

Some Black residents still distrust Baltimore police department, even after reforms, research finds

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Despite a series of reforms to the Baltimore Police Department (BPD) instituted by the U.S. Department of Justice, a University of Maryland study finds that some Black residents still have concerns that the police

are ineffective and racially biased.

Two companion reports, published by the Abell Foundation, drawing on the experiences of other cities and released on Wednesday, suggests that a proposed program to reroute low-risk 911 calls to civilian responders offers a potential avenue for improving police effectiveness, performance and community relations.

Both efforts follow a 2017 federal mandate for wide-ranging BPD reforms in the wake of Freddy Gray's 2015 death while in officers' custody and a corruption scandal in its Gun Trace Task Force. Together, they emphasize the urgent need for more comprehensive reforms and increased investment in community-based initiatives to address longstanding issues of distrust and tension between the [police department](#) and Black residents.

"The Baltimore Police Department has made important reforms in the last few years, but these studies should help the department in its future strategy for restoring confidence in the Black community and improving responses to a variety of 911 calls that tax police officer skills," said Distinguished University Professor of public policy Peter Reuter, principal investigator for the overall project.

In the [first report](#), Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice Assistant Professor Brooklynn Hitchens and Associate Professor Lauren Porter, conducted interviews and focus groups with 93 Black residents from diverse backgrounds to understand their experiences, attitudes and perceptions toward the department.

Key findings indicated widespread dissatisfaction with the BPD in reducing crime and ensuring public safety, along with concerns about [racial profiling](#) and use of excessive force and reluctance to call the police. Interviewees also expressed an interest in more recreation centers

to keep youths off the streets and better police training in engaging respectfully with people.

"Contrary to popular belief, Black participants were not 'anti-police' altogether. They held nuanced perceptions of the Baltimore Police Department that were steeped in both direct and vicarious experiences," said Hitchens.

"Although many of these experiences were negative, participants desired for police to be more actively engaged in their community and to intervene in criminal activity such as drug dealing. More generally, participants wanted officers to build rapport with residents, get out of their vehicles and use a humanistic approach to crime prevention."

The [second report](#), by criminology and criminal justice Associate Professor Greg Midgette and public policy Associate Professor Luke Spreen and Reuter explored extending the Behavioral Health 9-1-1 Diversion Pilot Program (BHD).

It was started in 2021 to allow dispatchers to redirect [emergency calls](#) about non-weapon behavioral health crises to Baltimore Crisis Response, potentially without police presence.

The research team found that as of January 2024, 53% of the 543 calls handled by BHD were resolved without police intervention, resulting in approximately 500 saved hours for the police and fire departments.

"Police forces in big cities are struggling to recruit patrol officers. They also struggle in handling 911 calls involving a range of distress, like lack of housing and behavioral problems, that afflict our society," Reuter said. "Shifting responsibility for many 911 calls from the police to social service agencies helps on both these counts."

The researchers also analyzed successful reforms in Albuquerque, Atlanta and Houston, where certain categories of other non-criminal 911 calls are redirected to civilian agencies. And they examined Baltimore's 911 data, modeling scenarios for rerouting additional calls and estimating potential benefits.

They found that routing low-risk 911 calls away from the BPD to civilian first responders alleviates some of the strain on law enforcement resources, enhances police efficiency, performance and community relations, and indirectly addresses the officer shortage that has plagued the department.

"They can help an otherwise underserved community while allowing police to refocus their resources," said Midgette.

The researchers aim for these findings to help guide policy decisions on enhancing public safety and well-being in Baltimore, particularly within marginalized communities.

More information: What Can Be Done To Improve Police Community Relations In Baltimore? Exploring the experiences and perspectives of Black residents. abell.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/abell-2021-07-20-what-can-be-done-to-improve-police-community-relations-in-baltimore-exploring-the-experiences-and-perspectives-of-black-residents-part-1-digital.pdf

Improving Baltimore Police Relations With the City's Black Community: Alternate response to non-criminal emergency calls for service. abell.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/abell-2021-07-20-improving-baltimore-police-relations-with-the-citys-black-community-alternate-response-to-non-criminal-emergency-calls-for-service-part-2-digital.pdf

Provided by University of Maryland

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