

Leading Public Safety Reform in Cities

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Mayors are increasingly called upon to reimagine and reform policing and city services in ways that will make their cities safer and more just. That work starts with reflecting on what public safety and racial justice mean. *What does a safe and just city look like? How do we define and measure it?* These are complex questions that cannot be answered by one city department alone, nor by city government alone. Public safety reform requires a *holistic* approach that cuts across functions like policing, public works, health, education, and other policy areas. It is also inherently *collective* work: the city needs to work with the community and other stakeholders and vice versa. Finally, in order to create a better future, a city needs to *understand its past*: the unique history of each community allows local leaders to tell a story of evolution from deep inequality to a safer and more just future.

DIAGNOSING PUBLIC SAFETY IN YOUR CITY

This diagnostic tool builds on the work done by the Trotter Collaborative for Social Justice at HKS in partnership with three mayors who have been remarkable leaders in public safety reform: Mayor Woodfin of Birmingham, Alabama; Mayor Sheehan of Albany, New York; and Mayor Curtatone of Somerville, Massachusetts. The themes and questions in this diagnostic tool are based on their actions and experiences as well as on the core capabilities that the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative researches, teaches, and writes about: using data and evidence, cross-boundary collaboration, innovation and experimentation, civic engagement, performance management, negotiation, moral leadership, and public narrative.

The tool does not provide specific answers or promote specific solutions. Rather, it helps city leaders ask the right questions, look at the right data, and engage the right stakeholders in the work of public safety reform. It holds up a mirror for self-assessment, and it informs and helps structure the conversations that need to take place to prepare for meaningful and lasting change. The tool is based on three pillars of the work:

- 1. Public Safety and Policing as a Public-wide Responsibility:** Thinking about public safety and racial justice from an ecosystem perspective
- 2. Building an Architecture of Listening:** Strategically engaging a broad coalition of stakeholders who can collaboratively design, execute, and sustain the work
- 3. Learning from and Leading with History:** Using local history to learn lessons from the past and build agency in the present

¹ Input for this note was provided by Adnan Perwez, Devon Jerome Crawford, and Kathleen Schnaidt at the Trotter Collaborative and by Bulbul Kaul, LaChaun Banks and Gaylen Moore at the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative

PART I: PUBLIC SAFETY AND POLICING AS A PUBLIC-WIDE RESPONSIBILITY

Thinking about public safety and racial justice from an ecosystem perspective

Public safety is a concept and a responsibility that touches on virtually every domain of city government: racial, social, and environmental justice; physical and psychological safety in public and private spaces; emergency response; planning and physical spaces; education and information systems; public health and social services; and the overall degree of trust and wellbeing within cities and communities. With all this in mind...

Assess Your City

On a scale of 1-10 (1 meaning not all; 10 meaning best you've ever seen), how closely do your city departments (e.g., police, public works, parks and recreation, health, transportation, housing, fire and EMS) work together when it comes to producing public safety?

Questions for Further Inquiry, Diagnosis, and Conversation

1. How is public safety defined in your city? Who has defined it that way? How is it measured?
2. How effectively are you coordinating and distributing the work of maintaining public safety across departments?
 - a. Are the departments whose work impacts public safety working from the same definition and aiming for an agreed-upon set of goals and outcomes?
 - b. What incentives exist within various departments in your city to contribute to shared public safety goals?
 - c. Is there a formal mechanism for leaders of different departments to meet and strategize about public safety?
 - d. Are funds allocated proportionally to produce holistic outcomes for public safety?
 - e. What kinds of data on public safety do departments collect? Can these data be merged across departments? How are you measuring progress?
 - f. Do you have a trusted inner circle to lead the work?
 - g. Are there opportunities to establish cross-departmental task forces to advance particular public safety goals?
3. Are you re-evaluating "best practices"? Are there new policies, practices, and procedures that need to be put in place or old ones that should be jettisoned? Are there

regulatory or legislative reforms you need to pursue to enable a new approach to public safety?

- a. What kind of training is provided and required for 911 dispatchers and police? Does officer training include de-escalation tactics and strategies? Do you have mental wellness resources available for police?
- b. Do you have social workers and/or mental health professionals on city staff who can provide services to the community? Who is responding to medical and behavioral health related emergencies?
- c. What hiring and recruitment practices are you deploying to ensure that the police force is more representative of the community?
- d. What kinds of early intervention systems do you have in place to advance public safety? Does the city have a community resource inventory that is available to first responders and the public?
- e. What jail diversion approaches does the city deploy, if any?

PART II: BUILDING AN ARCHITECTURE OF LISTENING

Building a broad coalition to design, execute and sustain the work

Public safety is collective work. A city cannot understand community needs or build a public safety strategy without engaging a broad coalition of stakeholders. To do this work well, city leaders need to understand and integrate the perspectives of advocates, faith leaders, small business owners, renters, homeowners, landlords, developers, workers, and community members across the social and demographic spectrum. With all this in mind...

Assess Your City

Which community stakeholders are collaborating with city hall on reimagining and delivering public safety in the city? Which community stakeholders are not engaged and why?

Questions for Further Inquiry, Diagnosis and Conversation

1. Do you have a community engagement strategy for public safety already in place?
2. Do you have a mechanism for capturing how the public views or feels about public safety? How do these perceptions vary across the population (youth, for example)?
3. Are you actively working to support and broaden a coalition within the community?

4. How are you being transparent, accountable, and building authentic relationships with your community?
 - a. Are you publicly sharing your public safety policies?
 - b. Have you conducted a public audit of public safety related expenditures?
 - c. What is the civilian oversight model? Is it transparent and community inclusive? Are there consequences and disciplinary actions taken for police misconduct?
 - d. What kind of data do you share externally?
5. How are you engaging the business community? Could local businesses offer pro bono support?
6. How are you engaging the non-profit community? Are there opportunities for synergy?
7. How are you engaging faith-based organizations? Can they help you shape and amplify a shared narrative about safety and justice?
8. Do you know what the community is doing on its own to advance public safety? How are you connecting your efforts with their work? What kind of resources are you providing to the community to support community care?

PART III: LEARNING FROM AND LEADING WITH HISTORY

Drawing on critical events and episodes in your city's past to empower change

As we know, those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. Every city is unique and has its own story. Learning lessons from your city's past helps build individual and collective agency in the present. We find ourselves at an inflection point in the history of our country and our cities. City leaders and especially mayors have a responsibility to tell an honest history and help their communities imagine and write the next chapter with all the hope and moral clarity this moment requires. With this in mind...

Assess Your City

What is unique about the history of racial injustice in your city? How are you using your city's history—the pain suffered as well as the progress made—to empower people and to show them what they can do to help “bend the arc of history towards justice” as Dr. Martin Luther King envisioned?

Questions for Further Inquiry, Diagnosis and Conversation

1. Are you creating spaces for residents and advocates to share data, lived experiences, and historical interpretations and to listen to one another?

2. Are you leveraging precipitating events and long running injustices?
 - a. Are you situating the work happening now within a broader movement or history?

3. Are you identifying injustices through research, history, and moral framing?
 - a. Are you listening to and capturing existing historical narratives (particularly where the community took action to bring about change) in the community?
 - b. Are policy discussions and debates capturing the health, cultural, economic, and political challenges of the moment? Do they recognize challenges from the past in these areas and incorporate lessons learned?

4. Are you using local resources like libraries, schools, museums, public art, and other cultural outlets to tell the story of the past and help residents imagine a better future?
 - a. Is there a cohesive and morally compelling narrative being shared?
 - b. Are there ways to leverage media, legislation, or litigation to advance this story?

THREE EXAMPLES OF CITIES LEADING PUBLIC SAFETY INNOVATION

The three examples below, from cities that worked on public safety reform with the Trotter Collaborative, help show what this work looks like in its early stages.

Birmingham, Alabama

In December 2020, Mayor Randall Woodfin’s office released the “Reform and Reimagine Birmingham Public Safety” report, detailing the recommendations of the Birmingham Public Safety Task Force and the administration’s 2021-2025 public safety policy agenda. That agenda is described as “a people-centric approach to improve public safety by:

- 1) investing in the people and communities that can have the greatest impact on public safety;
- 2) reforming current public safety operations;
- 3) creating new infrastructure for a reimaged public safety system; and
- 4) continuing to improve intergovernmental collaboration.”

In July 2020, Mayor Woodfin had charged the public safety task force with a full and urgent review of the city’s approach and practices. Over 90 days, the group held 30 working meetings, hosted eleven listening sessions across the community, and surveyed both residents and law enforcement. Recommendations were also informed by analysis of national and local reform models, programs, and frameworks. The final report organized recommendations around four pillars: community empowerment, policy and oversight, training and education, and safety and wellness. More information on Birmingham’s efforts is available [here](#).

Albany, New York

In the summer of 2020, the City of Albany and Mayor Kathy Sheehan launched the Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative to address persistent racial bias, including the over policing of communities of color, and to make law enforcement more transparent and accountable. The Collaborative established working groups to study and make recommendations in five areas:

- 1) Policies, Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), and General Orders
- 2) Civilian Oversight
- 3) Police Department Functions
- 4) Community Safety and Restorative Justice
- 5) Recruitment, Retention, Training and Officer Development

Dozens of meetings with stakeholders revealed areas of agreement and alignment between the community and its police force, such as ending police involvement in everyday issues like noise complaints, calls for emergency mental health services, and assistance for and with community members without safe places to call home. Each working group shared its findings and recommendations in a final report, available [here](#).

Somerville, Massachusetts

On June 4, 2020, Somerville Mayor Joseph Curtatone declared systemic racism a public safety and health emergency. The city committed to establishing an independent civilian oversight structure for the police department, petitioned to end police union oversight of misconduct investigations, redirected assets seized by police to diversion and social services, along with other local reforms and recommendations for changes at the state level. The city partnered with the Trotter Collaborative to develop a report examining:

- The current national and local context;
- Local police and justice reform efforts over the past half century;
- Literature on the social determinants of health and violence;
- Community perspectives on safety and policing;
- City budgets; and
- Police data and dispatch processes.

The report recommended the creation of a comprehensive and publicly-available asset map; investments in community safety through affordable housing, improved healthcare, and language access across city services; establishing strong wraparound supports (such as mentoring, counseling, and case management) for underserved communities and those struggling with mental illness; restructuring 911 dispatch procedures and establishing crisis assistance teams for non-violent situations; expanding jail diversion programs; exploring survivor-centered approaches to justice; and other recommendations at the level of city government. More information on police reform in Somerville is available [here](#).