

# 3.0

## INVESTING IN COMMUNITY SAFETY

During the summer 2020, we bore witness to an unparalleled global outcry resonating against anti-Black police violence in the United States. This movement has been largely led by Black, Latinx and other people of color<sup>1</sup> who are — to varying degrees — at the center of numerous overlapping crises including criminalization, economic precarity, the climate crisis, and crumbling housing and school infrastructure.<sup>2</sup> The movement exposed on a global scale how historical patterns of racialized violence against communities of color continue to shape the daily lives of people in the U.S.

Within this context, CPR recognized the urgent call for new visions of safety and in response developed the Community Safety Project, which offers people in highly policed neighborhoods a platform to define for themselves what is necessary to create safe, healthy, and thriving communities.

In this chapter, we will explore what safety looks and feels like for people in highly policed neighborhoods and how they understand the relationship between policing and other community investments.

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## 3.1 When policing is the only option, it's the only answer

New Yorkers in highly policed neighborhoods often need access to a wide range of resources to help meet their basic needs, but the most present, proactive and available taxpayer-funded resource always comes with weapons and the potential for violence and criminalization. Residents of these neighborhoods have been told — through our media, politicians and other sources of conventional authority — that the police are the only rational and effective option for producing safety and that the price they must pay for safety is being exposed to omnipresent policing, constant surveillance and police stops. The warped yet mainstream rationale for imposing what essentially amounts to a permanent occupying force in low-income communities and communities of color<sup>3</sup> is the false narrative that if New Yorkers don't support the NYPD, their only other option is lawlessness and violence. But is what New Yorkers have today safety? Can the police effectively keep them safe? Politicians give the police credit for lowering crime but do not blame the police for rising crime. In fact, rising crime rates offer cause for politicians to call for more police and more policing investments. Yet, very little police work actually focuses on serious violent crimes, the odds of police solving crimes is very low,<sup>4</sup> and almost all of the people whom police stop are let go and not arrested.<sup>5</sup> Why should people have to withstand the threat of police violence to be “safe” from other forms of violence?

**In essence, people in highly policed neighborhoods are made to endure police violence and harm for the unsubstantiated possibility of community safety.**

The results of our survey reflected this reality and revealed that for many residents, experiences with the police are not straightforward. For example, 64% who called the NYPD for help also experienced unwanted police contact, and 73% of those who felt the NYPD helped them also reported the NYPD harmed them. Or, when asked a series of questions about various forms of law enforcement presence, 60% of those who believed certain types of presence made them safer also indicated that other types of presence made them less safe. And 53% who indicated that the size of the NYPD presence in certain areas should not be reduced also indicated that the NYPD presence in other areas should be decreased. In other words, it was common for participants' experiences and views to reflect the tensions that omnipresent policing imposes on community life.

In the Community Safety Project, we were able to see many respondents deeply grappling with tensions related to the police as the only available safety option while experiencing and witnessing firsthand the risk of harm that the police bring. When speaking to researchers, one Brooklyn resident reflected on a police encounter he had experienced, explaining, “[A friend and I were] coming from the store on my way home and a [NYPD] car pulled up. I guess they suspected us of having guns because they asked us, ‘Where are the guns?’ So, they searched us, and they found nothing.” He went on to say, “They kind of were like jokers; they joked around a lot, so we joked kind of back in a sarcastic way. So, after the search, we just sort of went on with our day.”<sup>6</sup> This might have been categorized in a survey as a positive or respectful police encounter. In this instance, we had the opportunity to ask whether he understood that encounter as respectful, and he responded, “What does being respectful mean? So, the fact that you didn't call me a ‘n@#\*%’ or you didn't like curse at me,

does that make you respectful?” This participant, like many of the residents living in highly policed neighborhoods whom we spoke to held important insights about these tensions: “Why are you here in the first place? The physical presence of police in our neighborhoods is a sign of disrespect to our community because in and of itself it criminalizes our community and criminalizes the culture and thus the people in our community.” He went on to say, “But still, we have never seen safety come from anywhere else but the police department. So, we don’t know what accountability, what protection and what safety looks like outside of these governmental official institutions.” In these quotes, we see how, for this individual, the police put his community at risk, while at the same time, it is hard to understand what safety looks like without the police because the city does not ever provide other options.

Another Brooklyn resident described what it means to lack other options for help, stating, “When something does happen, it’s like we don’t have anybody else to go to, to feel some sense of safety, but the police.” Limited options force him to contend with the difficult choice of relying on the police, when harm can come from the community as well as the police: “Like I know the police are fucked up and the police don’t really care about Black or brown people, but still in my hood, if something was to happen, either I’m going to jump in front of a bullet for someone or I’m going to have to call someone; there’s nothing else to do.”<sup>7</sup>

**This participant’s responses, like the responses above, are not simplistic calls for more police or police at all but a realistic assessment of current conditions. Yet, it is easy to see how a certain line of survey questioning that centers policing as the only option might lead to simplistically misleading answers and, if one is not careful, could be misinterpreted as “pro-police.”**

For example, if a survey asked this participant if he desired more police presence, he might have said yes, but that would have missed the nuance of his response that in times of crisis there are no other options, and therefore he must choose the police. In other words, surveys can easily reproduce the false narrative of policing or violence unless participants are offered other ways of responding that are outside of the police-only logic.

This oversimplified line of questioning resembles the rhetoric of many politicians. What they ask, what they hear and what they propose are typically filtered through a false narrative that people have to either choose between omnipresent policing or lawlessness. As we highlighted in Chapter 1, Mayor Adams has recently stated: “When I go to my communities of color, and I’ve never heard them, never heard them [say] Eric, we want less police.”<sup>8</sup> Yet, we know from our study that seemingly pro-police responses are frequently much more complicated. For example, of the survey respondents who indicated a desire for increased policing, 83% also expressed worry or fear of the NYPD; 84% indicated a desire for nonpolice safety options; and 55% reported the NYPD did little to reduce violence or handle most of the harm their communities experienced. While more than half (57%) of those who indicated they thought the NYPD’s budget should increase also said that, when given other options, reducing the NYPD budget and moving that money to community-based institutions, services and programs would make them safer.

These are not inconsistent findings. The desire for safety is a desire for safety from police violence as well as community violence. This chapter offers insights not only about how residents living in heavily policed neighborhoods understand community safety but also how to learn

about community safety. What participants communicate through a narrow line of police-centered questioning becomes more complicated across the breadth and depth of the Community Safety Project, where we intentionally designed questions to resist this narrow lens. For example, 63% of those who told us they generally believed the NYPD is good at reducing violence also thought that at least one of the eight listed nonpolicing alternatives actually does more to reduce violence in their neighborhood than the NYPD. In our study, we developed spaces that gave participants an opportunity to describe in more detail their full sense of safety. By reframing the false dichotomy of either police or violence, we learned that the wide-ranging services and resources participants prioritize for safety are not what the city budget ever gives them.

Concerns of safety and violence that endorse policing are too often portrayed by mainstream media and political pundits as backlash to or rejection of the “defund” demands that were elevated in the summer of 2020. **Our findings suggest that those living in heavily policed neighborhoods are communicating a vision for both safety and justice.** Rather than being mutually exclusive, they want to feel and be safe from violence and victimization whether from a police officer, a person on the street, someone in their home or someone with whom they’re in a relationship. To feel safe, their basic needs must be addressed, and at the same time, the fear of abusive, unlawful or violent policing also needs to be addressed. In other words, when given an opportunity, the community’s understanding of who creates safety and how to produce it is much more expansive than a narrowly defined version that simply centers the police. In the next section, we will describe the methodologies we used to gain a more nuanced understanding of community safety.

## 3.2 Designing research to understand community safety

We designed the Community Safety Project around the research question, “How do New Yorkers in the most heavily policed neighborhoods understand community safety?” What we found is a fairly straightforward but, perhaps to many, unexpected set of findings. In short, many participants described meeting people’s basic needs as the primary driver of safety and that the police were a common cause of harm but the only well-funded public option for help. This is a difficult position for people living in heavily policed neighborhoods to navigate because they want to be safe, but they are rarely given options for creating safety in their neighborhoods outside of policing. While policymakers, the media and even primetime television frequently center policing as the default public safety strategy, participants instead prioritized nonpolicing, noncriminalizing community investments such as housing, schools and jobs.

We came to this understanding of community safety by using a set of methodological approaches that drew upon CPR member organizations’ highly localized work and decades of experience partnering with communities with high police presence. Their deep expertise pushed the Community Safety Project to build spaces that resisted the dominant policing narratives so ingrained in our public discourse and that are even baked into the questions that social scientists typically ask about public safety.

**Methodological Strategy #1: Offer unfiltered spaces for New Yorkers to communicate their grounded knowledge about safety and think big about their desires for what could and should be.**

Each town hall followed a basic template. The first part of the town hall started with a space for personal reflection facilitated by a short online survey. The survey offered audience members an open-ended opportunity to reflect on how they defined community safety. This helped people generate memories and organize thoughts that they could share in later discussions. The survey also asked audience members to make choices about budget investments. The town halls then transitioned to 90-120 minute facilitated conversations, both in large and small groups, that addressed three themes: imagining community safety and thriving; reflecting on police practices and experiences; and building a better future. In total, these guided discussions gave participants ample space to offer what they believe is needed to build a safer New York, and we then used the rich themes discussed in the town halls to inform the development of the Community Safety Project survey.

**Methodological Strategy #2: Offer opportunities for participants to explore their visions of safety within the context of open-ended survey questions.**

We wanted to replicate the open-ended space that the town halls afforded within the context of the survey. The first question in our survey was the open-ended prompt: “What are the things you believe are needed to produce safe, healthy and thriving communities?”

With this question, we wanted to offer participants the opportunity, prior to seeing any of our other survey questions, to define for themselves what is needed to produce safe, healthy and thriving communities. We intentionally worded the question so that we were not assuming what participants might prioritize. In this chapter, we will discuss how participants had a wide range of responses to this question, illuminating how for many community members, policing is either not relevant at all for producing safety or is part of a wider strategy for producing safety.

**Methodological Strategy #3: Ask questions that are conceptually related in multiple ways so that participants’ responses provide insight into the nuances of how they perceive safety and the NYPD.**

We asked about safety and policing in multiple ways throughout the survey, which opened doors for participants to express their nuanced beliefs and enabled us, as researchers, to gain a more complicated understanding of safety across the questions. For example, we asked a general question: “How good is the NYPD at reducing violence in your neighborhood?” Then, to understand this more specifically, we asked, “Which does more to reduce violence?” For that latter question, we always offered the police as an option but also offered alternatives including social services, jobs, schools, affordable housing and mental health services. Knowing whether participants believe the NYPD is effective at reducing violence is important but incomplete and potentially misleading. Knowing whether respondents might simultaneously believe other options are more or equally effective offers a fuller understanding of possible future safety investments.

A similar example involves the police budget. We asked participants whether they believe “the size of the NYPD budget should increase, decrease or stay the same?” In the next question, we asked whether participants believe it would generally make them more or less safe “if the NYPD budget was reduced and that money was moved to community-based institutions, services and programs?” Here we asked about budget reduction in different ways, but like the example above, we offered a viable nonpolicing alternative in the second question. It is valuable to understand the possibility that participants might want the NYPD budget to stay the same or increase now as well as understand a specific divest-invest alternative as a potential safer future solution. As we discussed in the previous section, while this may seem contradictory, it is in fact, a more realistic and nuanced expression of community safety that our research is making visible.

**Methodological Strategy #4: Provide response options to questions that include the possibility for participants to endorse policing and/or the legal system while not centering them or framing them as necessary.**

We included numerous questions in which the police and the criminal legal system were just two of several possibilities available to participants. For example, in one question we told participants: “Imagine that you are in charge of the city budget and responsible for producing a safe, healthy and thriving community. Distribute \$100 across the 16 items below. More money = greater priority to you.” Participants had the opportunity to distribute money to a range of options (as well as add in their own options), including the police, the justice system, housing, health care, jobs, mental

health care and transportation. This enabled us to see the extent to which people prioritized certain public investments in community safety as compared to others, without assuming that participants desire investments in the police and/or the justice system at all.

**Our study has major implications for how to ask New Yorkers about community safety to accurately understand what they desire and its impact on future safety initiatives and budget allocations.**

The ongoing public debate regarding policing and safety has consistently failed to adequately take up the question of what constitutes safety and how to produce it. Instead, public discourse has remained largely stuck in the overly simplistic duality of either decreased policing and lawlessness or increased policing and safety. Above all, the public narrative has failed to adequately consider community members’ thoughts, feelings and ideas about all the ways we can make neighborhoods safer. Through the implementation of the survey strategies outlined in this section, we were able to gather data that unsurprisingly disrupts overly simplistic narratives about New Yorkers’ perspectives on safety, the NYPD and effective public investments in safety.

### **3.3 Community safety means investment and care**

Safety for many, as we will describe in more detail throughout this chapter, involves well-resourced neighborhoods where basic needs are adequately met and where people have access to the comprehensive resources necessary to lead flourishing lives;



to not only survive but to thrive with dignity; and to have “opportunities and resources available for everyone — education, jobs, mental health resources, health care.” This kind of safety involves feelings of mutual accountability to others in the community so that individual well-being depends on collective well-being. Respondents described the importance of both having enough resources to support themselves and their families and also knowing their neighbors have enough as well, such as this person who explained, “[Safety is] knowing the folks around me have adequate (abundant!) housing and health care, public space to convene, celebrate and care for each other.”<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, a genuine discussion about safety must first acknowledge the fears of violence that many New Yorkers hold. Freedom from harm to body and soul are central parts of community safety. In other words, as this person aptly put it, “I don’t want to worry if I’ll see tomorrow.” Many define safety as a feeling of security and comfort, a feeling that comes from not fearing that they, their loved ones or others in the community might be harmed. One person described their safety as “Being able to walk around without having to take extra precautions, such as worrying about being jumped/attacked or harassed in any ways.”<sup>10</sup> Another explained, “I believe community safety is when people living in a neighborhood feel comfortable simply living their lives without the fear something bad will happen to them.”<sup>11</sup> While the indeterminate fear of violence is not equivalent to an increased likelihood of actually experiencing violence,<sup>12</sup> fear is a very real part of how people understand safety, and frequently it is the force behind calls for public safety initiatives that center police.<sup>13</sup>

The very first questions in the survey involved a three-part sequence that offered

people living in heavily policed neighborhoods different ways of describing their top needs, investments and priorities for safety.

The first survey question was a blank space that allowed participants to write whatever they desired. The prompt asked them to write the things they believe are needed to produce safe, healthy and thriving communities. **The majority (62%) of New Yorkers in highly policed communities wrote responses that did not mention police, prisons or the legal system at all.**

The specific content of the open-ended responses varied and often included multiple themes in a single statement. While more than one-third (38%) provided responses that were, in part, associated with “more police” or “having law and order,” most offered responses that included other factors. Some offered statements about good governance and leadership (4%) such as “trustworthy leaders,” “politicians that actually care,” “community leaders” or “leaders who have policies that help people.” Others provided general value statements or desires (19%) such as “the peoples voices need to be heard,” “equality,” “diversity,” or “accountability and justice.” While one-fifth (21%), as we will discuss in more detail below, described the need for community care: “unity, communication and compassion”; “sense of community”; “love, care and oneness”; and “a strong association among neighbors.”

**However, half (50%) of all the open-ended responses involved at least one of eighteen different nonpolicing community investments.** The typical responses often resembled lists of essential needs. For example, one person wrote, “1. Economic, racial and social equity. 2. Little to no police presence. 3. Efficient and frequent participation for resources for the

community such as super markets, youth programs, library, community centers, care for seniors, strong schools, parent support, day care, hospitals, proper healthcare services 4. strong and progressive government presence/programs with diverse/liberal/honest leadership and much community representation and participation.” Another wrote, “access to a quality education, safe and healthy homes, adequate employment, transportation, physical activity, and nutrition.” The top half of investments (9 of 18) most frequently cited involved economic security, schools, health care, food security, social/community services, child/youth services, housing, infrastructure and community centers/organizations.<sup>14</sup>

The second survey item in the sequence directed respondents to “imagine you are in charge of the city budget” and distribute \$100 across 16 items, including the police and justice system, as a way to communicate their specific priorities for producing safe, healthy and thriving communities. This question limited people’s ability to give money indiscriminately. In other words, it attempted to simulate the zero-sum decision-making against competing investments that more closely reflects the real city budget. Respondents were told that giving an item more money indicated greater importance, but they were free to distribute the funds any way they would like until it was gone.

The top half of highest priorities (8 of 16) on average looked similar to those provided in the open-ended question along with the addition of adult education and mental health care. It is important to note that 62% of respondents did not include police, and 69% did not include the justice system in their top five priorities. In fact, 45% gave the police and 51% gave the justice system \$0, suggesting no priority at all.<sup>15</sup>

A similar pattern continued with the final question of the three-part survey sequence. The third question listed a set of specific policy proposals and asked respondents which should be the highest priority for their neighborhood to produce a safe, healthy and thriving community. **The most frequently endorsed high priorities for the third question looked similar to the first two questions in the survey sequence but also included affordable child and elder care and nonpolice gun violence programs. Once again, policing did not emerge among the most frequently endorsed top priorities. In fact, a “larger police presence in the community, on public transportation and around the city” was the 4th least frequently chosen “high priority” of 17 policy items.**<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the three-part survey sequence above, we also distributed a short survey to town hall attendees. In this survey, we asked participants to respond to the following prompt: “What do you think should be valued in NYC’s budget?” We then provided a list of 20 potential funding areas and asked participants to “indicate how you feel each area should be prioritized in the city budget during the coming fiscal year” by selecting which should receive the maximum additional investment, some additional investment, no additional investment, or the budget should be reduced (take money away).

The top half (10 of 20) maximum investments of town hall participants overlapped with those described in the three survey questions, with the addition of environmental justice. Similar to the data presented above, the police and legal system did not emerge in the top half. In fact, 59% of the participants indicated the criminal legal system and 87% thought law enforcement should get money taken away in the coming fiscal year.<sup>17</sup>

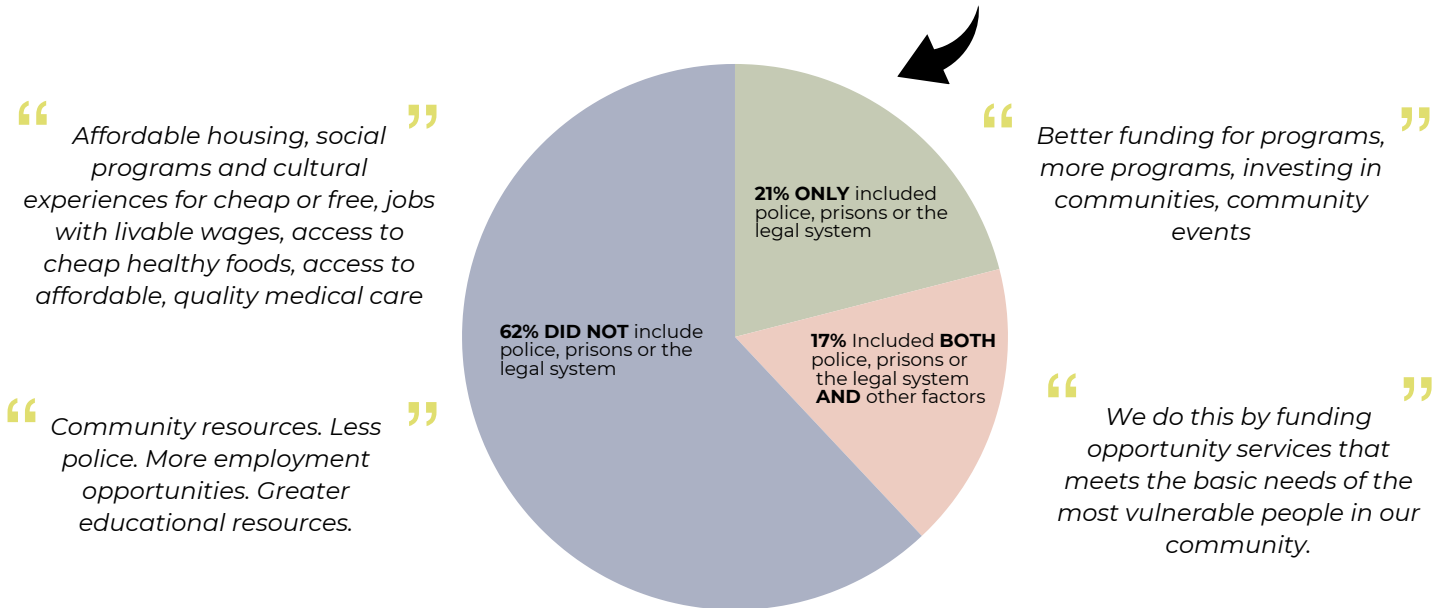


## #1 of the three-part sequence

Open ended: What is needed to produce safe, healthy, and thriving communities?

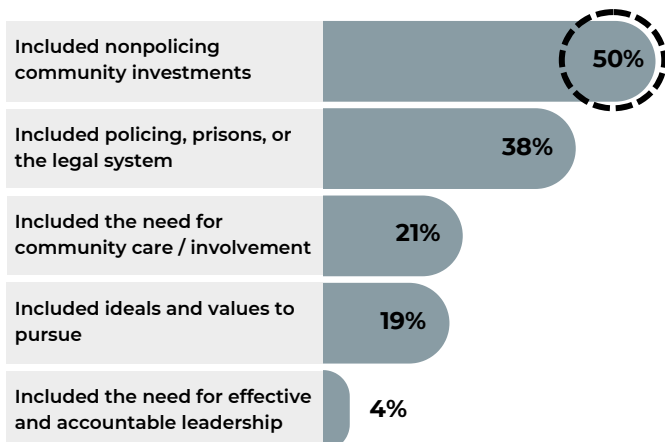
The first survey question was a **blank space that allowed participants to write** whatever they desired. The prompt asked them to write the things they believe are needed to produce safe, healthy and thriving communities.

**Most responses (62%)** did not mention police, prisons or the legal system **at all**.



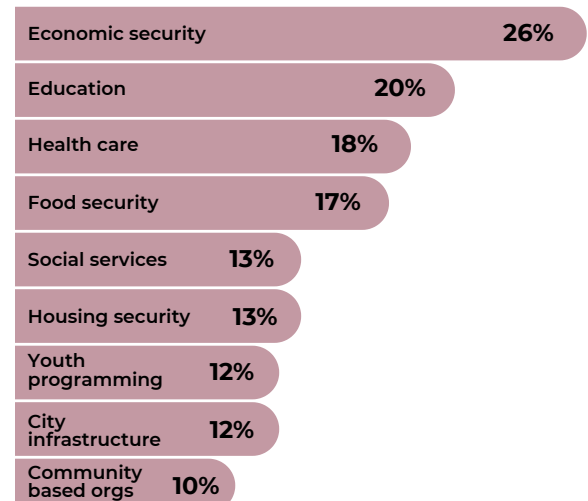
The specific content of the open-ended responses varied and often **included multiple themes** in a single statement.

However, **50%** of the responses included nonpolicing community investments



Survey participants wrote responses that fell into more than one theme. Therefore, the percentages do not equal 100%.

The **top half** (9 of 18) most frequently mentioned non-policing community investments were:



For the bottom nine non-policing investments see endnote 14.

## #2 of the three-part sequence (\$100 Budget): Imagine you are in charge of the city budget

Participants were asked to **distribute \$100 across 16 items** where more money meant a greater priority to producing a safe, healthy and thriving community.

**The top half** (8 of 16) investments were all non policing:

\$10.94	Housing
\$9.36	Healthcare
\$8.53	Jobs
\$7.59	Adult Education
\$7.00	Mental Health Care
\$6.86	Public Schools
\$6.53	Hunger Prevention
\$5.73	Community Based Organizations

The \$ represent the average money respondents gave to these items. For the bottom eight investments see endnote 15.

## #3 of the three-part sequence (Policy Priority): What is needed to produce safe, healthy, and thriving communities?

Participants were presented with **17 specific policy proposals** and asked to indicate the priority level of each proposal in terms of producing a safe, healthy and thriving community.

**The top half** (9 of 17) most frequently endorsed were:

74%	Public schools with enough school counselors, psychologists and behavior specialists to fully support all students
73%	Jobs for all levels of education with enough pay and benefits to support a family
73%	Affordable housing, not shelters, for families and individuals who become homeless
68%	Food and nutritional assistance programs to address hunger
64%	Community-based health and wellness clinics (e.g., mobile clinics, school health clinics, walk-in centers)
62%	Affordable child care and elder care that accommodate different work schedules
62%	Summer jobs made available for every young person who is 16 years or older and wants to work
62%	Improving community infrastructure (e.g., fixing or adding streetlights, redeveloping or expanding recreation space)
61%	Community-based, nonpolice gun violence prevention programs (e.g., "Cure Violence" or "Advance Peace Model")

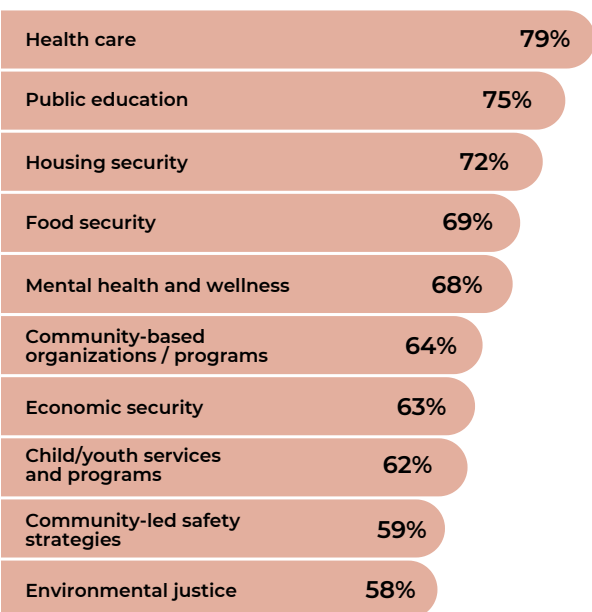
For the bottom eight proposals see endnote 17.

## Town Hall Survey: What do you think should be valued in NYC's budget?

Participants were presented with **20 potential budget areas** and asked them to indicate how each should be prioritized in the city budget during the coming fiscal year.

**The top half** (10 of 20) most frequently chosen for maximum investments were:

For the bottom eight proposals see endnote 16.



## Across all four survey items: The top needs, investments and priorities to produce safe, healthy and thriving neighborhoods

Investment	Q 1: Open Ended	Q 2: \$100 Budget	Q 3: Policy Priority	Q 4: Town Hall Survey
Housing (and shelters)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Health care	✓	✓	✓	✓
Jobs (economic security)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Public schools/education	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hunger prevention services (affordable, healthy foods)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Programs for youth/teens (youth activities, services, resources, programs)	✓		✓	✓
Community-based organizations	✓	✓		✓
Mental health care		✓		✓
Infrastructure	✓		✓	
Community-led safety strategies			✓	✓

Across four questions that asked participants to identify their top priorities, we found 100% agreement in the need for **housing, health care, jobs, public schools** and **food**.

We also found consistent agreement (agreement across 2 or 3 questions) in the need for **youth programs, community-based organizations, mental healthcare, better infrastructure** and **community-led safety strategies**.

At no time across the four questions did **policing** and the **legal system** emerge as a top half priority for producing safe, healthy and thriving neighborhoods.

Note: Items were included in this table if they emerged as top half priorities in two or more of the questions.

Through the four survey questions outlined in this section, participants explained the necessary and comprehensive resources they need and believe should be prioritized to not only survive in New York but lead healthy, flourishing, safe lives with dignity. The most frequent answers across the three-part sequence and the town hall survey showed remarkable consistency. What that tells us is that people prioritize pro-social investments in their communities over investments in policing. Our results suggest that most want to support youth and teens by investing in public schools with enough school counselors, psychologists and behavior specialists or summer jobs made available for every young person or community-based

rehabilitation programs and services for young people. There is a desire that all basic needs are met for everyone, such as affordable housing for families and individuals who become homeless and food and nutritional assistance programs to address hunger. People want jobs for all levels of education with enough pay and benefits to support a family as well as affordable child care and elder care. Most want health needs addressed through community-based health and wellness clinics as well as healing support programs that help people and communities recover from trauma or substance use treatment centers focused on harm reduction and long-term support. And they want their community infrastructure improved as well

as community centers that have comprehensive programming. This includes community-led safety strategies, such as violence and conflict mediation, transformative and healing justice, and anti-harassment methods.

“I believe that safety could only be felt when all of an individual’s needs are accounted for. These needs include but are not limited to financial security, housing security, food security, mental health support, access to education, etc. Unless all these needs are met, a community will never truly be safe because they’ll be vulnerable to many issues without any means of support.”

- Town hall attendee

The facilitated town hall conversations supported the survey findings by also illustrating the importance of community investments and helped elaborate these findings by providing us a deeper understanding of community care. Here a participant described community safety as rooted in relationships with and within the community, “Safety is knowing my neighbors, not even personally but understanding every day I pass this person that hangs out at this store, this person plays music on Saturdays ... basically knowing the rhythm of the community, familiarity.”<sup>18</sup> These are the familiar relationships and ordinary connections that happen throughout the day but help sustain life in healthy, supportive and accountable ways; the familiar strangers on the corner and at the bodega; feeling comfort with the neighborhood’s rhythms and activities; having meaningful bonds with friends and family, teachers and organizers, young people and elders.

In this way, “community safety” is a verb, as something one does and makes.

For example this person explains, “Community safety looks like community fridges that pop up to make sure everyone in the neighborhood has food to eat.”<sup>19</sup> Community safety is about relying on neighbors and being relied upon in return; it is about showing concern, providing mutual aid, watching out for others, as well as demonstrating respect, empathy and acceptance for differences. In other words, safety, as described by this participant, is understood to be produced and reproduced in neighborhoods every day through their mutual support and collective actions: “Mutual aid makes me feel safe, neighbors caring for each other makes me feel safe. Everyone having food on their table and a roof over their head makes me feel safe.”<sup>20</sup> But it is also centered on resourcing ways to build people’s ability to develop and sustain a vibrant community life.

“Community safety [is] ... knowing I can walk down the street without encountering profound human suffering and need on every block.”

- Town hall attendee

These neighborhood-level bonds of trust, relationships and support can be strengthened through support of, as one respondent stated, “spaces where people can gather, in my opinion a hub is vital. A hub that is actually active and has resources and organizations for the community.” Local community organizations and centers,<sup>21</sup> locally owned businesses, and public spaces and facilities such as parks or playgrounds are spaces that facilitate trusting and constructive connections with others where the unfamiliar can become familiar, camaraderie turns to solidarity and neighbors are accountable to each other.

Taken together, our research has offered us significant insight into how New Yorkers most directly impacted by policing understand and define community safety. Indeed, our findings suggest that residents of heavily policed neighborhoods want more resources for safer and healthier communities, resources that they are sorely lacking at the moment.<sup>22</sup> And this is at the heart of what “community safety” means. **Community safety is about greater life supporting public investments and services — investments in education, health care, jobs, local infrastructure and more; investments that strengthen community relationships and quality of life.** It is a positive articulation of safety, rooted in what safety and security are fundamentally composed of. It’s well-resourced neighborhoods where basic needs are adequately met and where people are offered the necessary and comprehensive resources to lead flourishing lives where they not only survive but thrive with dignity. Community safety involves feeling mutually implicated and accountable to others in the community, with the understanding that individual well-being depends on collective well-being and addressing a wide array of inequalities, harms and forms of violence.

### 3.4 Divest from police, invest in community

Since it was established in 1845, the NYPD has had consistently tense relationships with Black, Latinx and other communities of color; poor communities; immigrant communities; LGBTQ+ communities; Indigenous communities; as well as protestors and activists of all kinds. This is an old and ongoing story. Documented complaints about NYPD abuse emerged just a year after it was founded.<sup>23</sup> One hundred seventy-four years later, the summer of 2020 was marked by sustained

and massive uprisings and demonstrations against anti-Black police violence not just in New York, but across America. This mobilization and outpouring also set forth demands that have been years in the making from communities suffering under police violence; demands for a fundamental transformation in how policing takes place in neighborhoods and, perhaps more profoundly, in how to understand, value and invest in public safety. In response to the failures and harm caused by America’s reliance on punishment and policing to address social issues, communities called on everyone to reconsider what constitutes safety, how it can be produced and who can help produce it. They used slogans like “Defund the NYPD” or “Divest from Police.” What they were calling for was a transformative change of an entrenched condition by decentering police in favor of more fundamental solutions. In other words, divesting from police and investing in alternatives.

These calls and this movement were not new, but the widespread and mainstream momentum was. Still, it remained unclear how widespread<sup>24</sup> and mainstream these views were in New York. In our survey, we wanted to understand how fully people agreed or disagreed with the reasoning beneath the protest slogans that used words like “defund” or “divest/invest.”

“Community safety means the community keeping itself safe with support, training and funding from the city — not the city making the community feel unsafe with aggressive cops.”

- Town hall attendee



We began by asking respondents to read a paragraph, shown here in the right column, that summarizes why divestment from police is understood as necessary to those in this movement. Over half (56%) of the respondents living in heavily policed New York neighborhoods indicated that they mostly or completely agreed with the statement, and 75% agreed to some extent.

“Food and housing security for all, excellent public schools, free and accessible mental and physical health services, free and accessible child care, accessible and efficient public transit — I believe that if all of these things existed, policing would not need to exist (or it would barely need to).”

- Town hall attendee

For the neighborhoods involved in our study, the NYPD represents one of the largest city investments and yet to many, the police are all too capable of causing violence and are inadequate at addressing violence. Only 37% of survey participants thought the NYPD was generally good at reducing violence in their neighborhood. As a methodological strategy to more deeply understand this we then asked participants to compare the NYPD to a list of nonpolice options, and decide which they believed do more to reduce violence in their neighborhood. Of most significance, 71% thought at least one, and 60% thought more than one of the nonpolice options did a better job at reducing violence than the NYPD. The second most common response was that the nonpolice options were at least equivalent to police at addressing violence. In fact, only 6% thought the NYPD was always better at reducing violence, and 45% never thought the NYPD did a comparatively better job.

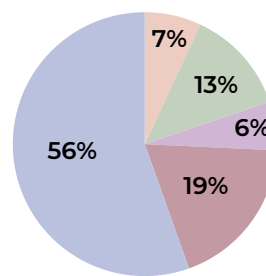
## Levels of Agreement with Divesting From Police

Participants were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with the following statement:

“The ‘defund’ or ‘divest’ movements argue that the police are too large in size, scope and power. More NYPD officers on the streets, more weapons, and more surveillance technologies overly criminalize communities of color in New York City. The NYPD do little to reduce violence and are generally incapable of handling most of the harm communities experience. In fact, attending to violence or solving crime are only a small part of police work. Many of the roles the NYPD are asked to take on, like intervening in homelessness, drug use and mental health issues, are better addressed by other professionals. And the presence of NYPD can often instigate and escalate violence, leading to arrest or even death.”

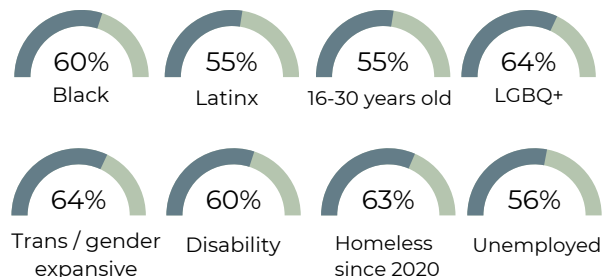
**56%** mostly or completely agreed with the above statement, and **75%** agreed to some extent. Only **13%** mostly or completely disagreed with the statement.

### More specifically:



**56%** Completely or Mostly agree  
**19%** Slightly agree  
**6%** Slightly disagree  
**13%** Completely or Mostly disagree  
**7%** Unsure

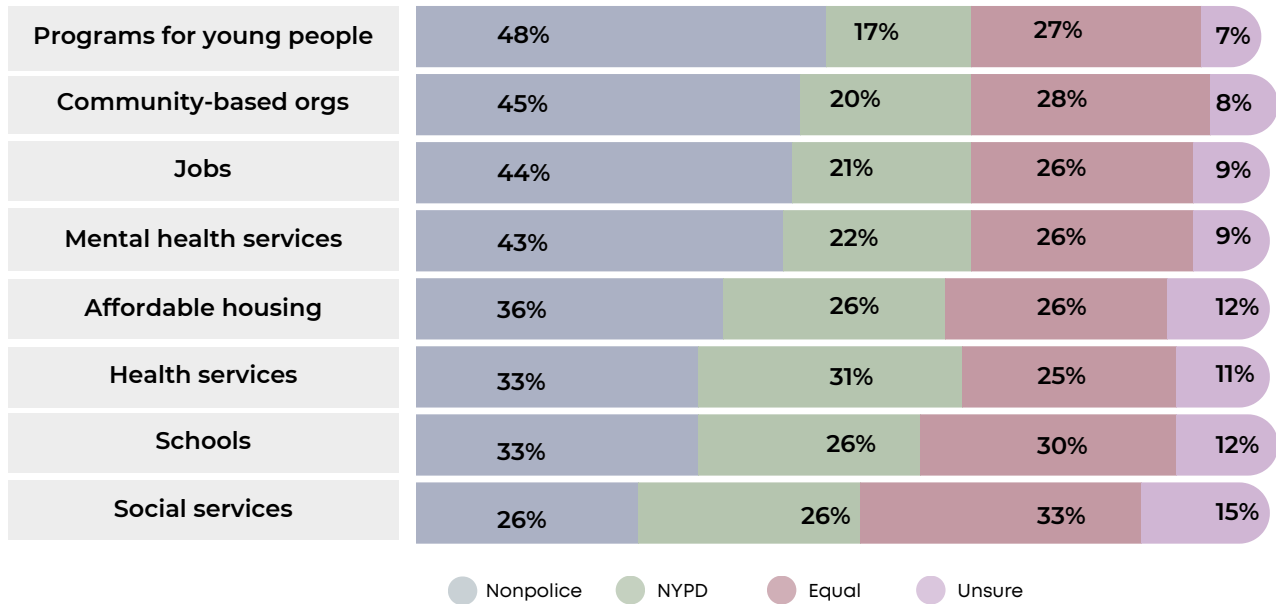
The **demographics** for those who responded “completely” or “mostly agree” are:



## Which does more to reduce violence?

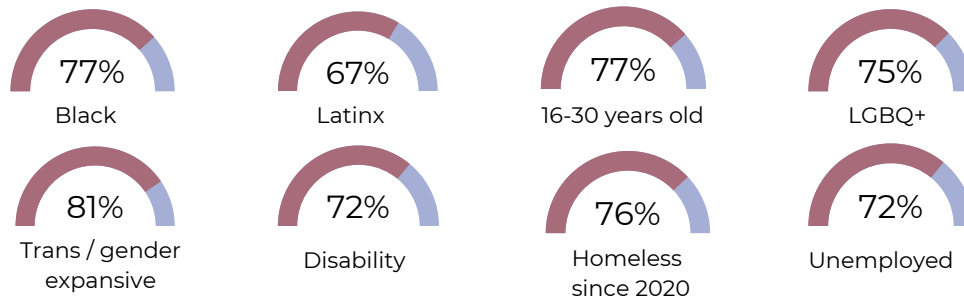
Participants were asked how various initiatives, including programs for young people, community-based organizations, jobs, mental health services, affordable housing, health services, schools, and social services, compared to the NYPD in terms of reducing violence. Only **6%** thought the NYPD was always better at reducing violence, while **45%** never thought the NYPD did a better job.

### More specifically:



Most (**71%**) participants thought at least one of the non-police options did a better job than the NYPD at reducing violence, this sentiment was often more pronounced for those with marginalized identities:

### More specifically:



The results outlined thus far in this chapter should make politicians pause and question their own assumptions about the supposed singular and necessary role of law enforcement in the most heavily policed communities. Their own constituents likely do not share such blind faith in this

institution. The majority of those in our study — when given the opportunity — do not understand policing as the most central or effective part of producing community safety. They do not hold views of safety that are solely limited to the experience of violence or crime victimization, which is the

typical focus of public safety as reported through policing statistics. This is an important fact that must be recognized and finally confronted when the city considers its public safety policies and budgets. Our study makes clear that for many New Yorkers who most directly experience the reality of policing in the city and also face significant safety needs, police are not synonymous with safety.

We also asked an additional four questions in the survey to explicitly examine the extent to which participants agreed with the combined divest and invest argument. We asked participants to read another paragraph (shown here in the right column), this time summarizing both the divest and invest point of view held by the movement.

When presented with the argument more holistically than the fragmented or decontextualized phrases commonly heard, over half (55%) of the respondents living in heavily policed New York neighborhoods said they mostly or completely agreed with the above statement, and 75% agreed to some extent.

“I think in order to fix the systemic issues with the police you need to completely dismantle it and create new solutions ... I believe it is no longer a matter of change from within. I think you need to clean house, reallocate funds to other areas that can do more to help the people.”

- Survey respondent  
(22, Black and Latinx, woman, Queens)

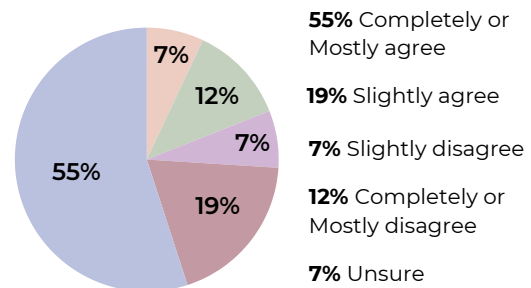
## Levels of Agreement with Divest-Invest Strategy

Participants were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with the following statement:

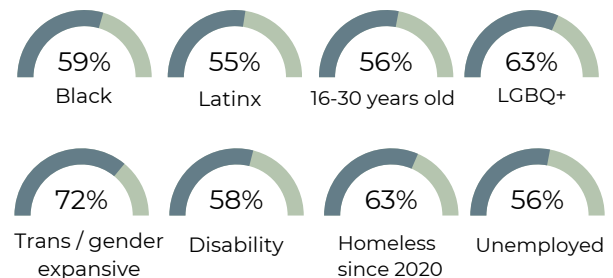
“The ‘defund’ or ‘divest’ movements want to change government budget priorities to make sure there is more funding for the kinds of services and resources that actually help create safety and prevent violence by addressing the root causes of poverty and inequality. In other words, making safe, healthy and thriving neighborhoods by shrinking the NYPD’s size, scope, and power and investing that money in things like better jobs, affordable housing, healthcare, mental health services, public education, to name a few.”

**55%** mostly or completely agreed with the statement above, and **75%** agreed to some extent. Only **12%** mostly or completely disagreed with the statement.

### More specifically:



The **demographics** for those who responded “completely” or “mostly agree” are:



**77%** of survey participants indicated a belief in a divest/invest framing of safety at least once in the survey.

In addition, the three other divest/invest questions in the survey found that over half (52%) of participants reported that they believed reducing the NYPD budget and moving that money to community-based institutions, services and programs would generally make them safer; 44% of participants said they most agreed with the idea of dismantling or reducing the role of the NYPD and investing in nonpolicing safety solutions; and 37% said that when it comes to their neighborhood, they feel it is important to cut the NYPD budget and put the money into community organizations and services. In total, 77% of survey participants indicated a belief in a divest/invest framing of safety at least once in the survey.

**In other words, most New Yorkers who participated in our study generally agreed with the sentiment that the NYPD is unable to adequately reduce violence, repair harm and produce safety in their neighborhood. Instead, they more often expressed agreement with the desire to invest in alternative community-based safety solutions involving more resources, not more police.**

In the last four years, in response to the failures and harm caused by our reliance on violence, punishment and policing to address social issues, an overdue conversation blossomed as to how best to ensure community safety and how best to allocate toward it in public budgets.

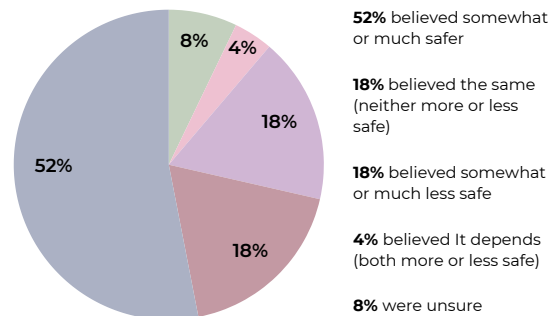
Divest/invest arguments get to a central question of how to best utilize relatively limited public funds to best produce

community safety. Rather than reflecting talking points around “defund the police,” our study suggests that participants understand and agree that reducing the police is not a question of abandoning safety but rather how to most effectively and efficiently utilize scarce public dollars to meet community members’ needs, and how to develop alternative strategies.

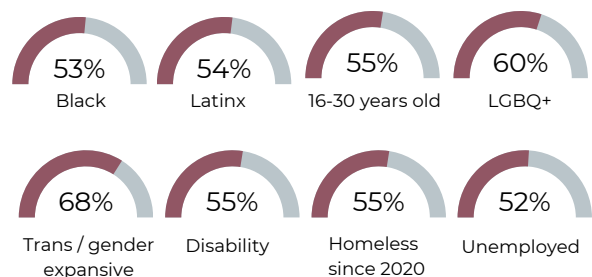
### Perceived Safety Impact of Reducing NYPD Budget in Favor of Community Programs

**52%** reported that they believe reducing the NYPD budget and moving that money to community-based institutions, services and programs would generally make them safer.

#### More specifically:



The **demographics** for “somewhat or much safer” results are:



While other agencies and services have faced decades of austerity measures and budget reductions, the police department

has seen regular increases, especially when considering federal grant money and private money that flows into the police department. The vision and definition of community safety that the respondents who live in highly policed neighborhoods provided, as described above, and that we will discuss further in the next chapter, necessitate a greater investment in social, health, housing and other pro-social services in the community, and these funds can be found in existing police budgets.

### 3.5 Generational differences in how people view policing and safety

Across our survey, we found that young people not only have very different interactions with the police compared to older New Yorkers, but they also frequently hold divergent ideas about the NYPD's role and size.

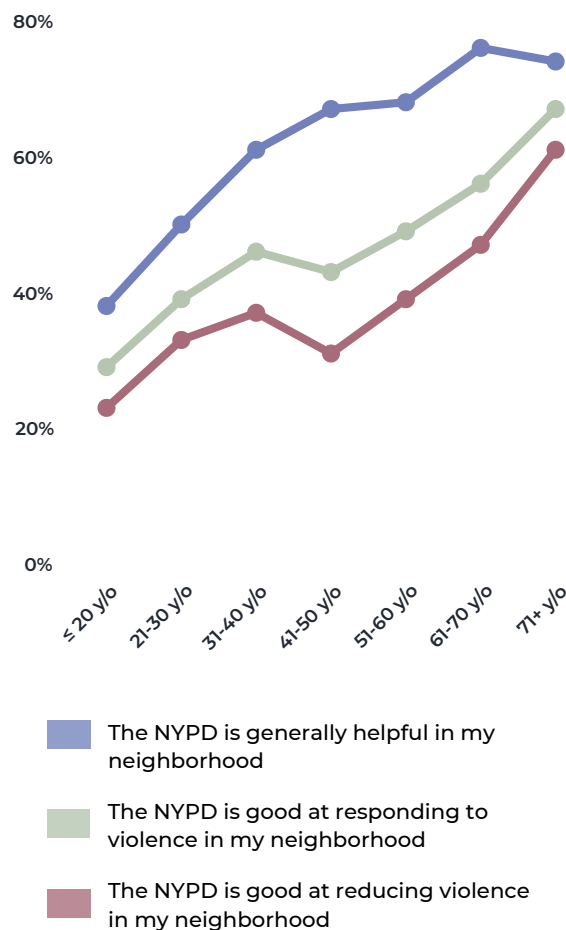
Indeed, we found a clear linear trend across age that helped explain how residents of heavily policed neighborhoods understood policing and safety. A greater percentage of participants from older generations interpreted the NYPD as effective at reducing violence, responding to violence and generally helping the neighborhood. They were also more likely to call the police and less likely to feel targeted or have a recently violent police experience.

On the other hand, a greater percentage of those survey participants within the younger generations felt targeted by police, were more likely to have a recent violent police encounter and were more likely to have the police called on them. And it was

the younger generations who, when asked questions about the role of policing, were more likely to endorse a vision for safety that reduces the NYPD's power, budget, size and use of weapons. In essence, a vision for safety that sits counter to the Mayor's Fiscal Year 2025 Executive Budget, which will, in fact, grow and strengthen the NYPD.

#### Respondents' reported beliefs about the NYPD in their neighborhood

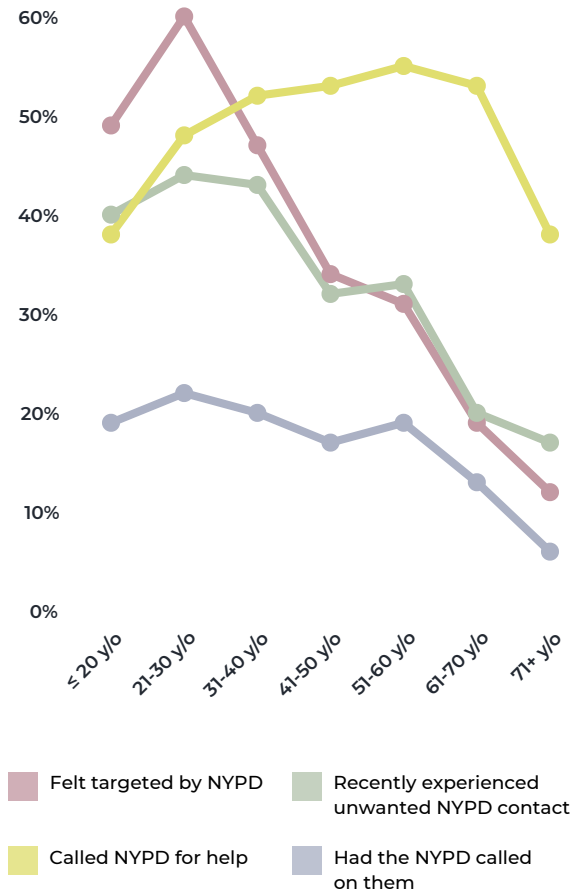
A greater percentage of participants from older generations interpreted the NYPD as effective at reducing violence, responding to violence and generally helping the neighborhood.





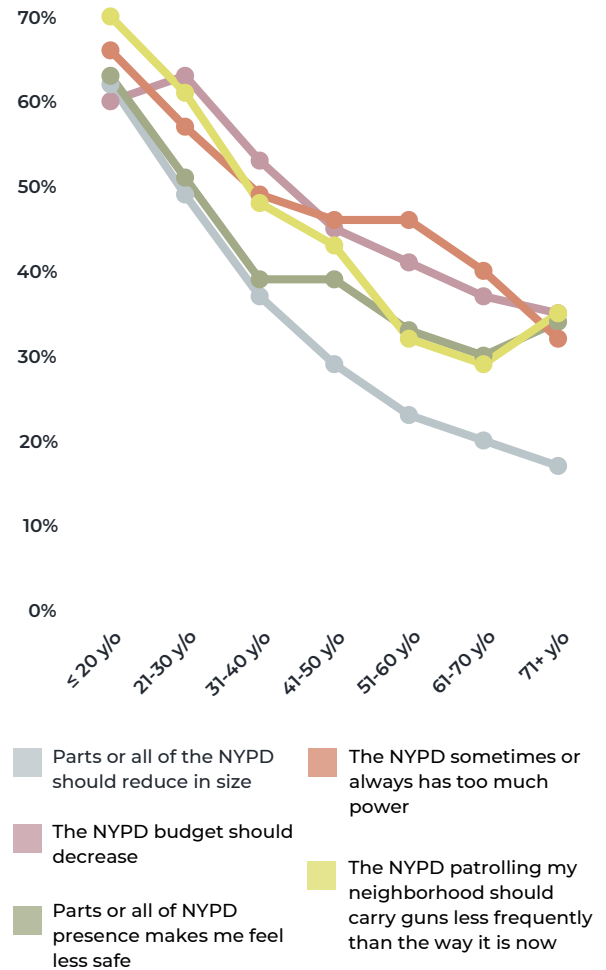
## Respondents' experiences with the NYPD

A greater percentage of participants from older generations were more likely to call the police, and less likely to feel targeted, have the police called on them, or have a recently violent police experience.



## Respondents' reported beliefs on NYPD funding, size, and power

The younger generations were more likely to endorse a vision for safety that reduces the NYPD's power, budget, size and use of weapons.

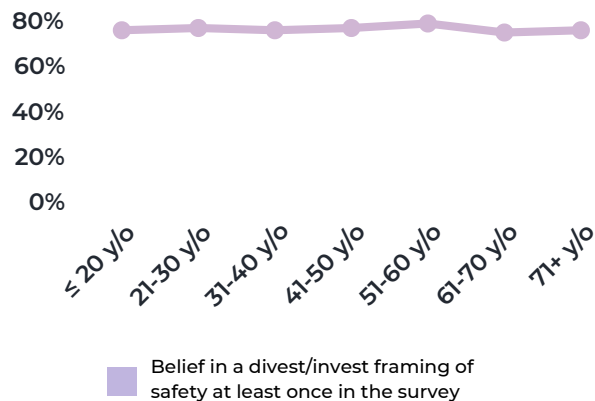


One might interpret these as developmental trends, meaning, as people get older, they are increasingly more likely to interpret the need for and effectiveness of policing. However, decades of on-the-ground experience have led the CPR members involved with this study to interpret the age trends as a generational shift, growing out of over 40 years of hyper-aggressive discriminatory policing practices that have led to skyrocketing incarceration and police violence with very little accountability.

Rising stop-and-frisks and aggressive practices like “quality of life” or “broken windows” policing have disrupted communities without making them safer.<sup>25</sup> Our data confirms what community organizers have noticed for quite some time: that young people and younger adults who have grown up under these conditions are more likely to believe that police should have either no role or a significantly reduced role in creating safe communities.

## Respondents' indicated belief in a divest/invest framing of safety at least once in the survey

77% indicated a belief in a divest/invest framing of safety at least once in the survey across four questions. **This trend did not change with age.**



However, it is quite significant that older participants were just as likely to indicate somewhere in the survey an agreement with the divest/invest framework as compared to younger participants. When presented with multiple questions that suggested *both* reducing the NYPD budget *and* investing it in other community-based resources, participants tended to agree with that vision at least once in the survey, regardless of generation. Our evidence reveals that older adults are not monolithic and, in fact, that many also share an understanding of safety that prioritizes meeting people's basic needs. **Most participants in our study, regardless of age, believed in the need to invest in more resources and services as a pathway toward creating safety instead of or in addition to the NYPD.** This has important implications to policymakers now but especially moving forward. They will increasingly need to contend with growing political pressure to address safety by investing in alternatives to policing and

incarceration. At the same, it will likely involve a growing public pressure for tightened oversight, transparency and accountability of the police.

## 3.6 Police accountability is part of community safety

Another theme we heard clearly and nearly universally across all age groups was the need for police accountability. Regardless of age or view of police, participants stressed that there needs to be "accountability for folks who have caused harm to community members on all levels"<sup>26</sup> including the police. Or, stated another way, "Cops need to be held accountable for their actions just like we all do."<sup>27</sup> Participants described what this meant to them. For one person, this involved transparency: "Community safety to me means if there is transparency and accountability for any abuse or mistreatment from the organization that is supposed to protect us." For another, it involved community empowerment and oversight: "Safety is knowing that my community has influence over the agencies and institutions which operate within our community. Safety is knowing that there is a system of checks and balances instituted at every level of power within the community, and larger society."<sup>28</sup> And someone else said, "Firing all killer cops; accountability from those in power."<sup>29</sup>

Nearly every one (94%) of the survey respondents believed that officers who commit violence should be held accountable through some disciplinary action. This trend was not dependent on age. However, true police accountability for police violence seldom exists. A town hall attendee explained that even when police

kill unarmed victims, they often are “not held accountable by the local criminal justice system.” She concluded: “that’s a major element of what allows the abusive violence to continue — there’s no accountability for officers who brutalize New Yorkers. They are held to a different standard of justice than everyone else.”<sup>30</sup> This person asks a pertinent question: “What does it mean for the police to do their job in a system of accountability?” In other words, what would policing look like if officers were held responsible for their actions in neighborhoods through strong, transparent oversight mechanisms? While police accountability rarely happens, one-third (33%) of the survey respondents endorsed suspension, and nearly half (47%) endorsed termination for officers found guilty of excessive force.

“Safety is knowing that my community has influence over the agencies and institutions which operate within our community. Safety is knowing that there is a system of checks and balances instituted at every level of power within the community, and larger society.”

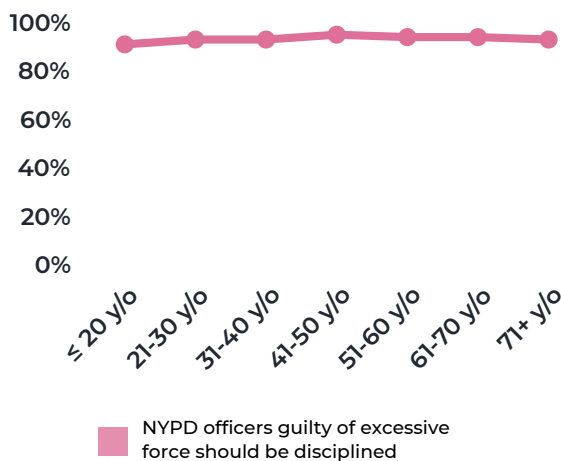
- Town hall attendee

“Community safety to me means if there is transparency and accountability for any abuse or mistreatment from the organization that is supposed to protect us.”

- Town hall attendee

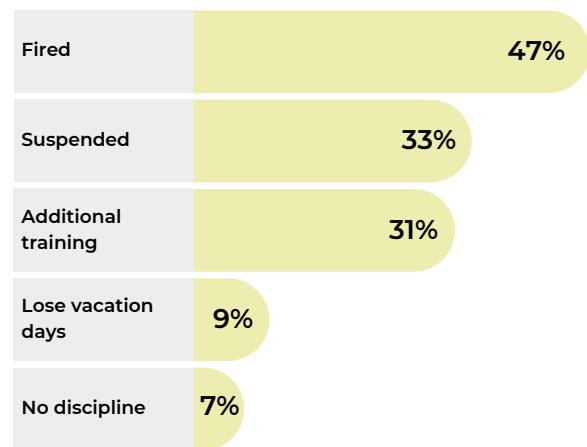
### What should happen to NYPD officers who are guilty of excessive force?

94% believed that officers who commit violence should be held accountable through some disciplinary action. This trend did not change with age.



### Respondents’ beliefs what should happen to NYPD officers guilty of excessive force

47% endorsed termination and 33% endorsed suspension for officers found guilty of excessive force.



\*Respondents could select more than 1 option. The percentages do not add to 100%.

## 3.7 Summary

The responses and visions from community members in highly policed neighborhoods speak for themselves. They describe a vision of community safety rooted in restoration and investment rather than enforcement and punishment. Given their lived experiences, many community members do not want greater resourcing of police as the solution to community safety. Likewise, it is clear that talking about a reduction in policing, whether in regards to budget, scope or size, is not enough. People also want investment in services and programs that support their ability to live healthy and thriving lives. Rather than a simple “defund” message, community members expressed a desire to divest resources from policing and invest them in a range of health, human and social services, programs and resources to best meet community safety and health needs. Four years on from the 2020 summer mobilizations, the findings from our research clearly show a sustained demand for an alternative vision of public safety in New York that is grounded in improving people’s quality of life and their ability to live and interact freely and fully with their community.

This study suggests that thoughts about policing and safety are changing. We have lived under 40 years of broken windows policing; skyrocketing incarceration; and increasing police violence and abuse of Black, Latinx and other communities of color. There have been dozens of high-profile instances of people being killed by the police in the last decade that officers are almost never held accountable for as well as rising numbers of Black, Latinx and other people of color who have been killed by police every year, even whose names do not make it into the headlines. Younger generations who have lived under these conditions their entire lives are more likely to question the value and effectiveness of policing as a public safety strategy. They are more likely to endorse reducing the size, scope and power of law enforcement. They are more likely to see the institution of policing as largely unreformable and want real options for safety in their communities that don’t come with increased violence and incarceration. Instead, they desire a radically reformed vision for what safety is, how it is achieved and how to enact it.

Most importantly, highly policed communities across all generations want other options for creating safety in their neighborhoods and increased resources and support that we know will make communities safer.

New York City’s Gun Violence Prevention Task Force (GVPTF), established by Mayor Adams, recently released “A Blueprint for Community Safety,”<sup>31</sup> which argues what community organizations have been saying for years: Long-term divestment from community resources that support thriving — including programs, services, housing, health care, mental health, public spaces and opportunities for young people — has led to increases in violence and trauma while negatively impacting residents’ physical and mental health. While Adams’ report acknowledges this and emphasizes an approach that prioritizes cross-collaboration and investment in community resources, his actions since he entered office directly contradict this approach, given that he has consistently elicited unwarranted fears in New Yorkers with messaging that the conditions in New York are dangerous, despite long-term evidence suggesting that homicide remains historically low.<sup>32</sup> His rhetoric, along with outsized and often sensationalistic media coverage, has predictably contributed to the NYPD’s growth in size, budget and scope, which ultimately means a larger footprint in Black and brown neighborhoods.

All New Yorkers need access to enough food, housing, health care, good education, decent employment, strong relationships, fun recreational activities, space to explore creativity as well as protection from individuals and institutions intent to do them harm — that includes neighborhood violence<sup>31</sup> and, for example, other forms of violence that get comparatively less attention like predatory lenders, white collar exploitation, and abusive and violent policing. These should be foundations every person in New York receives to create environments of opportunity and possibility and human dignity for their best to blossom. It is time to seriously consider why the city chooses to invest so much in policing and why it does not invest more in schools, community centers, affordable housing, living-wage jobs and a host of vital resources to facilitate nurturing and sustainable communities.

# Chapter 3: Endnotes

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- 1 Miranda Bryant, "‘It Was Time to Take Charge’: The Black Youth Leading the George Floyd Protests," *The Guardian*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/15/black-youth-activism-george-floyd-protests>
- 2 Michelle Fine, María Elena Torre, David M. Frost, and Allison L. Cabana, "Queer Solidarities: New Activisms Erupting at the Intersection of Structural Precarity and Radical Misrecognition," *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 6, no. 2 (2018): 608-630, <https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.v6i2.905>.  
Karenza Moore, Benjamin Hanckel, Caitlin Nunn, and Sophie Atherton, "Making Sense of Intersecting Crises: Promises, Challenges, and Possibilities of Intersectional Perspectives in Youth Research," *Journal of Applied Youth Studies* 4 (2021): 423-428, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43151-021-00066-0>.
- 3 Anthony D. Romero, "Reimagining the Role of Police," ACLU, June 5, 2020, <https://www.aclu.org/news/criminal-law-reform/reimagining-the-role-of-police>
- 4 Isabelle Leyva and Simon McCormack, "Hero-worship of Police is Failing Us," New York Civil Liberties Union, ACLU of New York, August 1, 2022, <https://www.nyclu.org/en/news/hero-worship-police-failing-us#:~:text=Data%20Sources,percent%20in%20New%20York%20City.>  
Serious violent crime is defined as homicide, assault, rape, torture, theft, and drug abuse.
- 5 Bahar Ostadan, "The NYPD Has Stopped Tens of Thousands of People Under Mayor Adams. Just 5% Were White," *Gothamist*, August 25, 2023, <https://gothamist.com/news/the-nypd-has-stopped-tens-of-thousands-of-people-under-mayor-adams-just-5-were-white>.
- 6 Town hall attendee - demographics unknown
- 7 Town hall attendee - demographics unknown
- 8 Jonathan Michalitsaianos, "Mayor Eric Adams Says Black New Yorkers Have 'Never' Said They Want Less Police on the Street, but MORE, as Murders and Shootings Spike 40% This Year Compared to 2021," Daily Mail, August 3, 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11077553/Mayor-Eric-Adams-says-New-Yorkers-want-cops-street-murders-shootings-spike-40.html>.
- 9 Town hall attendee - demographics unknown
- 10 Town hall attendee - demographics unknown
- 11 Town hall attendee - demographics unknown
- 12 Stephen D. Farrall, Jonathan Jackson, and Emily Gray, *Social Order and the Fear of Crime in Contemporary Times* (Oxford University Press, 2009).
- 13 Mariame Kaba and Andrea J. Ritchie, No More Police: A Case for Abolition (The New Press, 2022).
- 14 Public spaces and parks (6%), Mental healthcare (5%), Sustainable environment (5%), Fitness and recreation (5%), Local business (4%), Family support (3%), Public transportation (2%), Art and entertainment (1%), Fire department and EMS (1%).
- 15 Police department (\$5.64), Programs for youth/teens (\$5.18), Fire department (\$5.25), Services for elders (\$4.74), Transportation (\$4.50), Justice system (\$3.77), Parks and playgrounds (\$3.73), Libraries (\$3.27).
- 16 Healing support programs that help people and communities recover from trauma (58%), Community centers that have comprehensive programming (e.g., family programs, youth programs, health and mental health programs, arts and sports) (57%), Community-based rehabilitation programs and services for young people (55%), Substance use treatment centers focused on harm reduction and long-term support (55%), Large police presence in the community, on public transportation and around the city (53%), Public schools with no forms of policing (e.g., school safety agents (SSAs), metal detectors) (47%), More funding for arts and culture programming and institutions (e.g., murals, libraries, concerts, museums, plays, outdoor movies, music, dance, theater) (47%), Close all juvenile detention centers (28%).
- 17 Incarceration alternatives (52%), Public transportation (43%), Senior services and programs (42%), Cultural institutions and arts (33%), Non-police emergency response (33%), Public space (32%), Public maintenance (28%), Local business (22%), Criminal legal system (6%), Law enforcement (1%).
- 18 Town hall attendee - demographics unknown
- 19 Town hall attendee - demographics unknown
- 20 Town hall attendee - demographics unknown
- 21 Survey respondent - 24, Black, man, Brooklyn
- 22 Caitlin Cahill, Brett G. Stoudt, M.E. Torre, X. Darian, Amanda Matles, Kimberly Belmonte, Selma Djokovic, Jose Lopez, and Adilka Pimentel, "They Were Looking at Us Like We Were Bad People": Growing Up Policed in the Gentrifying, Still Disinvested City," *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 18, no. 5 (2019): 1128-1149.
- 23 Marilyn Johnson, *Street Justice: A History of Police Violence in New York City* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003). Johnson, for instance, details a range of complaints against the NYPD in their early years, including the use of physical violence to command respect and control among New Yorkers, preventing civilians from identifying officer badge numbers, and suppressing protests during moments of social and political unrest.



# Chapter 3: Endnotes

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- <sup>24</sup> Mariame Kaba and Andrea J. Ritchie, *No More Police: A Case for Abolition* (The New Press, 2022).
- <sup>25</sup> Bernard E. Harcourt, *Illusion of Order: The False Promise of Broken Windows Policing* (Harvard University Press, 2005).
- <sup>26</sup> Town hall attendee - demographics unknown
- <sup>27</sup> Town hall attendee - demographics unknown
- <sup>28</sup> Town hall attendee - demographics unknown
- <sup>29</sup> Town hall attendee - demographics unknown
- <sup>30</sup> Town hall attendee - demographics unknown
- <sup>31</sup> New York City's Gun Violence Prevention Task Force, "A Blueprint for Community Safety," 2023, <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/home/downloads/pdf/press-releases/2023/Blueprint-Community-Safety.pdf>
- <sup>32</sup> Fola Akinnibi, Rebecca Wahid, and Angel Adegbesan, "Fear of rampant crime is derailing New York City's recovery," Bloomberg, July 29, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2022-is-nyc-safe-crime-stat-reality/>



“I feel safe when there's a community around me more than police or security. When there's police officers around, I feel scared and afraid that something bad will happen.”

- Town hall attendee