



DEAR SPEAKER PELOSI AND MINORITY LEADER SCHUMER:

We are a group of civil rights organizations, elected officials, faith leaders, academics, public defenders, and community led organizers who are writing to ask you to take immediate action to heal our American cities and foster a society where all people feel safe.

The current protests across the nation—in the aftermath of the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and Tony McDade—are just the latest signs of racism and of the all-too-apparent crisis in policing in America. But it would be a mistake to focus on policing as an institution, and then to contemplate the reforms to the profession that could be made. We've made that mistake before.

Eric Garner. Michael Brown. Laquan McDonald. Sandra Bland. Jessica Williams. These police killings six years ago sparked protests across the country and birthed the Black Lives Matter movement. Six years later, however, not much has changed.

The solutions we need right now both to protect our safety and to rescue our democracy are ones that meet the scale of the problem. To respond to George Floyd's death, or Breonna Taylor's death, we must replace the questions about how to reform policing with questions about what role policing should play in a broader vision for safety and justice in America.

Police budgets have ballooned so much that in many cities across the country policing gobbles up 40% or more of the city budget. Even small changes in police budgets can mean large changes for other departments. Now more than ever, we need to invest in the services that will make our communities safe and healthy instead of funding police departments at the expense of these other vital functions. We are at a point in our history when the global pandemic has precipitated the highest unemployment levels since the Great Depression, left tens of millions of Americans unable to pay rent or their mortgage, and exposed how a lack of universal health care jeopardizes the health and safety not only the uninsured but all of us, as a virus spreads through communities.

So, today our solutions must change the ways our communities work by shrinking the overall footprint of the criminal legal system, including police, in our country—and by investing the savings in areas that truly will make us safer. The federal government can and should lead the way. Here's how to do so:

- ▶ The HEROES Act provided \$300 million for the Community Oriented Policing Services program, which could be used for “hiring and rehiring of additional career law enforcement officers.” The Act should be amended, and aid to cities, counties, and states should include a prohibition on supplementing local law enforcement budgets. The money should be diverted to non-law enforcement emergency response services.
- ▶ Since 1994, the federal government has allocated over 14 billion dollars to the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) program. Those dollars have funded the hiring of many thousands of police officers, equipment, and training. Last year's budget for the program

hit over \$300 million dollars. Additionally, through COPS, this administration has launched Operation Relentless Pursuit, increasing the number of federal law enforcement officers in seven cities. This program should be discontinued and the dollars redirected to community led non-law enforcement focused safety priorities.

- ▶ The federal government must cease operations of the Community Oriented Policing Services program and redirect its budget to local and state governments to build out non-law enforcement expertise in responding to calls for service. Here are two examples:
 - We need the right experts responding to the right problems. Shift most first-responder responsibilities away from traditional law enforcement agencies because most problems arising from substance use disorders, mental health diagnoses, and poverty require medical professionals and social workers, not criminal enforcement or armed officers. Law enforcement officers are not trained and equipped to be experts in responding to mental health crises. We shouldn't send armed law enforcement to respond to a mental health crisis any more than we'd send a social worker to respond to a burglary in progress.
 - Diversify violence prevention resources by shifting dollars from police budgets to violence interruptions programs. Public safety budgets reflect a belief that law enforcement is the primary way to reduce violence, in large part because police officers solve serious crimes like homicides. However, clearance rates for homicides are near or at all time lows in cities across the country. We need to invest resources in a public health approach to violence prevention that stops fatal violence before it occurs and stops its spread by interrupting ongoing conflicts, working with community members at the highest risk to change behavior related to violence and community norms.

In the U.S., policing is seen as a mostly local issue. However, the federal government provides significant financial support to local and state jurisdictions, and those dollars continue to shape the contours of policing throughout the country. As Rachel Harmon, a law professor at the University of Virginia and a former federal prosecutor, has written, these federal resources “provide incentives to local police departments to conduct additional arrests, use force, intimidate citizens, take private property, and engage in electronic surveillance of individuals.” Right now, in the middle of a national policing crisis and rapidly shrinking local government budgets, Congress should not supplement local law enforcement budgets at the expense of other vital services.

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