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Toward Trust

Grassroots Recommendations for Police Reform in Baltimore

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Introduction and summary

When Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old black man, died in the custody of Baltimore police officers, the incident brought to a head years of community anger and frustration with the city's police department. The protests and violence that followed—sometimes referred to as the Baltimore Uprising—focused a national spotlight on the city.¹ But Gray's death was only the latest grievance against a police department that many local residents have long perceived as overly aggressive, out of touch with the community, and able to act with impunity.

The call for police reform is especially relevant at this moment. Baltimore is just one of a number of major U.S. cities that recently have experienced tensions between police and the communities they serve, particularly poor communities and communities of color. The deaths of Eric Garner,² Walter Scott,³ and others at the hands of police sparked a national conversation on police violence, and the Black Lives Matter movement has emerged as a powerful voice calling for reform.

The federal government has also acknowledged the need for policing reform and accountability. Between 2009 and 2014, the U.S. Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division has opened more than 20 investigations into police departments, more than twice as many as the previous five years.⁴ Last year, the Department of Justice convened the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, which released its recommendations in May 2015.⁵ In light of this national focus on policing, this report proposes a series of recommendations that the mayor of Baltimore, the Baltimore City Council, and the police commissioner of the Baltimore Police Department, or BPD, can adopt to reform and improve the BPD.

In the weeks after Gray's death, a coalition of local community organizations began holding regular meetings in Baltimore to come up with a plan to move forward. Called the Campaign for Justice, Safety, and Jobs, the coalition represents a wide range of grassroots, civic, and religious leadership in Baltimore, including

countless organizations and institutions that have advocated for police reform for years. On June 8, 2015, the campaign released the following framework, which has informed the recommendations in this report:

Effective law enforcement upholds equal justice and protects public safety by ensuring community accessibility, transparency, and accountability. True community policing must include an intentional orientation in language, practice and policy of police as protectors, partners and fellow community members, rather than antagonists and occupiers of our neighborhoods, towns and cities.⁶

Building off of that framework, this report focuses on ideas that, together, would make the BPD more accountable to residents, more transparent about its internal workings, and ultimately more effective at preventing and solving serious crimes.

The six recommendations are:

1. Fire police officers who have demonstrated corruption or unnecessary violence
2. Remove the gag order on victims of police misconduct
3. Distribute body cameras to all police officers within one year and ensure that the public has access to footage
4. Improve community policing by prioritizing, measuring, and incentivizing problem solving and community satisfaction
5. Publish all Baltimore Police Department policies online
6. Ensure that every police officer is trained in de-escalation techniques

As broad principles, these recommendations can serve as a model and be adapted and repurposed for other cities dealing with police-community tensions.

A history of aggression

The Baltimore Police Department has a long history of aggressive policing, particularly in communities of color. In 1930, the city's black newspaper, *The Baltimore Afro-American*, covered a police shooting of an unarmed black man and blamed a police captain's policy of "shoot first, investigate and explain later."⁷ High-profile police shootings have made news every decade since,⁸ and police-community relations continued to suffer, including in 1980, when the NAACP called for a federal investigation into police brutality by the BPD. In the mid-1990s, city leadership instituted a policy of zero-tolerance policing,⁹ which led to a rise in arrests for minor crimes, culminating in 2005, when police made approximately 100,000 arrests in a city of 640,000 people.¹⁰ More than 23,000 of those arrested were released without charge.¹¹

In 2010, city leadership abandoned the official policy of zero-tolerance policing, but residents continued to complain of overly aggressive police officers and their continued reliance on "quality

of life"-style arrests for minor crimes.¹² In 2013, tensions escalated when Baltimore resident Tyrone West died in police custody after being pulled over and beaten by police.¹³ In September 2014, *The Baltimore Sun* found that the city had paid \$5.7 million in court judgments and settlements in the previous three years for more than 100 civil suits related to allegations of police misconduct, brutality, and civil rights violations.¹⁴

In many ways, the Baltimore Uprising was a manifestation of the city's failure to fulfill the promise of police reform. Since the incident, the city's leadership has failed to deliver. However, with the national spotlight on Baltimore, the city's elected and appointed officials must respond to the long-standing demands of the community.

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The Campaign for Justice, Safety, and Jobs is a diverse group of over 25 community, faith, civil rights, and community leaders in Baltimore City who have come together to advocate for meaningful police reforms to promote transparency, accountability, and safety in our communities. The affiliated groups include: 1199 SEIU, ACLU of Maryland, Amnesty International, Baltimore Algebra Project, Beats, Rhymes, and Relief, Bmore United, CASA, Citibloc, Communities United, Council on American-Islamic Relations, Equity Matters, Empowerment Temple, Freddie Gray Project, Fusion Group, Jews United for Justice, Justice League, Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle, Maryland State Conference NAACP, Peace by Piece, Pleasant Hope Baptist Church, Power Inside, SEIU 32BJ, Southern Engagement Foundation, Ujima People's Progress, and Universal Zulu Nation.

