval of the Akron City Council, a team of faculty and student researchers from The University of Akron were assembled in mid-January 2021 to develop the research process through which virtual focus groups would be conducted.

The current report summarizes the research design, the analytic procedures, and the final results. In general, the results provide community member support for many, but not all, of the initial recommendations presented by the Council. Thematic analysis of the focus group data indicated that focus group participants have experienced a declining sense of safety within the city over time and are concerned about: (a) police-community relations in regard to trust and respect, (b) the amount and type of policing within the city (e.g., over-policing of particular communities, militarization of police), and (c) issues related to police training and resources. The most prominent solutions suggested by community members involved: (a) alternatives to police response, (b) the need for increased community policing outside of patrol cars, and (c) the need for greater depth and breadth of police training. Illustrative quotes from community members are provided for each of these common themes.

As a group, community members were grateful for the chance to share their experiences and ideas. However, it is important to note that although each city ward was represented, our virtual data collection process took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and its reach and scale was not as large or complete as we would have liked. As such, we urge the Council, as well as other facets of local government and the broad range of Akron-area community organizations to pursue additional means of increasing the frequency and consistency of two-way communication on issues related to equity, trust, and respect in regard to public safety policies and practices.

We thank the Akron City Council for the opportunity to serve the greater Akron community through this work. We are also immensely grateful to all of the Akron residents who contacted us by email and telephone, and who took valuable time out of their days and evenings to share their experiences and insights with us. We conclude with a quote from a community member who succinctly captures one of the overarching sentiments shared by our participants -- that public safety is, indeed, an issue that deserves and requires the care and concern of *all of us*.

> *This is not a police problem; this is a community problem and the community needs to find the solution, otherwise we're never going to solve it.*

Engaging the Public to Re-Imagine Public Safety in Akron – Virtual Focus Groups

<u>**Research Purpose and Procedure**</u>
The approved purpose of the project was to engage adult members of the City of Akron community in focus group conversations via Zoom to learn more about the community's concerns and suggestions regarding public safety in Akron. Twenty-one focus group interviews, each lasting approximately one hour, were conducted between March 20th and May 11th, 2021. All focus groups were led by a trained moderator who asked the same series of questions (see Appendix A) to each set of participants.

Participants were recruited through various means, including: press releases from The University of Akron and the Akron City Council, related Akron Beacon Journal press coverage, and social media posts disseminated through Facebook and other platforms. Participation information was also posted on the Akron City Council website and Council members, as well as members of the city's Racial Equity and Social Justice Task Force were encouraged to share the information through normal means of communication with their constituencies. Finally, virtual and printed flyers with information about the focus groups and how to participate were distributed to a range of Akron-area community organizations. Leaders of organizations with a history of experience in the area of public safety were also invited to participate.

Community members who were over the age of 18 and either lived or worked in the City of Akron were welcome to be part of the focus group interview. Those who were interested in participating contacted the project office by email or telephone. In some cases, members of the community who were not interested in or able to participate in the virtual interviews left phone messages, email messages, or shared their ideas with the Principal Investigator by phone. In each case, these comments were recorded in written form and became part of the project's data. Here too, identifying information was removed prior to analysis to protect confidentiality.

Those interested in participating were sent an email link that enabled participants to select a focus group day and time that worked with their schedule as well as IRB-approved documents related to ensuring informed consent for focus group participation. This information included details about the voluntary nature of the study, its purpose, the fact that each focus group would be recorded and transcribed for later analysis, possible risks and benefits associated with participation, and principal investigator contact information were someone to have additional questions. Within 24 hours of the scheduled focus group, each participant received a Zoom link for logging in to the group. Prior to questions being asked, participants were once again informed of the voluntary nature of the process, that the conversation would be recorded and transcribed (with identifying information removed prior to analysis) and that no one needed answer any questions they did not want to and that anyone could leave the focus group at any time. All participants were informed that they could change their screen name or turn off their camera at any point during the conversation. In addition to the standard questions and follow-up from the moderator, participants were encouraged to engage in conversation with one another.

<u>**Focus Group Demographics**</u>
Fifty-six community members from the City of Akron participated in 21 focus group interviews between March 20 and May 11, 2021. Every Akron City Council Ward had at least one

participant in the focus groups with the following breakdown: Ward 1 (13), Ward 2 (10), Ward 3 (5), Ward 4 (4), Ward 5 (3), Ward 6 (2), Ward 7 (7), Ward 8 (7), Ward 9 (3), Ward 10 (1).

Participants ranged from 20-82 years of age with 50 being the median age of our sample. The focus group sample included 12 participants who were 30 years of age or younger, 22 participants between the ages of 31-60 and 22 participants who were 60 years of age or older. As such, our sample is considerably older than the City of Akron as a whole whose population has a median age of 37 (Note: https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/akron-oh-population serves as the source for all demographic comparisons between the focus group sample and the City of Akron population).

Whites were over-represented in the focus group sample. Approximately 73.2% of the sample was white (compared to 60% in the city as a whole), 21.4% Black or African American (compared to 30% in the city) and approximately 5.4% were of Asian or other racial-ethnic backgrounds.

Women constituted 57% of the focus group participants (compared to approximately 52% of the City of Akron as a whole) and men 43% of the sample (compared to 48%).

Analyzing the Data – Identifying Shared Themes
As noted above, all focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed into a written document of the conversation that occurred. The purpose of our analysis of these documented conversations was to identify the most prominent themes, subjects, and ideas that were found across the transcripts as a group. Two faculty members and three undergraduate students engaged in the analytic process we briefly describe below, with each transcript being reviewed at least 2-3 times by at least two team members. Initial read-throughs enabled the researcher to become familiar with the data/information contained in the transcript. Written memos were made during this time to document initial thoughts and to note potential themes observed. The next pass through each transcript, recurrent themes were individually noted in greater detail and linked to the transcript from which it emerged. At this point, team members were asked to share their initial themes with the principal investigator who then synthesized these individual submissions into a set of thematic descriptions. These themes were then shared with the team who reviewed, discussed, and revised the themes to ensure that they reflected what the group had observed in transcribed data. Referential adequacy was then tested with team members returning to the transcripts, applying the thematic codes in their analysis of the data, and specifying the specific line locations of quotes that illustrate an identified theme. Each researcher also searched for recurrent statements that did not fit any of the identified themes to help ensure that key points had not been missed.

Appendix B presents the list of final themes that emerged from this analytic process. The list first identifies issues of concern raised by community participants, followed by solutions proposed. In what follows below, we provide more context, information, and key quotes from community members to illustrate and further explain each theme listed.

RESULTS: ISSUES OF CONCERN RAISED BY COMMUNITY MEMBERS

<u>**Akron's Social/Safety Context**</u>
When asked about their motivation for participating in the virtual focus group, the majority of community members described their **current social or neighborhood context** based on their personal experiences. Not surprisingly given the identified topic, their reasons for participating often revolved around their **decreasing sense of safety** -- particularly within the past few years and months -- as they **see social and economic resources in the city as being in decline**. Participants followed these general statements of motivation with specific stories related the increased level of gun violence occurring around them. References to the broader social and economic context of life in Akron, not just issues directly related to police, were linked to safety concerns and community members' motivation to contribute to the focus groups. Finally, some community members **wanted to be part of a proactive solution**, seeing this initiative and their participation as an attempt to prevent some of what has happened in other communities in regard to policing from occurring in Akron.

Decreasing Safety
I've lived in Akron all my life as well, and I love the city. But in the last three or four years, five years, three people have died within literally again, a few yards of where I work now. One was shot and drove into the gas station and passed, passed away there at the gas pump.

I've been here a little over five years. I first came here and really wasn't too concerned about it, about safety issues, but I'm at the point now I think I'm ready to move.

The amount of gun violence that we've seen in our neighborhoods in the last year since the pandemic, it's kind of skyrocketed and it's in the news every day and…I have seen, you know, just a really large increase in gun violence and deaths. And I don't know that I would feel the same kind of safety anymore back in those neighborhoods where I might have felt okay going for a walk in the morning before work in the past. Maybe not so much now just because I think people have been kind of pushed beyond their limits and it's not as safe as it as it used to be.

The idea of crime and safety, it's always interested me. I feel like we began as a violent society, continued as a violent society, and none of us really know what to do about violence. And I think this past week has kind of emphasized that. So that motivated me.

Declining Resources
What public safety, for me, would look like is housing, good, safe, reliable housing for all, food and healthy food, access to transportation and good jobs for people who want it. It would look like, you know, inclusive social structures for disabled people and neuro atypical people, and you know people with mental health problems and queer people.

Proactive Solutions
[What motivated you to be here?] *Well, I mean the big hot button issues, right now, you know, like I said I lived in Minneapolis for nine years, and now I'm seeing all this stuff happen out there. And, you know, how long before it comes in a more serious way to our front door Akron? As far as you know, police violence and things like that, so this is us getting ahead of it, I hope.*

We protest but I've always been the type of person that I want to directly go to the people that can affect change; the people that can actually set policies….You know, I protest because that's our right, I demonstrate because that's our right, but we still need to get to the people that can actually change the policies, so that's why, since you are saying that this is going directly to city council, and that they can actually do something, check the laws or do some training or something can be enacted…I don't believe in spinning my wheels; I believe in doing things that are actually effective.

Police-Community Relations: Issues Of Trust/Respect and Communication

Focus group participants identified issues of **trust and respect** to be one of the primary areas of concern when they were asked about their experience of feeling safe in Akron. Participants noted problems related to their hesitancy or **fears about calling or interacting with the police due to such status characteristics as their race, gender, sexual orientation or disability** (e.g., autism spectrum disorder). A majority of these comments were linked to stories of previous problematic interactions with police officers. Others emphasized the need for enhancing positive communication and respect among all of those involved in such interactions. A final theme emerging from the analysis involved the **need for more frequent, consistent, and pro-active communication from local government sources** (e.g., mayor, city council members, police) about issues involving public safety and policing, suggesting that current modes of communication are not reaching all audiences.

Trust and Respect
When law enforcement's involved, I feel uneasy due to just, [how] I am in the world. You see, you don't know if this is a good cop, bad cop or how the situation's gonna end…A typical traffic stop can go left completely, and it didn't used to be like that. Within the current environment of the world, it is just like now, you're pulled over, and you don't know if this is the last time you're driving or something like that.

Yes, the police officer is going to be respectful to you and the police officer and law enforcement has to say, I am going to be respectful to this person. But you also have to be proactive and have community commitment of all of us saying, I am going to be respectful during this interaction as well.

Fears
I called the police, because [of] the kids fighting in front of the house and [the dispatcher] talked to my mother and me so badly. [When the police came] they were just so nasty to everybody, and I mean I live in a neighborhood that it's all people my mom's age and [they are] elderly now because we lived there for 30, 35 years. So, everybody is older, it's all grandparents. You know and how skeptical older black people are already. Skeptical of the police, because of what they dealt with. Not all police are like that, but I'm just saying it's like the experiences of those instances; it makes you not want to call the police at all or have any interaction with them. And we shouldn't because we need the police, we need them to protect us because society would devolve into chaos without laws. We need them, but they act as if they're occupiers not as if they're there to help us, as if we're an inconvenience.

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My oldest has never had a run in with the police. However, we were talking, and I said to him, how do you feel about the police? Do you feel like you can trust them if something was wrong, and he said no. And he said, Mom, ever since, ever since they got killed, I think he said Tamir Rice. He said ever since then, that changed my whole perception. And I can't make that any better for him, there's nothing I can do to change that. But if there's no policeman that's making the effort also to get to know these young people…This is a young man who is in college, who has gotten his bachelor's degree getting ready to graduate with his master's degree. Does he look intimidating? Yes, because he is tall, because he's brown, because he's got dreads, because he's got a beard, you know, but still, this is an educated young man who for reasons beyond our imagination, could be subject to something horrible, not just from the police, but just because of anything. But I can't change his perception of the police because of what he saw back with Tamir Rice. And I think that's just a sad thing that he feels that way. And I don't know how to make that any better, but I can't do it. The police have to do it. They have to make it better. They have to reach out to all of these people that feel like they are disregarded or always targeted…They have to change the uniform, not being all black, wear a white shirt or something so that they're not so ominous, then you're just always afraid of them, and really make that effort. And again, the young people have to make that effort too, to want to be involved and want to get to know [the officers], but I think that the police have to make the first step.

Another thing is like dealing with white cops or different cops dealing with people of color. Because black people are probably the most conservative people that I know and…since a lot of cops I know are conservative, if they, you know, if they just took the time to deal with black people or deal with different people of color they would see how much we have in common, how we are most alike in a lot of our views on society and a lot of times we agree. But it's just that the manner that [the police] do it, and the way that they treat us. They treat us as if we're aliens, as if we're foreign, as if we're something that is just so far removed from what their lives are.

I know a lot of trans queer folks who have had either bad experience with the COPs or just heard enough stories to where they don't ever feel comfortable turning to them so regardless of the situation, you know if your life is in danger, you feel threatened or you feel unsafe a lot of these folks don't feel like they have any recourse they don't feel like they can call the police, and (if) they do they think that (things are going to get) worse….There is no other recourse for these folks and so that, for me, really hits home when you know the, the only group of folks you know you're told to, you're supposed to call for help. When you just know, deep down that they're not going to help you or make the matter any better, then you're left with nothing, and so, for me that matters, almost as much as the negative interactions with the police.

There's lots of balance here that we have to deal with, but we need to stop the pretextual stops. Unless, you know, that failure to use a turn signal or that equipment violation, unless that was somehow interfering with the order of traffic or it was going to cause an accident, why are we using that as a basis to stop a vehicle and then that creates distrust? Of course, those citizens [who are stopped and searched] are walking away from that stop thinking: 'Well, that was a terrible interaction with the police. They pulled me over for not using a turn signal to change lanes on the road. And then everything escalated from there. And then they found nothing, and they let me go because they found nothing. But it was a half hour of terrible interaction. So, I have a natural tendency not to like and to distrust the police.' And unfortunately, that happens in

our minority communities a lot more than it happens in my community…So we have to kind of balance the need to ask the police to be responsible and respectful. And we also then need to deal with our communities. And that's going to be not just the police, that's everyone. The churches, the schools, everyone trying to educate our young people to stay away from the guns. We have way too many guns.

Communication
The communication that comes back to the citizens is not timely. They make projects out of everything; everything doesn't have to be a project there should be ongoing problem-solving.

. . .if the mayor and his staff at the PD were to issue statements weekly. Say, you know, just like the pros and cons in the Beacon, "Hey, we've had this issue this is what we've done." If they communicated back to us, maybe the citizenry wouldn't feel so left out.

I want to go back to the accountability and then the transparency. There has to be truth. When there's not truth, and there's cover up and stories and things are made to look so great, when in reality that's really not happening, not to the poor community, not to the black community not to the LGBTQ community. When that's happening there's not truth. An auditor is fine, but the accountability, there needs to be perhaps quarterly, what were the number of uses a force and what was the outcome of those uses of force?

Over and Under-Policing, Militarization and the Need for a Different Response

When participants were asked specifically about their experiences with policing in Akron, there was a complex juxtaposition of **experiences related to both over-policing and under-policing**. Community members shared experiences of feeling harassed or subject to unnecessary police intervention combined with the seeming lack of police presence in communities where it is most needed. An additional theme emerged regarding **the armed, militarized feel of the police when a more engaged, member-of-the-community presence would create a greater sense of safety.** Anticipating many of the solutions listed below, a final theme emerged around the **inappropriateness of having police respond to situations that are essentially problems rooted in the lack of social or economic resources and mental health issues rather than criminal behavior.** In these situations, standard police procedure is experienced as harmful rather than helpful.

Over-policing and under-policing
I think we don't have enough policemen on site. Used to be, we would see policeman parked in our parking lots they were very visible, some of them were in the actual police cars or they were in unmarked cars we don't see that much anymore.

So I've lived here for 43 years and never called the police, other than my son's bike was stolen. So, for the first time in 43 years I called the police, not 911, I called the business number. And it was answered by man, who said that he was answering for both police and fire. And I started explaining to him about [the pop-up party] going on and finally he said, "Well, it's a really busy night, they probably won't have time to go over there anyway." So, I did not feel safe. You know, my concern was there's been gunfire a lot in the last few months. My concern was, you know, this

was getting louder and louder, and I could hear some arguing. My concern was that it could potentially turn into gunplay. He was not interested in any way or in trying to get anything resolved… it was "I don't know what you're talking about and nobody is available anyway," so, you know, we're just pretty much on our own.

Militarization
You know if you're wearing armor, if you're dressed in black, these are all signifiers of intimidation. So, to place yourself in the community as basically an occupying force, regardless of what the, you know, what the circumstances are in that community, that sends a message. And, you know, maybe if you're on a bike, maybe if you're not wearing a black uniform…maybe that's a step, you know away from, you know, from this sort of over-militarized, over-equipped kind of response to things.

My experience is that they're always armed to the teeth and, you know the expression, when you're a hammer everything starts to look like a nail. I think that that's maybe that's some of our problem, some of our difficulty with policing, with law enforcement, and just with how the interaction with police goes with, you know, with everyday citizenry is there's a little bit of hammer-nail happening.

I'd like to see the de-escalation of the uniforms, the cars, the black uniforms, the helmets. I think I think anybody, myself included in a certain situation, would feel angry simply because I've got a fairly violently dressed individual that's facing me. And I think we need to de-escalate the uniforms. I really do. There's got to be ways to do that and still have the safety officer have their cuffs, have their mace, have their arms. I respect that, but we've got to tone that down.

I think we could spend less than that money on high tech militarization I'm not saying that we under-equip our police force, by any means, but they certainly don't need what they have to the degree that they have it.

Different Responses
Why are the police, the answer to everything? You know, if someone is homeless, or if someone may be having some mental health issues, the police should not be the first line of defense for that…Instead of investing such a huge budget into police force, maybe putting that into different community programs, mental health programs having, you know, crisis counselors available…You know, in a public place that police, you know, someone with a gun, is not going to be someone that's going to really and truly know how to de-escalate the situation; know how to talk to someone, how to relate to them instead of, what I think has become so much of a threat is all of a sudden, having police on the scene, you know, all of a sudden, people are very, very threatened in that situation.

Personally, in the work that I do, again with the houseless folks, multiple times we've dealt with police harassment, police threatening to take in our cars, because of where we park, even though all we're doing is passing out food and tents and things to people who need it. There's been several times, where we've dealt with ostensibly undercover cops trying to either buy or sell weed to folks who are out here, you know, serving food or giving supplies to houseless people when they're clearly, you know, not houseless folks themselves, nobody recognizes them. And so we, you know, just doing this work, you kind of deal with that regular harassment. Obviously

we're not doing anything illegal, we're not trying to do anything illegal, we're just trying to help folks.

The ideal for me would be less policing with programs in which the community plays an active role. And I mean the community of people who live in that neighborhood, in the community, an active role and maybe professionals along with them. Call coming in would go through the appropriately trained and then filter to social needs….the police could focus more on actual crime, serious crime.

Well, I do have a little personal experience with…my son had a little….break with reality, or so were his last words to me on the phone were, "Dad, can you get me to a hospital?" So, I drove down to his apartment and couldn't get him to answer the door, couldn't find him, so I called 911. Fire and police showed up. I explained to the dispatcher what the issue was and I ended up finding him while they were still there, he came walking down the street. Dipping his finger in puddles and, you know, drinking the water and whatnot. He was just not in his right mind. And the police, and we finally got him into the yard, the police, they stood by and were laughing at me or maybe at something else, I don't know, doesn't matter, don't care. But long story short, he ended up in handcuffs behind his back, strapped to a stretcher on his back and taken to a hospital where I was not allowed to see him and…Putting myself in that position, even in my right mind, that would just send me over the edge. So, a better response to that, I think, would have been somebody, counselor, mental health, whatever, but, handcuffed in the ambulance wasn't really necessary. The ambulance may be, but, you know, police? No, they didn't need to be there… Yeah, so, if we could respond with more appropriate, with the correct resources, I guess would be the biggest thing.

Resource and Training-related Issues
The final question asked in all of the focus groups was specifically about police response to calls involving mental health issues and domestic disturbances. Concern that communities may be "asking cops to do too much" in regard to these types of societal problems fully entered the national conversation on policing when voiced by Dallas police chief, David Brown, in July 2016. Or, as one of our community members put it:

> *A police officer should not be a Swiss army knife.*

Although it is difficult to disentangle problem-identification from suggested solutions (see sections below), participants across the focus groups raised concerns **about whether the police have adequate resources and/or training to respond adequately to calls that reflect social problems rather than serious criminal behavior**. The types of issues noted by community members included homelessness, mental health crises, domestic violence/abuse, and drug or alcohol addiction. Some raised **concerns about police hiring, training, and accountability** in regard to these issues while others noted that the **police should not have sole responsibility** for our community's response to these problems. Finally, community members returned to issues of trust and respect in this context as they **discussed the need for a different type of resources or training to address systemic racism and other forms of inequitable responses/interactions** depending on the neighborhood.

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Other Professionals
I talked to police officers on the phone, they'll say you have to come down to the station, we're too short-handed we have too many violent crimes going on, okay? My biggest concern is properly handling people before they get into the system. So, if it's mental health, if it's a homeless issue, or if it's some other issue, if there's some way to divert or use other resources to help cure that ill, if you will. I feel like police, policing, is like the sort of last resort. You know, if you need the police, then that's what they're there for, but some of these other [issues], really what I would consider more social service type needs, we should be addressing in other ways, and I know, I know the city has been working to try and do that.

. . a mentally ill person, a person going through a crisis, they themselves might be the person calling the police to get help, or their family members are calling the police, because they're in a mental health crisis and they end up shot, they end up harmed somehow, I think that we woefully undertrain police in this country, in general, compared to most developed countries around the world. And the majority of their training comes in weapons training and it's not in de-escalation, it's not in mental health care. You know, we had incidents nationwide about you know, an autistic child getting slammed to the ground, or you know, an autistic individual who might not be able to comply right away, and they get harmed right or they get shot.. . .I would like to see, you know, a shift towards more investment in mental health, where social workers, mental health professionals, they are the ones, responding to those sort of calls. Nobody should fear that, because their child is having a mental health crisis or is maybe off some sort of medication, and they call the police for help that they now have to worry that that person ends up dead....You shouldn't be worried about that when you're calling for help.

Training & Resources
I think that everybody on the force should have that training ..., but then there also needs to be a different group that is sent out in those specific situations when the call goes in...Minimally they should all have basic training and how to handle and help people dealing with [a] traumatic event. I mean, I was just thinking of my daughter, one of my daughters was in a car accident on the expressway and she was having a panic attack in her car and we happened to be behind her. And the police officer that was there, I mean it was a 17-year-old kid having a panic attack, and [the police officer] was looking like he had no concept of how to address that with her in the middle of this. I mean, it was horrible to watch, he's yelling at her. And so I'm thinking like he's trained to go and be the first responder there, but he had no concept of just how to talk a teenage girl down.

Police put their life on the line, so do firefighters, so do nurses nowadays with COVID, so do teachers, but police especially are out in the front. It's a dangerous thing to do, it's very tense, it causes a lot of family disruption, just to live through it. I don't think we prepare them adequately, we don't give them the right resources to handle it, and then we set up a dynamic and are surprised when some, someone goes awry.

You know, the more dangerous aspect is the 20- and 25-year veterans that have been doing the same old, same old for 25 years and it's much easier for them to just pull out a weapon and solve it, rather than de-escalate the situation. How do we work with the union and go through that? And it's not just the police department, we've seen a lot of issues of racism rampant in the

Summit County Sheriff's Department, and I think that, yes your local APD but it has to be in lockstep with Summit County Sheriff's, it can't be isolated.

SOLUTIONS PROPOSED BY COMMUNITY MEMBERS

As illustrated in some of the preceding quotes, community members frequently followed their identification of a problem with proposed solutions. Some of these comments will be shared below in relation to specific Council recommendations. However, the three most common themes emerging from the data also correspond closely with some of the Akron City Council's recommendations for **1) developing alternatives to relying solely on a police response, 2) increasing community policing, and 3) enhancing/expanding resources and training of police officers**.

One additional theme that emerged was the need for members of the local government to complement continuing community conversations with **specific steps being taken to correct the identified problems**.

We really need to quit imagining and make things happen. It's time. And so obviously there's many more experts in the field that can deal with this. And I hope that we all do. There's obviously funding coming from this COVID relief package. One hundred fifty-three million dollars, I understand, for just the city.

I grew up in the city, I was a kid I'm lucky I didn't get killed, but things were a lot safer back then and I don't sleep at night thinking about it, and I hope they [the City Council] don't either, but let's start doing more than talking.

Developing Alternatives To Police Response
The most prominent theme throughout the focus group conversations concerned **the need to invest in alternate responses to community members' calls for help**. This point can be found in a number of the preceding quotes and it was also commonly noted prior to asking for specific solutions to calls related to mental health or domestic violence.

I think I think even the best of us have biases. And so, what I learned is that people don't want to see someone die on TV, national TV, it unsettles us, you know, very much. And I think that's why there was such an outcry. And to me, that says there's something wrong with policing. They're trying to do a job that belongs to people in the medical field or the psych, you know, the psychiatric field. And I've never understood why that falls on them, other than the fact that in reality, some years ago when we started closing down the beds and facilities, those people ended up on the street. And I don't think that problem ever got completely corrected. And then, of course, poverty and hunger and things put people on the street as well.

I don't think the police are the answer to every problem in the community. And I think a lot of community members a lot of times think the police are the answer, and so the police are called to solve a lot of problems that are not really law enforcement problems. And so I think cops resent

that and they're not really trained to handle a lot of situations that they're called into. How we might do things differently, and it's not that we don't want services, it's just maybe different services can be provided, maybe there's situations where you don't need to send somebody with a gun that's going to cause a response from people that makes the situation worse.

[We've talked about] the idea of the roving van of resources, you know, the idea that there could be social services available to be dispatched in certain situations because I don't disagree with the idea that the two officers maybe shouldn't spend six hours of their shift trying to broker some sort of truce among warring housemates who may or may not be under the influence of drugs and alcohol or dealing with untreated mental illness.

I don't want policing as is. I want there to be some sort of lawful authority [but] I want there to be multiple safety systems for residents. And I don't want that to be policing, I think that the structure policing was born under in the United States is another root issue and when the police force treats civilians as if it is a war zone and they're militarized in their weaponry, that is a problem I don't want. It's hard to even reimagine what that should be. I believe [it] would be a true community-building type of resource and, in my opinion, a much better expenditure of funds would be to invest in people, who are trained in various things people need, like conflict management.

I guess, I would say, I would like to see more investment in culturally and linguistically appropriate social services that could address situations where the police are not needed. That where I think it would, you know, it can look different ways for different communities, but I think there's just a lot of situations where police escalate the situation and there could be some sort of social worker or professional interventionists to help with situations so it doesn't escalate.

Are there any police forces in the country that have a multitude of people who are not policemen and women, but who are trained simply in the mental health? It seems to me like there's an opportunity for Akron to lead the road here…. I think we have a tremendous opportunity to change the whole dynamics here.. . .Maybe a separate vehicle that cruises the city who was able to respond – you know, with lights, sirens, etc., with all that authority -- to something that potentially is a mental health situation. And also be on the spot and giving advice on the way over. And I think the <u>community</u> would certainly respect that person, <u>not</u> [being] in a black uniform and all decked out, with more respect. And probably [the mobile mental health unit] presence would help if they have just an identifying uniform that says that they're there from the mental health industry. I think that in itself would help de-escalate things. Maybe I'm too hopeful, but I think we need to try.

A major thing Council needs to reconsider is allocating funds away from the police department into, you know, community resources, into education, into food security, into housing, into jobs, into just the place. Making places actually welcoming, more beautiful, and more resilient and life affirming.

I've worked in a psychiatric era, taking care of a lot of psych personality disorder, substance abuse folks. And you need to be very patient with them, and you need to not feel rushed. And when you're a police officer and somebody else just got shot, or you know somebody is

unresponsive, or any of those other things, those can distract your approach. And I think anything you can do to cognitively lighten the burden of these folks and get them back to fighting crime and saving lives, I think, is great, you know, so I'm all for it.

Increased Community Policing

Focus group participants also emphasized the need for police to adopt a **more visible, positive, community-focused, "service" orientation** to how they do their jobs and where/how they spend their time on the job – most preferring officers to be **out of their cars, consistently walking or biking specific neighborhoods**. Community members desire a **greater personal, community connection** with specific officers who are personable and who **know and understand the lived experiences of those they are serving.** Despite the 2009 Ohio Supreme Court ruling (Lima v. State) that city employees are not required to live within city limits, participants nonetheless voiced the idea that serving one's own community might bring about more positive, equitable outcomes.

Living in the Community
I think it has been a big misstep that, nationwide, the vast majority of police officers don't live in the communities they serve. They live in surrounding suburban communities and particularly when we're talking about cities and urban centers. So you know, I would like to see more community policing, I would like to see police out in neighborhoods not just driving around... You used to be able to know your kind of neighborhood officer who went around the neighborhood and I think that that not only kind of instills a bit more of the community, but it allows people to not fear the police – that the only time the police come is on the worst day of their lives, you know – but that they see the police officers. So I think community policing should be a big focus.

You know teachers don't live in the city. Police don't live in the city. Yet these are the servants to the people. And yet the people that they serve they don't know. They know that they come into the city between seven to five. And yet they know there's no investment in the place that they serve.

Walking/Biking/Community
We'd like to see more policeman walking or even biking, being around. I think those cars that they are in just seem so remote and kind of scary when they are just driving around and they're sort of dark glass and I don't know, I don't find that very comforting really.

If I'm walking down the sidewalk of downtown Akron, I want to see some cops walking around. Too often, you see them in their cars, and it immediately creates separation between them and the citizens that, you know, they're supposedly protecting...And, you know, in those cases when you see a cop walking around, I naturally feel better about it. I mean, I'm a white male so, you know, take my word with a grain of salt, but when I see a cop in a car, that makes me feel uneasy. Like they're out like scanning, trying to get somebody, trying to find a warrant or something. But when they're out walking around, it feels more communal like they're part of the people.

. . .I would love that, like if I knew that there were possibly police walking around when [my daughter] was going for her run that would definitely, you know, we already take other precautions and she tracks, or like she sends me an APP that tracks where she's at so I know. But if I knew that there would possibly be, you know, occasionally a police officer walking around too, then that would definitely make it…. And a police officer walking around that then she could stop and talk to them…that would definitely make me feel safer.

[In the past], there were one or two police officers assigned to the wards and so you would see these people on foot or on a bike. There was a presence other than when a call for help was made. And one of the cool things, I have children, one of the cool things was that kids had an opportunity to see police other than in an emergency situation; they could see and recognize that police are people. And police have interactions that can be friendly and playful and fun. [An officer] would show up at the community garden gatherings you know, he was fun and friendly it went a long way to making the neighbors feel neighborly too.

How do we get closer to that better feeling of…like, when I went to college here in the late 90s, early 2000s I feel like there were cops all over the place, just walking around interacting with the students at the bars, the local bars downtown and things like that, and you just don't see that anymore. It's very strange.

Years ago…when we're doing some kind of Story Circles in the Exchange House and this like one police officer randomly popped in and then he stayed and did Story Circles with us. And that was like, the vulnerability to come and forget about that there's this boundary, to come into the Circle, to talk in the neighborhood and actually share their personal experience. It was amazing. I felt like more police would probably…That if they do those kind of things more, then it would be…a better neighborhood, I believe.

I grew up East and West Akron, a little bit of both, same thing…I feel like it was more community-based when I was younger, now it's not so much that. Even as a kid I remember at the corner the police used to hand out stickers. You look forward to that, but now you don't even want to go near them at all. When I was a kid, if you wanna go to the store on Fridays, they [the police] would be parking by the corner store giving out stickers. And now, they're not doing that. Now kids, kids are scared. Like it's a different conversation now you have to have with kids, how to conduct themselves around a police officer. You can't even simply play with a toy gun. No, it's not that now, they can't even enjoy that as kids, you know.

Police Training, Skill Development, and Resources
Finally, in addition to proposing the development of alternatives to policing and increased community policing, community members also expressed **the need for members of the police department (including dispatch) to be better trained in a wide variety of interactional skills**, including de-escalation, empathy, conflict mediation, how to engaging more effectively with racially diverse and neuro-atypical populations, Participants often recognized that they were asking officers to develop new sets of competencies but suggested that such skills were more important than the traditional skillsets mastered in the past. Community members also indicated

the need for supportive resources to help maintain the mental health and well-being of police officers themselves.

De-escalation
Well, I know [the police] need to check for safety, but I don't know at what point they're drawing their guns and it just seems like they're drawing their guns too quickly when there could be other ways to deescalate by engaging. It just seems like it goes too quickly, and I don't know what their procedure is now, if they're taking anybody out with them as part of the team? But I do think if they have more experience on trauma and understanding how flashbacks work, things like that, it might help [the police] just to engage in a different way, or at least respect others more.

I feel like crime de-escalation upon intervention from police is crime intervention or crime prevention. So, crime de-escalation is crime prevention.

If, you know, if the primary focus of policing could be training on de-escalation, on humanizing people, on using your words. Using other tactics outside of using a gun.

Dispatchers
First of all, the people who screen these calls need to be more in depth, they need to ask whether or not this is a mental health issue or whether there are any mental health issues involved with this call. That's a simple question that can set up a more positive response.

Training
I have some friends on the autism spectrum. And I was talking with them earlier this month about how many public safety officers are trained to deal with those on the spectrum and with mental health disorders and illnesses. Often, if a person on the autism spectrum gets pulled over, that can be a very extremely overwhelming circumstance and it can send them into an overwhelming reactive mode and that can be interpreted as being violent. So, I would highlight that and there's a good reason for education on what violent looks like versus, you know, a reaction.

I think policing could look different if police were not armed. There's room for community relations to be built on nonviolent approaches for policing. I think it starts with the gun, I also think the car that they drive around is a factor if it was bright pink and played music, I think that would change things. And I think we can raise the bar for training. Especially, you know, a lot of people are looking for good jobs, good paying jobs. Let's give people employment but also you know raise the bar for what policing could be and what public safety could be.

Well, OK, so I think the crisis intervention should be way, way more emphasized than it is that I know there are I think one quarter of the officers on the police force have had crisis intervention training, but I'm still unclear as to how many of those hundred were trained by an outside source or how many of it was train the trainer. . . .So effective crisis intervention, training. What, you know, what else would be awesome is to have serious training in how to control or mitigate personal bias, which is never easy and very much less so when the adrenaline's flowing to make those distinctions…while you can never overcome it, you can train to reduce its effect. So, that would be a key thing. I think the police would benefit hugely from understanding their own history of the police force, where it came from, not Akron's, but policing in general, and the history of the relations between police and minorities, especially in understanding where that

sort of generational heritage comes from, that it's not just here and now [that] we're doing things differently, or things are not as bad as they were…Well, yeah, they're not as bad as they were, but what they were was pretty horrific. And those experiences get passed on and acted upon…

I would just reinforce all human relationships, but especially, mental health and also addiction. There's so much relationship encountering between police and community. I mean, if you're at a desk job, maybe it's minimal, but out there policing with people. Just the basic, nonviolent ways of approaching how to deal with an issue, [of] being able to assess that someone is high… Because they're in a completely different state of mind, and instead of taking a retribution or a punishment approach, to take a mental health approach or a health and healing approach. And also with the LGBT community, to be able to be understanding what their needs are and, of course, the Black community. I mean there's just so much human relations work that should be mandated, not a continuing ED, not an extra.

I know they're very good at training for crisis intervention and they're trying to do more of that. But I mean, anything that can help [the police] handle their job and give them more tools to do their job certainly is helpful. And mental health support for police and other self-care things for polices, I think that's important too.

CONNECTING COUNCIL RECOMMENDATIONS TO COMMUNITY CONCERNS

In their "Report of Recommendations" the Akron City Council's Special Committee on Reimagining Public Safety focused on four areas of interest in regard to the Akron Police Department (APD) and its operations: Accountability and Transparency, Prevention, Personnel and Culture, and Technology and Equipment. As noted in the report, the Council held 22 online meetings during which they talked with liaisons from the APD and other guest speakers to better understand the department's processes in these four areas. The content of these meetings led to the four sets of recommendations outlined in this earlier Council report: https://www.akroncitycouncil.org/media/2623/reimagining-public-safety-report-of-recommendations.pdf.

For those familiar with the recommendations, many of the issues and solutions proposed by focus group participants will sound familiar – as they echo, and thereby reinforce, a number of the Council's own recommendations and the legislative steps that have been taken or are currently being considered. It should also be noted that the results from our qualitative focus groups are also consistent with the quantitative community input gathered during the search for Akron's new Chief of Police. In that report, results indicated that the Akron Police Department's top three priorities should be: (1) Reducing police use of force, (2) Reducing racial disparities, and (3) Community-oriented policing (see https://www.akronohio.gov/cms/resource_library/files/752315227cae8f13/chief_of_police_community_input_survey_results.pdf).

In what follows, we list the original Council recommendations, make note of any comparable comments from the focus groups, and point out any distinct areas of concern raised by

participating community members. We would also note that since the time that the Council released their recommendations, they have begun enacting legislation on some of these issues (see https://www.akroncitycouncil.org/ for more information on the Council's legislative activities and agenda).

Accountability and Transparency Working Group - Recommendations
The recommendations from this committee focus on increasing clarity around and support of the Office of the Independent Police Auditor and ensuring that more police data and information are made publicly-available online and updated on a regular basis. Both of these issues were acted upon by the Council (see https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/news/2021/03/19/city-coucity-council-to-vote-to-make-police-auncil-vote-make-police-auditor-full-time-hire-assistant/4714615001/; and https://www.cleveland.com/news/2021/07/city-of-akron-required-to-turn-in-body-camera-surveillance-if-an-officer-uses-deadly-force-or-causes-bodily-harm.html).

Focus group members did not mention the preceding issues specifically, but did discuss the importance of frequent and transparent communication between governmental agencies and the public as well as the importance of holding the police accountable for their actions on the job. The following quotes illustrate some of the community members' most common view on issues and processes related to accountability.

The only other thing that gets me is, I guess I would say responsiveness, and in that regard, what are the police or sheriff doing in the community. To show that they're responding to concerns. Any response from the mayor's office or a PD saying this is how we're going to deal with [the problem]. It's like there's no responsiveness. And I think that's a roadblock. If the mayor and his staff at a PD were to issue statements weekly say "hey, you know," just like the pros and cons in the [Akron] Beacon [Journal], "hey we've had this issue, this is what we've done." If they communicated back to us, maybe the citizenry wouldn't feel so left out.

I also believe that the accountability is lacking, because of the lack of transparency. And the reason that I say that is that there is a person who is an auditor, a police auditor. But he doesn't have either the authority or the staffing to get all the information. Sometimes you get information and half of it is redacted. That shouldn't be. There has to be transparency when you're dealing with problem-solving or else you're not going to get the correct information back...The communication that comes back to the citizens is not timely. [The city] makes projects out of everything. Everything doesn't have to be a project, there should be ongoing problem-solving.

I think that there needs to be procedural changes that are enforced by the chain of command on the frontline officers. You can train for de-escalation, but unless they all understand that when they see it fail, or when they see an officer fail at de-escalating, they're required to report it. Because no amount of training is going to change that unless you change the culture.

I think there's a transparency issue as to whether or not [the police] are doing anything. There's an accountability issue when nothing is being done and no one gets back to you. I think that all

of these things need to be of concern, but when you say, is there any one thing that needs to be of concern, I think this is a systemic problem.

It's the accountability. Your individual officers, as well as the department as a whole needs to have accountability and to be held to that accountability. And when they violate that, there needs to be consequences.

So I think that it's the lack of accountability, you know. It doesn't make sense -- if I mess up my job, and it has a negative impact, I lose my job. If the teacher does something improperly, they can lose everything you know, or anyone else can, you know. So, where do we draw the line? Why are [the police] not being held at the same accountability level as with regular jobs? Even professional athletes, they do something crazy, they will lose their job, you know, if they put some negative light loses endorsements, everything. Well how is the [police] the one profession? They're just above the law, or they're making decisions to take a life, you know, someone was a father, someone was a mother…someone was a kid, you know? That's crazy.

And for police officers what I think is a great first start [is] having police officers carry malpractice insurance like doctors do. I think would be a good start. Why should citizens keep having to pay million dollar payouts because a police officer violates civil rights or murders somebody? Doctors have to carry medical malpractice, right, and so I think having some sort of insurance policy or program for police officers would be a good start.

A lot of the polarization… I see all these signs that say, like, "I support the police." And I think to myself, like, what does that mean, right, when somebody says, I support the police? I think, I support the police. Right, I think that accountability is, you know, just like any parent supports their kids but you still hold them accountable. Right? It doesn't mean you let them do carte blanche, it doesn't mean that when they make a mistake or do something against the law that you don't hold them accountable. And so I think that for me accountability is part of support.

Prevention Working Group - Recommendations
The stated focus of the Prevention Working Group is how community-based programs might proactively prevent crime and reduce the overall burden on the police force. This is broadly consistent with focus group participants' concerns about problems that are not-well served by a police response as well as suggestions about alternatives to policing and the desire for improved community policing and additional training of police officers to more adequately respond to mental health and other human crises. As many of the preceding focus group quotes have demonstrated, community members appear supportive of the committee's statement that we should find "ways that bike and foot patrols can be built into the regular schedules of all the officers who serve in the Patrol Bureau" (Akron City Council, 2021, Special Committee on Reimagining Public Safety, Report of Recommendations, p. 9).

The data presented above also lend community member support to the committee's recommendation that existing community and social service partnerships should be expanded, including finding ways for such local partners to potentially respond to 911 calls as appropriate. The Prevention working group also recommended that funding for department-wide Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) for all officers should be a priority to improve all police officers' responses to residents impacted by mental

health and crisis issues. Although CIT training was not frequently mentioned by name, the data presented in this report suggest strong support for funding and taking demonstrable steps toward improving our community's professional response to mental health and other social crises. It should be noted, however, that some focus group participants expressed concern that the police may not always be the most appropriate first-responders for serving those experiencing social and mental health problems, and that additional forms of training are needed to improve interactions with diverse populations and to more generally improve police-community relations and the effectiveness of police response. As such, a holistic examination of where and what training is called for to achieve measurable public safety goals, as well as the funding and development of alternative response options, is likely to have broad community support.

Personnel and Culture Working Group - Recommendations
The first recommendation emphasizes the need to hire a more diverse workforce that represents the demographics of City of Akron. The council members noted that recruitment has been increasingly difficult throughout the country in recent years. This speaks to the need for continued care and concern surrounding the health and well-being of police officers and continued attention to the creation and maintenance of a positive organizational culture within the APD. An important component is increased access to and support for police use of mental health and self-care resources. The working group's discussion of expanding drug testing for police officers was noted by one focus group participant linking it to enhancing a sense of trust and comfort in the APD:

I do think, though, that for people to feel more comfortable with police, in general, I think any time that there's been a firearm discharged from the police, or there has been, "a violent arrest," or however you want to term it, I don't think it's unfair to ask the police -- and I know you're going to fight the police union with this tooth and nail -- I think police should be drug tested...I think in some cases [there is] overuse of steroids. And I think 'roid rage sometimes plays into that fact. Now, I have ridden with a police officer during an evening shift for a while. And believe me, I'd love to see more councilmen and city representatives and citizens do that because what they face is unbelievable. I mean, it's sickening and obviously worse every day. But I think it's fair to ask them to be drug tested and report that to the community.

The second recommendation of the Personnel and Culture working group calls for increased state support of CPT in-service training of police officers as they join the force and move up the ranks into more specialized positions. This recommendation is in line with the data presented above and with the recommendations proposed by other working groups. In particular, community members recognized that the call for increased training throughout police careers requires funding support beyond the local level.

We would also point out that focus group participants' desire for police who are "from" the neighborhood and who "know" the residents, lends support to the goals of this first hiring recommendation to pursue new and alternative pathways for local youth to pursue careers in public safety. The sense that fewer officers reside in the community they serve was also identified in a news article from 2020 that reported only 46% of police officers live in the City of Akron compared to a 70% residency rate for all other city employees (see https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/news/local/2020/07/04/most-of-akronrsquos-finest-live-

. As representatives from the University of Akron, we heartily support the working group's recommendation that there are real opportunities for developing innovative and interdisciplinary "Pathways to Justice" that would attract young city residents (under 21) who seek meaningful career and educational opportunities. It is important that these opportunities are structured in such a way that students would experience the ability to make a positive impact in their communities right away. Reflecting the stated desires of the focus group participants, these experiential pathways would benefit from teams of students with a range of human service career goals working together. Shared learning experiences would enable those pursuing public safety careers to simultaneously become personally and professionally knowledgeable about the role and function of those working within other types of social and human service organizations. The University of Akron looks forward to helping advance the achievement of this and other working group recommendations.

Technology and Equipment Working Group - Recommendations
In response to the focus group questions, community members did not turn their attention to police technology and equipment in regard to the working group's focus on body cameras or other mechanisms of surveillance. However, the concerns noted by community members regarding the perceived "militarization" of the police, suggests that many would be dismayed by additional funds being spent on this type of equipment. In fact, one of the more prominent themes emerging throughout the focus groups concerned the need to demilitarize the physical presence of police officers more generally. For example, one community member stated:

I'd like to see the de-escalation of the uniforms, the cars, the black uniforms, the helmets. I think anybody, myself included in a certain situation, would feel angry simply because I've got a fairly violently dressed individual that's facing me. And I think we need to de-escalate the uniforms. I really do. There's got to be ways to do that and still have the safety officer have their cuffs, have their mace, have their arms.

Concerning the APD's potential use of new and emerging technologies, only one of our focus group participants made a specific reference to the forthcoming drone program along with other possible public safety uses of common technologies.

So, I do two things. First of all start using zoom for some of your lower level crime and incidents and start doing some zoom dispatch and dispatch with police officers just calling in on zoom with you and getting a better assessment…maybe get pictures. And [the police] can give realistic wait times or options on what we can do. And I think you get better buy in from the community with that. And secondarily, look at your hotspots, and again approach the community leaders in those hotspots and see who's willing to show up and partner and ally with you….People start getting more lights up, people start learning who their neighbors are and you start to build that sense of community, a safe community….We don't have enough police officers and I don't know what our budgetary restraints are, but I think if we had the money, I would put it towards drones, I would do drone surveillance. There's some regulation on nighttime drone surveillance, but I would do more with drones.

To the extent that the working group examined the need for improved online communication capabilities with the community, quotes presented earlier in this report suggest that any means of improving the consistency, frequency, and reach of communication strategies would be welcomed. In addition, the working group's recognition of the need to increase "community awareness of APD's use of technology and equipment," including the upcoming drone program, coincides with participants' desire for continuous improvements in communication around the development of public safety policy and practice.

Conclusion

In sum, virtual focus group participants identified many of the same problems and solutions as did the Akron City Council's report. We would note, however, that many community members do not view "public safety" merely as an issue of "policing," but as being intimately tied to the support, strength, and success of Akron's educational, economic, housing, and health care opportunities and institutions. Similarly, Akron area residents are interested in being active, involved partners in seeking what they see as being necessarily "community" solutions. We hope that the Council and its partners will continue to seek out the wisdom, guidance, and lived experiences of all members of the Akron community.

We conclude this report with two participant reflections to consider as the Re-imagining Public Safety initiative moves into its next phase:

One of the beefs that I have with the conversations that exist right now is that we keep dealing (in) binaries, they're either good cops or bad cops and part of the complexity is the human heart. And the binary of either a cop or not a cop. The complexity of every one of us, like there's layers of brokenness within me, what would I do if I showed up in that circumstance and why? To understand this isn't an "us and them" thing, this is for "all of us," like we've all got to do something.

I feel like this is something that the city is doing a good job at too, like developing that pride in your city and in your neighborhood and helping people take ownership of their communities. And then the policing is a part of that, like the policing alone won't fix what's ailing Akron right now. It's one important piece, but it has to go hand in hand with you know building strong communities, and you know, helping families, no matter what that family looks like or where that family's from or where they live, now, or what they're going through, you know?... Everybody deserves to feel safe in their home, and feel like they can walk down the street and not be worried about making it home, or go to school and not worry about getting beat up... I feel like if we can give just, as a community in general, if we can give a little bit more now it's going to ease the burden later on. In a year, two years, we'll start seeing the benefits from investing more in our communities now.

APPENDIX A

<u>Engaging the Public – Virtual Focus Group Questions</u>

1. I'd like to begin by giving each person the opportunity to tell the group: What motivated you to participate in this conversation today?

2. In Akron, like many cities across the U.S., people are concerned about public safety. One focus at both the national and local levels has been the role of police in maintaining community safety. What is your experience living in Akron when it comes to feeling safe here in Akron?

3. What would you <u>want</u> policing to look like in your neighborhood? What would be ideal?

4. Police spend a good deal of time addressing domestic disturbances and problems associated with mental health. What kind of training would you like the Akron police to have related to these issues?

    a. Are there any alternatives to policing that you think might better address these or other types of challenges? And, if so, what would you suggest?

APPENDIX B

Thematic Descriptions from the Focus Group Data

ISSUES OF CONCERN

1 – SOCIAL/SAFETY CONTEXT. Statements that reference current feelings/experiences of *safety* (or the lack of or decline in feelings of safety), presence of *violence* in the community, or the lack of other social/economic *resources* (i.e., not police-related) in the Akron community that contribute to or reflect lower levels of safety or wellbeing.

    (a) Not feeling safe; decline in safety over time; violence/increased violence

    (b) Lack of social/economic resources (health care, mental health, housing, education etc.) that contribute to lower sense of safety (or its decline)

    (c) Other social context/resource issues that don't fit a or b above

2 – POLICE-COMMUNITY RELATIONS: ISSUES OF TRUST/RESPECT AND COMMUNICATION. Statements that reference level of or lack of trust or respect between community members and police or the quality of police-community relationships.

    (a) General police-community relations statements or trust-related comments

    (b) Community members don't trust police or feel that police don't show them respect (i.e., focus of comment is on *police behavior*)

    (c) Lack of respect shown toward police; community members need to trust and behave appropriately when interacting with the police (i.e., focus is on *community member behavior*)

3 – UNNECESSARY POLICING: ISSUES OF OVER-POLICING, MILITARIZATION; UNNECESSARY USE OF FORCE, AND POLICE ARE NOT WHO ARE NEEDED. Statements indicating that police/law enforcement is called when another response would be more helpful; officers are using unnecessary force for the situation, overreacting, or when more de-escalation is needed; militarization of the police and *how* police are behaving/responding; *police response is not appropriate or helpful* (e.g., arresting/jailing when healthcare or social services are needed).

    (a) Over-policing; intimidating police presence; too frequent or menacing presence

    (b) Unnecessary or too much (violent) force is used; overreaction for the situation or people involved

(c) Militarization of the police; war zone; armed "to the teeth"

(d) Response/Behavior inappropriate or unhelpful (e.g., jail rather than mental health Care, etc.)

4 – RESOURCE/TRAINING-RELATED ISSUES. Statements indicating that police *do not have the proper training* or resources to respond appropriately or help people who have mental illnesses, are victims of domestic violence/abuse, homeless, etc.

(a) Statement references some form of training-related deficiency. [Identify specific type of issue in parentheses after the lines of text identified if mentioned. For example: (mental health) or (diversity) or (domestic violence) or (de-escalation)

SOLUTIONS PROPOSED BY COMMUNITY MEMBERS

1 – DEVELOPING ALTERNATIVES TO POLICE RESPONSE. Statements suggesting that we should have other alternative possibilities for help besides just the police – for example, dispatching social service workers, mental health professionals, community service officers (without guns), either on their own or in conjunction with officers.

2 – INCREASED COMMUNITY POLICING. Statements related to the need for a more visible, positive, community-focused, helpful, "service" orientation to how police do their jobs and where/how they spend their time on the job (e.g., out of their cars, walking, biking). Increased personal connection to a specific neighborhood/community, knowledge and understanding of the lives of those who live there.

3 – POLICE TRAINING/SKILL DEVELOPMENT/SUPPORT RESOURCES. Statements related to the need for additional or improved training of police officers of some sort, enhancing already existing or skills or developing new ones, or resources to help and support police officers themselves (mental health support/resources).

- If noted by the participant, the type of training is specifically identified (e.g., mental health, empathy, diversity, de-escalation, etc.).