

# Reimagining Public Safety in Asheville, NC

Community Engagement Summary Results

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## Executive Summary

The goal of this project was to provide a venue for feedback about public safety priorities in Asheville, NC and drive survey responses to the online survey developed by the City of Asheville. Feedback from this community engagement process will be used by the City of Asheville to make budgetary decisions. Through 6 virtual listening sessions, several one-on-one meetings and 2 in-person engagements, Asheville residents and stakeholders from relevant populations highlighted the strengths, vision, challenges and opportunities in regard to public safety in Asheville; specifically community policing efforts. In addition to discussing themes in these areas, this report summarizes several responses to what public safety means to Asheville residents, prioritizing services that should be divested and reinvested and naming relevant community partners who are missing from the conversation, who should be included in future engagement.

As described in greater detail in this report, themes related to reimagining public safety in Asheville include: **Racial Equity, Ownership and Comfort in Personal and Community Spaces, Equal Access to Resources, Representation, Proper Training, Transparency, and Trust.**

“Feeling comfortable in one’s own space” was a common phrase heard throughout the engagement process. Black Asheville residents expressed the idea of safety as feeling comfortable in their personal spaces like homes and neighborhoods but also in public spaces without the feeling of being observed or policed.

This report also details challenges faced by current Asheville Police Department Officers. Major themes related to reimagining public safety from an APD Officer’s perspective include: **Trust, Transparency, Support from Leadership, Community Pride, and increased Tactical Training.**

While this feedback is described in greater detail in this full report, it is important to recognize that continued collaboration will be necessary to determine the appropriate levels of public safety funding.

## Introduction

Following the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Black Asheville Demands demanded that the City acknowledge a past and a present that have caused harm to the Black community. Since June 6, City Council has voted to remove or repurpose the Vance Monument, passed a resolution supporting community reparations, and passed a budget that only funded departments for three months so that City staff could work with the community to reimagine public safety. The work to fund departments for the rest of the FY21 budget year relies on the input from the community engagement sessions.

The City of Asheville has contracted with community facilitators I Am Brilliant and Amplify Community Consulting to hear ideas for how public safety in Asheville could be improved before any future budgetary decisions are made.

## Methodology

The project was co-led by Christine Edwards with Amplify Consulting, LLC and Shemekka Ebony of I Am Brilliant. Amplify Consulting identified Leadership Matters Group as a subconsultant partner specializing in the area of public safety to strategic facilitation and interaction with APD. Amplify Consulting facilitated goals for the project related to logistical organization, developing and implementing the engagement strategy. Christine Edwards served as a co-facilitator during the virtual listening sessions and coordinated the drop-in in-person event. Shemekka Ebony served as a co-leader and co-facilitator on virtual listening sessions in addition to working with Asheville residents in inclusive dialogue and feedback and has identified individuals from key interest groups to help spread awareness of the project survey.

This report focuses on data collected from 6 virtual listening sessions conducted via Zoom. One session was a project kick-off meeting conducted with community partners. One session was themed Civics 101 to increase awareness of city operations. There were four general listening sessions scheduled for different times of the day and offered multiple times during the week to remove participation barriers. All community listening sessions took place between the week of August 31st and September 7th. There was additional engagement conducted, community capacity building, during the week of September 14th, after the initial summary report was submitted. The public safety survey hosted on PublicInput.com opened at 7:30 pm on September 3 and closed at 5:00pm on September 11.

There were two in person engagement opportunities: a listening session with Asheville Police Department (APD) Officers held on September 10 at 4:00pm and a Covid-19 safe community drop-in session held on September 11 from 2:00 to 4:30pm.

## Results

Virtual Listening Sessions						
	9/3 6:00 PM Kick-off Meeting	9/8 12:30 PM	9/9 12:30 PM	9/9 6:00 PM Civics 101	9/10 6:00 PM	9/11 11:00 AM
Registered	33	109	75	107	71	67
Attendance	42	101	63	72	51	65
White <sup>1</sup>	25%	82%	81%	87%	78%	77%
Black	68%	18%	18%	12%	17%	16%
Latinx	0	0	0	0	4%	0
Asian	0	0	0	4%	0	0
Native	0	0	0	0	0	3%
Race Unknown	0	0	0	0	0	3%
Other	6%	0	0	0	0	0

### Total virtual engagement: 461

At each virtual listening session, participants were welcomed into the meeting venue (Zoom video conferencing) and had audio and text controls. Using the chat function, they could communicate with all panelists and attendees, using the Q&A function, they could ask questions anonymously and using the Raise Hand function, could volunteer to speak and have their voice added to the conversation.

Participants were asked to respond to three activities during the virtual sessions: I AM Brilliant, asking people to introduce themselves and their unique qualities that make them a brilliant

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix for full demographics report. Demographics reported here are based on self reported information obtained by a poll/survey administered during the listening session.

member of the Asheville community, to reflect on a high level to **three public safety survey questions** and to complete a visioning activity to envision the future of a safer Asheville.

#### Virtual listening session Agenda

- I. Welcome Video from City of Asheville
- II. Introductions
- III. Exercise 1: I Am Brilliant
- IV. Why we are here- Public Safety Survey
- V. Exercise 2: Visioning
- VI. Demographics poll
- VII. Calls to Action

#### Three questions asked at every meeting:

- What does safety mean to you?
- Which area should be a priority and which should be reallocated?
- Who's missing from the conversation?

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## Summary Results<sup>2</sup> from all virtual Listening Sessions<sup>3</sup>

What does safety mean to you?

- A comfort level when I see men and women in blue
- Not only are police there to serve me when I need them. I don't feel I have the same protections under the law.
- I witnessed 11 officers outside of the United Way Building addressing a homeless person...
- Safety to me means having other resources to turn to other than the police.
- Safety to me means equitable access to what everyone needs to thrive.
- Safety is the ability to move around in the environment without harm either physical or emotional and to have the food, shelter and other necessary resources needed to thrive.
- Safety allows people free expression with risk or fear.
- Access to basic needs.
- Community being cared for without judgement.
- Removing barriers to affordable housing and higher paying jobs, especially from their backgrounds and things that may have happened in the past.
- Being able to protest against police violence and injustice and to not experience violence in response from the police and excusing that violence from the city officials.
- When I feel respected
- When all people are treated with equity and justice
- To see that all people are treated with the same respect and care by police.
- As a specific - to feel safe from vehicular traffic when walking on city sidewalks & biking on the streets.
- Safety is creating spaces for people from different neighborhoods to talk and get to know one another.
- I feel safe when I feel represented. Oftentimes, as a Black Man, I don't feel safe being a target in Asheville- community, police culture, and feeling of unease. Felt safest when I have seen more diversity and representation.

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<sup>2</sup> Comments typed in the chat or verbally spoken during the listening session

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix A: Web Chat Text

- People show up to unify and grow through conflict. Restorative justice. When I know these things are happening, I feel safe.
- Transparency in the police department and how their budget is used and how it's playing out.
- Transparency about APD training and policies helps people to feel safe.

Which area should be a priority and which should be reallocated?

- The community outreach piece is a real eye-sore. Need for relationship building in patrol communities
- What's important isn't the right question. All is important - nothing can not be addressed.
- Police aren't needed for all these roles. They are not trained for some. We must invest in a robust strategic action plan on policing alternatives and resource those alternatives!
- Priority: Death response/Investigation & Violent crime
- Priorities: Property crime, traffic safety, violent crime, others to be relocated to trained personnel.
- Only if a person's life is in danger, would actual police with arms need to be deployed. Other situations require trained individuals with experience in the issues requiring outside help. Violent situations call for experienced police officers trained to handle such happenings.
- Re: drug and alcohol enforcement: Long term residential treatment and recognition of mental health needs  
but what needs to happen is partnering with other resources, and changing the current culture of APD which arrives at all incidents with a dangerous denial/defensive attitude.
- I think that the attitude of authority and force is not conducive to the areas that they are currently involved in.
- Should be about the context of how they are doing their jobs. There should be analysis of the impact.
- Reallocate funding from police to mental health professionals to train them as first responders for drug and alcohol enforcement, mental health and addiction, and domestic violence. PARTICULARLY domestic violence. There is an unusually high rate of domestic abuse in police officers as it is.
- Property crimes, Violent crimes, Traffic enforcement, Death investigation if determined to be of violent/malevolent nature.
- I think the black community should have a huge voice in how these funds should



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be reallocated. I think this would require big structural changes and not shuffling money around.

- Should be reallocated: Mental Health and Addiction, Nuisance Crimes, Community Outreach, Crowd Management
- De-escalation is very important in rendering police services and reducing harm
- Calls regarding Mental Health and Wellness Checks, Addiction, victims of crime, homeless individuals, and domestic disturbances should be handled by trained professionals in the mental health and medical fields with the goal of support through resources and rehabilitation instead of punishment and force
- Response should be some combination of deputized folks with the ability to de-escalate. Other responses through trained units in combination with social service orgs.

Who's missing from the conversation?

- Are there other ways to do storytelling and surveying in communities that are left out?
- Individuals with lived experiences
- People who are most impacted
- People in public housing
- People who are always left out
- Other criminal justice stakeholders ie judges, probation, DAs office, Public Defenders
- People who are affected by each issue get a chance to respond to how each issue is addressed
- More Black Men should be involved.
- Houseless community
- People who are incarcerated
- Public Housing Residents
- Youth and I would include children in that.
- People working in service industry
- Elderly people
- People who don't have access to internet
- The Western North Carolina AIDS Project
- Social workers
- Vaya Health

- Steady Collective
- BeLoved Community
- Mental health screening/therapy for law enforcement
- Making sure the people who are affected by each issue get a chance to respond to how each issue is addressed
- LGBTQ Community
- Schools and Teachers
- The business community
- The Black business community

## Common Themes from Virtual Listening Sessions

<b>What does safety mean to you?</b>	<b>Which area should be a priority and which should be reallocated?</b>	<b>Who's missing from the conversation?</b>
Freedom	Violent crime should be a priority for APD	LGBTQ residents
Equal access to resources	De-escalation training	Youth
Racial Equity	Increased Community engagement	Teachers
Ownership of space	Increased budget transparency	Homeless individuals and families
Representation	Increased Collaboration between APD and Mental Health Service Providers	Those experiencing poverty
Mutual respect	Mental Health services should be conducted by trained professionals	Seniors/Elderly residents
	Nuisance Crimes should be reallocated	Black Asheville residents
	Crowd Management should be reallocated	Residents experiencing the Digital Divide

# In-person APD Listening Session Summary

September 10, 2020

Harrah's Cherokee Civic Center

Agenda

- I. Greetings from City Manager
- II. Why we are here
- III. Discussion Questions
  - What does “safety” mean to you as an APD officer?
  - What would be your (duties) start, stop, continue as an APD officer? Why?
  - What are APD officers missing (i.e., training, wellness support, more meaningful community engagement opportunities, etc.)

APD Listening Session Summary compiled by Glenn Thomas

## Overview

The “Reimagine Public Safety in Asheville” listening session with the Asheville Police Department (APD) included over 40 sworn and non-sworn APD employees, with primarily sworn officers in attendance. The discussion was facilitated for 70 minutes and covered three questions: 1) Safety - What does safety mean to you (as an APD employee), 2) Action Perspective - As an APD employee, what would you start, stop, or continue as a department/city, and 3) Additional Needs - What is APD missing (resources, training, support, etc.).

For the purpose of this summary, the questions asked in the listening session have been placed into three themed categories - safety, action perspective, and additional needs.

**Safety: Responses to the question “What does safety mean to you,” were present in themes of *trust and intense scrutiny*.** APD respondents shared their thoughts of not feeling supported by elected and city leaders. An example of this concern was shared through articulating the differences between public-facing statements and private statements made by city leadership on matters pertaining to the APD. Statements that highlighted the issue of *trust* included, and paraphrasing: *there is a lack of trust inside the department as it pertains to city elected officials, APD does not feel heard, and APD wants their side of polarizing stories to be heard.*

APD respondents also indicated that they were being *intensely scrutinized* by not only the public, but also within the city leadership. These occurrences have led APD to feel that they are unable to fully execute their job duties absent of professional/personal retaliation. Safety concerns additionally included APD respondents highlighting the need for proper officer training, addressing the attrition rate, and mending the adversarial relationship between APD and City Council.

**Action Perspective: Responses to the question “What should APD start, stop, or continue,” were present in themes of *communication, accountability, and collaboration*.** APD

respondents shared their thoughts on how communication could be better executed by, 1) not publicly criticizing APD without fully understanding incident circumstances, 2) communicating with APD consistently, and with a sense of empathy, 3) Directly addressing antiquated ordinances that place APD in lose-lose situations with the public, and 4) ending the knee-jerk responses to community groups who are mostly not from Asheville.

APD respondents articulated that *accountability* was important to them as well. Comments from attendees addressed concerns that city leadership teams should begin taking the lead on crime prevention (from a holistic perspective), city council should have to commit to APD ride-alongs, mental health/other support agencies should be held accountable to their incident response contributions, and APD/City of Asheville should tell the lived experiences of APD officers with the Asheville community. For example, when mental health service providers respond, they should stay on the scene until the incident is complete to provide some level of follow up or solution. If the jail is no longer taking overnight stays for mental health crises, what is the solution for keeping Asheville residents safe if this person is released back into the community? And officers expressed the desire to share their stories so residents understand that they are Asheville residents too and they love Asheville like everyone else.

Finally, APD respondents shared their insights on *collaboration*. Responses on collaboration “action perspectives” included having more non-profits align/collaborate more effectively, in order to better support and respond to community incidents involving non-police authorities. Additionally, APD respondents shared the need for a more uniform APD and community support network strategy in order to provide best in-class service to community residents, and this includes more robust APD partnerships like collaboration between the City and RHA Health Services.

**Additional Needs: Responses to the question “What is APD missing,” were present in themes of *training, wellness, and community strategy*.** APD respondents shared their thoughts on how

training, specifically in the areas of hand-to-hand de-escalation can improve officer interaction outcomes. The mental and physical wellness of APD officers, as a priority, was discussed as an important aspect of serving the community better and cultivating a healthy APD culture. APD respondents also shared their feelings on how important a community-based strategy should include *residents with influence* to help support needs-based programs to improve the APD-community relationship. Additionally, better compensation, 911 center position needs, and disseminating more positive APD de-escalation stories were shared as a means to develop a more positive APD culture.

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## Drop-In Event Summary<sup>4</sup>

We had numerous community members visit the drop in event hosted at the Edington Center from 2:00-4:30 PM. The Housing Authority of the City of Asheville (HACA) staff was very helpful in setting up an experience that was both Covid-19 safe and engaging for Asheville residents.

Attendees rotated through three available activities in the event space:

- Community Engagement Gallery
- Complete the survey online or via paper, and
- Share your story via video testimonial

Approximate Number of Attendees: 60; approximately 15-20 people in the space per 30-minute time slot.

At the in-person event, attendees shared their thoughts and feedback reimagining public safety, reflected on their personal definition of safety and networked with one another. City of Asheville staff and City Council Members were present at the drop-in event.

Event organizers arranged for boxed meals to be distributed. Various ages and ethnicities were represented at the event. Adults showed up with children to experience the engagement and workers dropped by on their lunch breaks to provide feedback.

When asked to **describe a time where they felt safe in Asheville**, attendees responded:

- “I don’t think I felt a time where I wasn’t safe”
- “I feel safe when I walk my dog in the morning and in the evening. From where I live, there’s lighting and neighbors and sidewalks”
- “as a Black woman, [there] should be laws and law enforcement that were actually built to support and protect us”
- “It’s hard to think of a time when i felt safe because that is the norm”
- “I pretty much always feel safe in Asheville”

When asked **what does safety mean to you**, attendees responded:

- “I think safety means stop shooting because people keep dying and I feel sad for the people”
- “Live and work in Asheville and know that our city is a place where everyone is welcome”
- “It means that I don’t like that people are killing little kids because they don’t get to see their moms and dads anymore”

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<sup>4</sup> View Appendix for Engagement Summary Report for further details

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## Community Engagement and Capacity Building<sup>5</sup>

I Am Brilliant Community Engagement Summary compiled by Shemekka Ebony

I Am Brilliant was involved with engaging with several community members throughout this engagement process. In an effort to connect with community members we reached out to Yashika Smith and Brenda Mills for guidance and they were amazing resources that were delivered. We have had several phone, video, and email correspondence with the following individuals identified as stakeholders, influencers, and community leaders.

We were able to connect with the following Asheville residents and staff:

- Yashika Smith connected us to Paulina Mendez, Training Consultant with the Office of Equity and Inclusion. Paulina referred us to Carolina.
- Yashika Smith connected us to Shuvonda and David at the Edington Center to secure our drop in site, and get support sharing the survey in community.
- Brenda Mills connected us to Alex Mitchiner who is Workforce Development Program Coordinator. Alex connected us with two City Youth Leadership Academy graduates and high school seniors Porsha and Ashley. Porsha and Ashley posted surveys and outreach on Instagram and Snapchat targeting youth.

Davidson Jones offered support with facilitator process feedback.

We received emails of support and more community connections from self-identified community leaders like Roberta Wall.

I Am Brilliant posted frequently about taking available surveys in the Asheville Black Lives Matter Facebook group and thru targeted boosts in Facebook and Instagram. We also engaged Beloved Asheville via messenger for support and sharing about the survey.

In summary, we were able to engage several targeted groups of interest including Latinx, youth, senior citizens, and residents who are under-resourced.

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix for full I Am Brilliant Engagement Report

## Public Safety Survey Comments

### IMPORTANT NOTE:

The online responses were compiled through the publicinput.com platform. Responses are still being analyzed and work is being done to make sure there are no duplicate responses. With a commitment to transparency, all comments have been included in the below appendix and may include some duplicates.

### ONLINE PARTICIPANTS:

5797 confirmed out of an initial report of 11,522. Work continues as staff reviews the data to make sure duplicates and discrepancies are addressed. The total number of respondents may turn out to be slightly higher than 5797.

### INITIAL IMPRESSIONS OF QUESTION #2

Question #2 - Describe what your safe Asheville would look like. What do you think is needed to help you feel safer in your community?

To inform the first round of budget recommendations to be made at the Tuesday, September 22 City Council meeting, all comments under Question #2 were read by staff. Initial impressions indicate the themes identified in the virtual sessions are similar to the themes in the comments.

The comments in this section suggest many people are strongly supportive of the delivery of police services and there are many who are deeply concerned with how those services are delivered.

Staff will continue to analyze the data to reveal opportunities to be explored in the next phase of this re-imagining public safety initiative which will begin in the next couple of months as work begins on the Fiscal Year 21-22 begins.

Final results for multiple choice questions will be posted to the project page in the next month once discrepancies and duplicates are addressed.

## Conclusion

Through the engagement process, it appears that Asheville residents are experiencing different versions of the City of Asheville based on their interactions with public safety professionals and general feeling of acceptedness in the community.

Many long-time activists and residents have lived experiences of several engagement sessions in the past with no evidence of follow through. When they show up, they are hoping to move beyond their past engagement experiences and move towards tangible positive change.

Community organizers have expressed interest in learning more about how the City of Asheville allocates funding on public safety and would like to have a better understanding of city operations in general. They are appreciative of the allies who are already involved and have hope for consistent community engagement.

## Appendix

- A. [I Am Brilliant Community Engagement Report](#)
- B. [Virtual Listening Sessions Chat Text Transcript](#)
- C. [Demographic Polling Data](#)
- D. [Engagement Summary Report With Photos and Video Testimonials](#)
- E. [PublicInput.com Survey Comments](#)