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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is about the Community Safety Project, a study designed to center the knowledge, experiences and desires of those who live in heavily policed neighborhoods. Reaching over 3,300 people across all five boroughs through community-based surveys and town halls, the results of this research communicates the experiences and perspectives of New Yorkers who are often excluded from political decision-making yet are fundamentally necessary to crafting public safety solutions that offer both safety *and* justice. What we learned is that many people living in highly policed neighborhoods want New York to reconsider what constitutes safety, how it is produced and who helps produce it. They are asking for a fundamental transformation in how safety is achieved in neighborhoods.

The city continues to favor policing as a means to address public safety concerns, despite the community's demands to end the pervasive, abusive and discriminatory practices within law enforcement agencies. Many policymakers continue to suggest that safety can only be achieved through widespread and forceful police intervention. This stance justifies the city's persistent underinvestment in the critical life-supporting resources, services and institutions our communities urgently require. It is essential to challenge this flawed perspective to bring about the changes necessary to support all New Yorkers' welfare and safety.

Our findings are clear that people in highly policed neighborhoods suffer from harmful experiences with the NYPD, they frequently do not understand safety as synonymous with policing, and they desire non-police responses to crises. Furthermore, when given the option, most participants chose investments in public programs and infrastructure over investments in policing as a way to make communities safer. True safety, they believe, comes from deep and sustained investments in essential services rather than prioritizing funding for the NYPD as the primary public safety agency.

This executive summary will review the study's three key findings and then outline our central policy recommendations.

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Key Finding #1:

Those living in highly policed neighborhoods frequently experience policing as pervasive, harmful, violent and frightening.

The Community Safety Project offers unique insight and support to the large body of empirical evidence that police saturation is often experienced as a collective punishment of whole communities, especially communities of color, with ongoing and far-reaching consequences. In sum, we found that while community members want to be and feel safe, the experiences they or their community members have had with the NYPD often run counter to that.

New Yorkers, especially Black and Latinx residents, living in highly policed neighborhoods report feeling that the police are an omnipresent force that subjects communities to near-constant surveillance. Study respondents describe high levels of police contact involving direct experiences of physical, verbal, and sexual/gender-based abuse. Many also have witnessed these abuses or know friends, family, or neighbors who have experienced them. Frequently, the cumulative impact fosters an individual and collective sense of insecurity and fear. The findings from this study signal serious concerns about a public safety approach that prioritizes NYPD enforcement without addressing the perceived and experienced harms caused by police.

Many people in highly policed neighborhoods see the NYPD as an unsafe presence involving a constant threat of police surveillance and contact.

73% understood the NYPD as a constant or frequent presence somewhere in their community life, **56%** felt at times unsafe with the NYPD's presence, and **39%** felt specifically targeted by the NYPD.

73% had direct contact with the NYPD in their lives and **54%** reported experiencing unwanted police contact in their lives.

Many people in highly policed neighborhoods are worried or fearful about their own safety or the safety of loved ones during police interactions.

51% worried most days or everyday about their own safety with police and/or the safety of their friends/family. **70%** worried to some degree.

70% feared calling or approaching the NYPD for help because it would make the situation worse or lead to unnecessary violence.

Many people in highly policed neighborhoods experience or witness harm and violence at the hands of the NYPD.

71% experienced varying degrees and forms of harm by the NYPD in their life. For example, **32%** had a physically violent encounter with the NYPD that involved being hit, slapped, choked or punched, **19%** reported that the NYPD used bigoted, sexist or racist language toward them and **9%** experienced sexual violence by the NYPD such as sexual assault or being touched in a way that felt sexually inappropriate or uncomfortable.

37% witnessed varying types of NYPD violence in their neighborhood. For example, **24%** witnessed police threaten to kill someone, **13%** actually saw the NYPD shoot at someone, **34%** observed physical violence at the hands of the NYPD and **24%** heard the NYPD use language that was bigoted or prejudiced.

Key Finding #2:

Those living in heavily policed neighborhoods frequently describe a vision of community safety rooted in restoration and investment rather than enforcement and punishment.

Our study has major implications for how to ask New Yorkers about community safety to accurately understand what resources and services they desire, as well as their 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 safety discourse has largely been framed for communities as either policing or violence; a simplistic binary that centers policing as the key driver of safety. The Community Safety Project sought to interrogate community members' thoughts, feelings and ideas about all the ways to make neighborhoods safer. We offered participants a wide range of options outside of the narrow "only-police" logic to more accurately illuminate hopes and desires for community safety. By implementing our nuanced survey strategies, we were able to gather data that disrupts overly simplistic narratives about New Yorkers' perspectives on safety, the NYPD, and effective public safety investments.

Our study found that 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 seek investment in services and infrastructure that enhance their own and their community's ability to lead safe, healthy and thriving lives. Rather than simply decrease funding to the NYPD without other viable options, 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 after the 2020 mass mobilizations, our research findings reveal a sustained demand for an alternative vision of public safety in New York, centered on enhancing people's quality of life and their ability to live and interact freely and fully with their community. Heavily policed communities are calling for approaches to public safety that invest in a broad set of supports, services and institutions to more fundamentally address the root causes of violence.

When asked about making their neighborhoods safer, many people in highly policed communities prioritize non-police community safety solutions over policing.

When asked to write in a blank space the things they believe are needed to produce safe, healthy and thriving communities, **62%** of the responses did not include police, prisons or the legal system. Meanwhile, **50%** of the responses did include nonpolicing community investments such as economic security, schools, housing and health care.

When asked to create a city budget across 16 items that communicated their specific priorities for producing safe, healthy and thriving communities, **62%** did not include the police, and **69%** did not include the justice system in their top 5 priorities. In fact, **45%** gave the police and **51%** gave the justice system $0, suggesting no priority at all.

56% mostly or completely agreed with the "defund" or "divest/invest" movements that argue the police are too large in size, scope and power and **75%** agreed to some extent.

Many people in highly policed communities believe that budgets should prioritize non-police services and resources that make their neighborhoods safer.

55% mostly or completely agreed with the "defund" or "divest/invest" movements that argue for the need to change government budget priorities to fund nonpolicing services and resources that can help create safety and prevent violence by addressing the root causes of poverty and inequality (and **75%** agreed to some extent).

52% believed it would generally make them safer if the NYPD budget was reduced and that money was moved to community-based institutions, services and programs. In total across multiple questions, **77%** endorsed a divest/invest framing of safety at least once in the survey.

Across multiple survey items, the **ten investments** most prioritized in order to produce safe, healthy and thriving neighborhoods were: housing (and shelters); health care, jobs (economic security); public schools; 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.

Almost all people in highly policed neighborhoods believe that holding NYPD officers who commit violence accountable is key to community safety.

94% believed that officers who commit violence should be held accountable through some disciplinary action. For example, **33%** endorsed suspension, and **47%** endorsed termination for officers found guilty of excessive force.

Key Finding #3:

Many residents of heavily policed neighborhoods have experienced or fear experiencing negative interactions with the NYPD when seeking assistance, and often favor non-police responses to crises.

Many who participated in the Community Safety Project reported they sought the police for help during emergencies, only to find them unresponsive. When the police did respond, the encounters too frequently resulted in negative interactions. Reflecting a broader desire for alternative solutions, a considerable number reported instances where they opted to handle serious situations without involving the police, concerned about the potential violence or legal escalation they might cause. This preference for non-police options was further emphasized in response to mental health crises. The majority of respondents believed that the NYPD should not be first responders in mental health calls, citing that their presence generally exacerbates the situation. Instead, respondents desired assistance from other individuals or agencies considered more qualified to provide support.

Counter to dominant narratives, our research found that policing is not necessarily central to peoples' understanding of safety and that many participants understand safety in relation to a broadened notion of harm occurring to them and their communities. There is a strong demand from the community for investment in alternative emergency response resources, including community-based, non-police violence prevention professionals and local crisis response individuals and teams. This reflects a widespread desire for dependable emergency support options other than the NYPD, underscoring an urgent need for innovative and empathetic public safety approaches that prioritize community wellbeing and trust.

People in highly policed communities experienced negative interactions with the NYPD when seeking help.

62% had a negative experience when seeking the NYPD for help. For example, **52%** of those who sought the police for help said the NYPD didn't always show up, **38%** said they showed up half the time or less and **37%** said they felt disrespected, unsafe or harmed when the NYPD did show up.

35% were in a serious situation where they could have contacted the NYPD but decided to handle it without involving the police. They described a range of successful strategies and community members who assisted in resolving these issues. When asked why they chose not to call the police, **68%** explained they were worried about the NYPD harming them in some way.

Many people in highly policed communities want places or people to rely on in emergencies other than the NYPD.

55% indicated a strong desire for another place to turn in times of need other than the NYPD (**85%** to some degree).

Of those who were previously in danger or had an emergency where 911 was called, **50%** wished in their moment of crisis that there were people other than the police who responded.

61% indicated that community-based, nonpolice gun violence prevention programs like "Cure Violence" or "Advanced Peace Model" should be a high priority for their neighborhood.

Many people in highly policed communities want places other than the NYPD to turn to in instances of mental health crises

56% agreed with the statement that "the NYPD should be removed from mental health calls because they generally make the situation worse."

77% reported they would not want the NYPD as first responders at all if they or someone they loved was having a serious mental health issue that required 911.

Of those who experienced a mental health crisis where 911 was called on their behalf, **57%** desired options other than involving the NYPD in their particular mental health situation(s).

Key Recommendations:

1. Expand oversight, transparency & accountability of the NYPD

- Hold the NYPD accountable for failing to fire abusive officers
- End NYPD misinformation and propaganda
- Demand that the NYPD comply with city and state oversight laws
- Demand transparency on costs of NYPD settlements

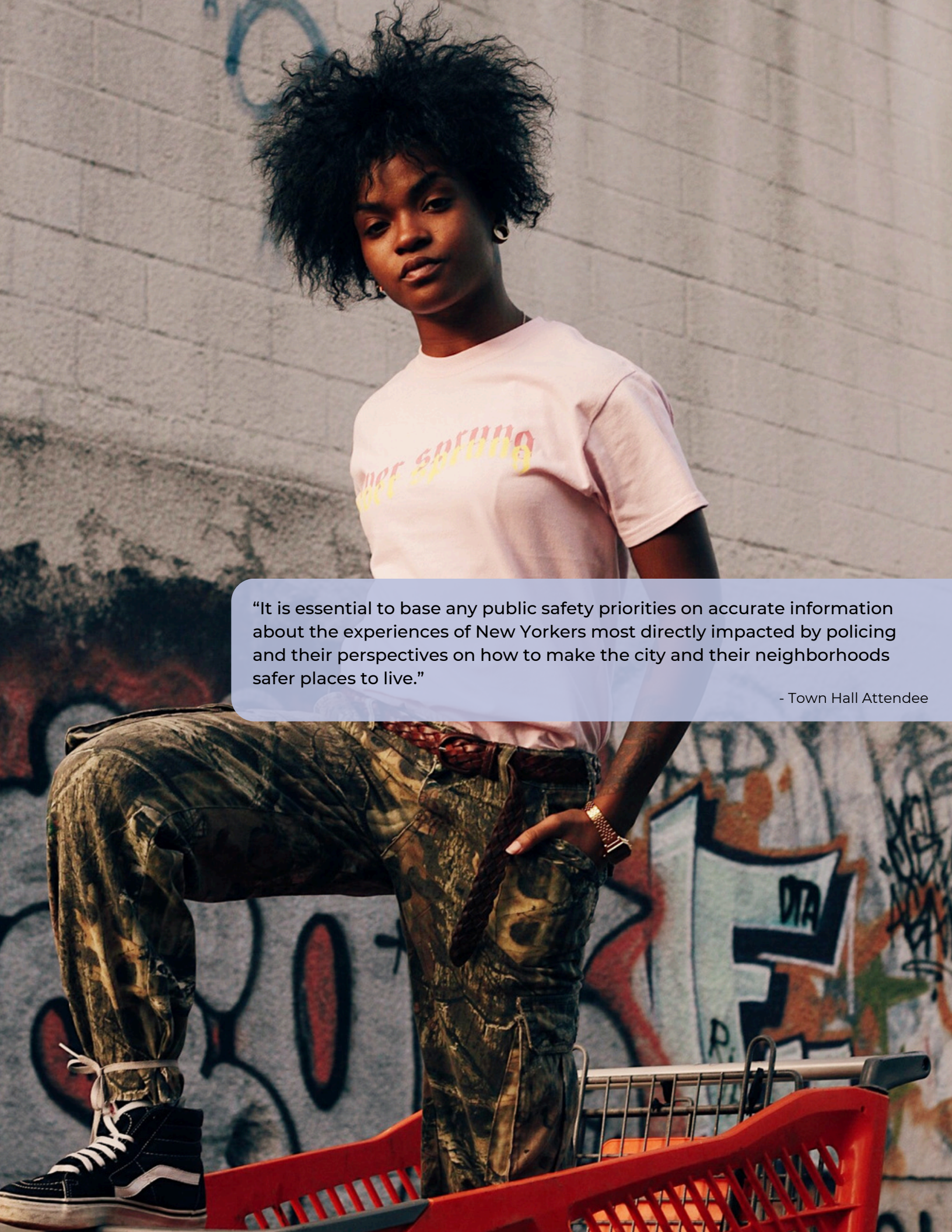## 2. Reduce the size, scope and budget of the NYPD

- Disarm and demilitarize police surveillance
- Disband historically abusive NYPD units
- Remove the NYPD from social service roles
- Reduce the growing number of police officers in non-police agencies
- Reduce the size of the NYPD
- Reduce the NYPD's budget

3. Invest in the fundamental needs of New Yorkers

- Housing
- Education
- Health care
- Mental health care
- Employment
- Youth programs and services
- Quality city infrastructure
- Community based organizations
- Food security
- Community-led safety strategies

4. Invest in violence prevention and crisis intervention programs

- Crisis Management Systems (CMS)
- Hate violence and bystander intervention programs
- Restorative justice programs in schools
- Non-police crisis response systems

"It is essential to base any public safety priorities on accurate information about the experiences of New Yorkers most directly impacted by policing and their perspectives on how to make the city and their neighborhoods safer places to live."

- Town Hall Attendee