



Reimagining Public Safety Community Input Report

December 2022

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Background

The City launched the Reimagining Public Safety process in July 2021 to evaluate and make recommendations that will ensure that Olympia's public safety system is just, equitable, and without bias. Although many far-reaching societal factors influence public safety in general, this process looked specifically at the City's public safety system as it exists today and envisions what it could be in the future.

A Community Work Group made up of community members who represent a cross-section of Olympia's demographics, expertise, and experiences has been leading this effort. The Work Group's role is to learn about the City's public safety system, hold listening sessions with community members and groups, and reflect what they learn in a set of recommendations to the City Council.

The Reimagining Public Safety process will culminate in December 2022 with the Work Group delivering a set of recommendations to City Council. The Community Work Group has been dedicated to listening carefully to community members and working together to prepare recommendations that represent the needs of our community.

Who We Heard From

The input and data collection processes were designed by the Community Work Group to maximize opportunities for community members to voice their unique perspectives and experiences. The intent was to have an inclusive process that includes a variety of safe spaces for community members to share their views.

1. Listening-and-Learning Sessions

Listening-and-Learning Sessions were hosted with the public (both in-person and virtual) to gather input from a wide variety of community members within various groups. The following Listening-and-Learning Sessions were hosted April through October 2022:

- All community members
- Neighborhoods
- People of Color
- Non-profits, community organizers, and advocates
- Business and property owners
- Faith communities
- Black community members
- Public safety system staff

2. Focus Groups:

Focus groups provided safe conversation space (usually 6-8 people) for demographics-based small groups. A safe space is not just one where participants are sure they will come to no physical harm, but participants are also confident that no one in the room will cause them emotional harm. The following Focus Groups were hosted May through September 2022:

- Transgender women
- Temporary shelter residents
- Community members receiving rental assistance

- Transitional housing residents
- LGBTQ+ community members
- Peer Navigators and case managers
- Asian and Pacific Islander community members
- Black community members
- Muslim community members
- Latinx and immigrant community members

3. Surveys

- Community-wide Survey
 - Community members submitted their ideas, experiences, perspectives and thoughts through Engage Olympia, the City’s online engagement platform.
 - 375 responses were collected April 11, 2022 through June 5, 2022
- Internal Survey of Public Safety Staff

What We Heard

Three questions were asked of all participants, no matter the form and style of engagement.

1. With respect to Olympia’s public safety system, what do you feel is working well and what do you feel is not working well?
2. With respect to Olympia’s public safety system, what is something the City can do (or do differently, or do more of) today or in the near term?
3. With respect to public safety in Olympia, how will you know that the City is making progress in improving the public safety system? What will that look and feel like to you?

The following themes were developed by looking across all participant responses. As much as possible, themes (primary and secondary) have been developed based on the actual words used by session participants and survey respondents.

Primary Themes

The following primary themes were developed based on the degree to which the themes (a) extended across multiple participant/respondent groups, (b) were connected to other themes, and (c) were frequently offered by participants/respondents. They are in no particular order, so Primary Theme One should not be interpreted as “stronger” or “more important” than Primary Theme Seven.

Primary Theme One: Non-traditional Approaches to Public Safety are Supported

Participants/respondents consistently expressed support for non-traditional approaches to public safety. Programs and services such as the Clean Team, Community Court, Crisis Response Units (CRU), Downtown Ambassadors, and Familiar Faces were all referenced in relationship to what is working well when it comes to public safety in Olympia. There was disagreement regarding whether these non-traditional approaches need to be used as a replacement or a supplement for traditional approaches from the OPD and other government bodies. Regardless of that position, participants/respondents emphasized that if non-traditional approaches are going to be successful,

they must have full funding support not just marketing/public speech support. This need for full support was expressed along several lines, the two key perspectives being that (1) full support was needed to properly determine the effectiveness of non-traditional approaches, and (2) inadequate support for non-traditional approaches could make the community highly vulnerable to issues escalating that result in a need for more traditional interventions.

LGBTQ+ Community Members and Faith Communities Members Note: Non-traditional approaches to public safety was one of the most frequently discussed topics across the listening-and-learning sessions and focus groups. While the discussions varied immensely, individuals from these two engagements brought forward a topic that was not discussed elsewhere – the importance of training. While discussed in slightly different terms, with members of the LGBTQ+ community focusing on the complex challenge and members of the Faith Communities linking training to sustainability, both agreed that a focus on training was essential for non-traditional approaches to have any degree of effectiveness.

Primary Theme Two: Houselessness has Reached a Critical Level

One of the most consistently discussed topics by participants/respondents was the impact of houselessness on public safety in Olympia. Individuals went into detail discussing their experiences and observations about the relationship between what is perceived to be a correlation between an increase in houselessness and a decrease in public safety. What participants/respondents covered a wide gamut of aspects of life in Olympia, from fear of attack to property crimes to what was perceived as a general degrading of Olympia by not adequately helping the unhoused. There were a variety of perspectives on how to address houselessness, but the two most dominant perspectives were either (a) the City is providing too much help and/or not holding them accountable for their actions, and (b) the City needs to provide much more help to curtail houselessness. While there was no agreement on the optimal approach to address houselessness, there was almost universal agreement that houselessness has reached a critical level in Olympia that is impacting all aspects of community life. This perception of houselessness reaching an intolerable level was frequently used as support for changing the approach to public safety – be it a stronger commitment to traditional approaches to public safety that utilized OPD in the central role or a more intense focus on non-traditional approaches that results in OPD having a narrower set of responsibilities.

Muslim Community Members Note: As it relates to the Muslim focus group, there was specific focus on the importance of addressing systemic poverty as a component of crime mitigation. This had been surfaced in other groups, with various participants and respondents discussing the overall relationship between poverty and crime. What has now emerged as a more pronounced sub-element of this primary theme, because of the focus group with Muslim community members and looking back across previous data, is how people can become “stuck” in the carceral system when they cannot afford to pay fines (potentially leading to getting jailed) or pay for “good” legal representation.

Black and African American Community Members Note: When looking at the perspectives shared in this focus group, as well as the Asian and Pacific Island and Muslim groups to a lesser degree, sentiments about providing “too much help” to the unhoused are not present at all. Instead, there are focused statements about the potential to lower overall crime if the City and the

community are more committed to helping those experiencing houselessness. For the Black and African American focus group, this was embedded in a larger sentiment about a need for more compassion from the City of Olympia government, OPD, and Elected Officials, and how that would contribute to new approaches to public safety.

Latinx Community Members Note: Aligned in many ways with the sentiments of those who participated in the Muslim focus group, the Latinx focus group participants emphasized that public safety was not simply tied to the number of people who are unhoused or experiencing houselessness, but that the negative impacts on public safety were a product of there not being enough efforts to prevent houselessness and help those who are unhoused.

Primary Theme Three: More Focus is Needed on the Connections between Public Safety Issues

Participants/respondents indicated that there is a need for more focus on the relationship between public safety issues, specifically the relationship between crime, mental health, addiction/substance abuse, and houselessness. While what was perceived as the nature of that relationship varied (from the unhoused not being arrested leading to more crime to calls for prioritizing treatment of mental health issues across the community leading to lower crime), a significant number of participants/respondents expressed that focusing on single public safety issues is ineffective.

Latinx Community Members Note: The facilitator(s) approached the focus group with an emphasis on solutions or “constructive feedback,” and that showed up with participants discussing how public safety could be improved through more efforts to get people out of the “poverty cycle,” to help people who are suffering from addiction/substance abuse, and to reduce recidivism.

Primary Theme Four: Community Involvement and Civic Relationships are Vital to Addressing Public Safety

Both public safety professionals and non-public safety professionals expressed that the ability of Olympia to improve public safety is directly connected to the degree to which community members are involved. The expressed belief is that little or no community involvement would mean Olympia would be able to improve public safety not at all or only in minor ways, but a high level of community involvement and civic relationships (city-community) could result in significant public safety improvements. Moreover, there was a call from some and a plea from others to focus on improved relationships between city leaders, community leaders (residents and business owners) and public safety professionals. The belief in the need for community involvement was most often tied to the complexity of addressing public safety and the need to have diverse perspectives, with as much community support as possible. Connected to that perspective was a call for as much information sharing and outreach as possible, to weave together professional expertise and community knowledge. These sentiments even included participants/respondents explicitly expressing appreciation for the current stakeholder engagement and requesting more.

Black and African American Community Members Note: After reviewing the data collected from this focus group, a new sub-element of this primary theme emerged – a need for more community dialogue. That had been discussed to some degree across all groups, but after this specific focus group it has risen to a level that needs to receive more attention. This was also

discussed by the participants in the Neighborhoods listening session, who asserted that strategies are needed to create spaces for more community dialogue.

Asian and Pacific Islander Community Members Note: An interesting and new dimension of this primary theme is a focus on direct engagement from OPD, specifically the Police Chief, with community groups. This new data expands upon the existing theme by illuminating how some degree of rapport between community groups and OPD could result in higher quality outcomes.

People of Color Community Members Note: While community involvement was most often discussed as beneficial for addressing public safety, individuals in this listening-and-learning session spoke about the value of creating a greater sense of belonging in the neighborhood. This is important because it could indicate an identified need for more relationship building in the community, as well as a greater focus on inclusivity – both of which could contribute to reimagining public safety.

Primary Theme Five: The Cleanliness of Olympia is Seen as a Direct Indicator of Public Safety

When asked about current public safety in Olympia, as well as what would “improved public safety” look or feel like, one of the most discussed topics was cleanliness. Specifically, participants/respondents shared their dislike of what is perceived as an unprecedented level of trash in the streets and graffiti throughout the downtown corridor. While most participants/respondents directly or indirectly invoked the logic of the “broken windows theory,”¹ others asserted that the perceived increase in trash and graffiti in certain areas of the city was reflective of an inequitable approach to public safety with only certain corridors and neighborhoods being “cared enough about” to receive the necessary attention to mitigate trash in the streets and graffiti. These expressed perceptions about cleanliness not being a priority are connected to the belief, by some, that Olympia has become a “haven” for unhoused populations due to the City’s laws and policies.

Primary Theme Six: Increased Crime and Decreased Feelings of Safety Have been Too Normalized in Olympia

One sentiment that repeatedly arose in the data, across all questions, was that elevated crime and decreased in feelings of safety have been too normalized in Olympia. These expressed feelings and perspectives often occurred in close proximity to participants/respondents discussing previous times in Olympia that were perceived as having better public safety conditions. One space of focus is the downtown corridor. Participants/respondents repeatedly spoke about how downtown Olympia has become unsafe at an accelerated rate. This sentiment was expressed across almost all groups, with the perceived effects ranging from economic downturns to the City simply “giving away” downtown to the houseless.

This theme is also connected to statements about the identity of Olympia’s community, which was expressed by many as being one where feeling safety had always been a key priority. While additional research would be needed to explain the exact nature of this sentiment in the community, it’s important because it likely reflects a hope for improvement that can be seized upon before shifting to cynicism or hopelessness.

¹ Visible signs of crime create an environment that encourages further crime and disorder, including serious crimes.

Latinx Community Members Note: Many of the focus group participants compared the current state of public safety in Olympia to the past, asserting that Olympia is less safe today than it was in the past. It's important to note that what constituted "the past" varied between the participants, for some being three years ago and others a decade ago. However, there was no discussion about the normalization of less safety.

Primary Theme Seven: The Current Approach to Public Safety is Not Working

Regardless of whether a participant/respondent thought that there needed to be a return to so-called "traditional" public safety approaches or there is a need for new or "non-traditional" approaches to public safety, there was a highly shared perspective that the current approach to public safety in Olympia is not working. While that theme does not illuminate much in terms of next steps, it does reflect a degree of alignment between the City of Olympia's ongoing efforts to reimagine public safety and feelings within the community and stakeholders who participated in the engagement efforts associated with this effort.

Secondary Themes

In addition to the seven primary themes, six secondary themes were identified during analysis of what was heard from stakeholders and community members/groups. While the secondary themes have been identified as relevant for the project, they were not as present² as the primary themes. The secondary themes are also in no particular order.

Secondary Theme One: The Challenge of Changes to Public Safety Approaches

Many participants/respondents recognized that the changing dynamics surrounding public safety approaches, within and beyond Olympia, created immense challenges that needed to be recognized. This sentiment was expressed across different groups, whether in support of traditional public safety or amongst those who argued for an overhaul.

Business and Property Owners Note: Participants in this listening session focused on a specific dimension of public safety practices, which was framed as "traditional" and "important" – response times. While others varied in terms of whether changes to public safety approaches were beneficial or harmful, members of this group generally felt that any changes must not negatively impact response times.

Secondary Theme Two: State of Public Safety in Olympia must be Fully Acknowledged

As previously expressed, there was little disagreement among participants/respondents that public safety is a significant issue in Olympia. However, many felt that the City of Olympia has not fully acknowledged the issue and the challenges that accompany that issue.

Black and African American Community Members Note: After incorporating data from this focus group, a secondary dimension of this theme was elevated – the impact of fentanyl on public

² In terms of frequency of expression and/or connected to other themes.

safety in Olympia. The aspect of this issue discussed most is how addiction to fentanyl is ravaging communities but is not being discussed enough and thus not receiving enough attention as a contributor to crime.

Secondary Theme Three: Crime Data/Statistics are Important Indicators

Crime data/statistics were frequently cited by participants/respondents as having value for assessing current conditions in Olympia, as well as whether certain approaches (traditional/non-traditional) or interventions were being effective. However, many felt that there was a need for crime data/statistics to be independently verified if they were to be trusted.

Asian and Pacific Islander Community Members Note: With the inclusion of the data from the Asian and Pacific Islander focus group, a new element of this secondary theme rose to a level of significance – the need for new types of metrics and statistics. Hate crime metrics and other associated statistics were discussed the most.

Latinx Community Members Note: Focus group participants cited crime data as a valuable indicator of public safety. There was no reference to the data needing to be verified, but they did assert that the City could do more to share crime data and educate the public on what that data actually means (data translation). The importance of sharing crime data was also brought forward by participants in the Non-profits, community organizers, and advocates listening session and the focus group with community members receiving rental assistance.

Secondary Theme Four: Important Terms Need to be Community Defined

When complex issues like public safety are being addressed within a community, there is always a need to establish some degree of shared understanding and a common vocabulary. This was recognized across participant/respondent groups and reflects a level of civic sophistication and problem solving in the community. Many participants/respondents expressed that unless terms like “public safety,” “crime,” and “justice” were defined through community involvement, there was great risk of misunderstanding or manipulation by any stakeholder group who could benefit from a specific definition that aligned with their wants but not necessarily with the needs of the community.

Neighborhoods Note: When examining the responses from this listening session, facilitating community-created definitions of key terms was asserted as not only having benefit for the complexity of public safety issues but the value that comes from groups sharing and better understanding one another’s perspectives. This was seen as potentially reducing strife between and within groups.

Secondary Theme Five: The Visibility of OPD has an Impact

While there was no agreement on whether there is a need for more or less OPD visibility in the community (more or fewer uniformed officers on the streets and/or OPD vehicles around the community), a shared sentiment was that OPD visibility does have an impact on public safety – be it positive or negative.

Olympia Community Members Note: The participants in this listening-and-learning session offered a unique sub-dimension of the secondary theme – the impact of the OPD uniform and visual appearance of police officers for feelings of safety in the community. This was further deepened by participants from the Non-profits, Community Organizers, and Advocates listening session that specifically spoke about the visual impact of people seeing the officers’ guns.

Secondary Theme Six: Trust in Public Safety Professionals is Important

Regardless of whether the focus was on OPD or professionals associated with programs like Crisis Response Unit (CRU), participants/respondents consistently shared the importance of trust in public safety professionals. This was expressed in many ways, from experiences of not trusting public safety professionals to the transformative effects of trusting someone tasked with ensuring public safety. The nature of “trust” varied among participants/respondents, ranging from trusting that a public safety professional understood a person or community’s dynamics to more generalized notions of trust aligned with professional ethics.

Asian and Pacific Islander (API) Community Members Note: With the addition of data from the Asian and Pacific Islander focus group, a new dimension of this secondary theme emerged – culturally-embedded fear of law enforcement. While this had come forward in some low levels in other datasets, this was especially expressed by individuals within the API focus group. The fear was framed as cutting across multiple groups, from age (youth to old) to specific API subcommunities (Micronesia). It’s important to note that they didn’t frame the fear as insurmountable; nonetheless, it was framed as significant and directly contributing to perceptions of law enforcement.

LGBTQ+ Community Members Note: Members of this focus group brought forward a dimension of this secondary theme that was not offered by other individuals and groups – representation. The assertion was that a public safety workforce more representative of the diverse makeup of the Olympia community could have a positive impact, such as increased trust.

Secondary Theme Seven: Risks of Tolerance for Criminal Activity

Participants and respondents differed when it came to what constituted a “crime” deserving of engagement from the Olympia Police Department (OPD), with some expressing that all crimes needed to be addressed by OPD and others believing that only specific crimes (often of a high and grave threat) needed a response from OPD. However, one sentiment shared by many participants and respondents was that there are certain risks associated with tolerating criminal activity, be it petty or otherwise. Those perceived “risks” ranged from creating an environment that invites crime and/or criminals to increasing the costs for public safety in Olympia by not proactively addressing crime in the earlier stages (perceived as being less expensive) and thus having to engage with subsequent behavior or impacts that were perceived as being more expensive.

Secondary Theme Eight: Racism Impacts Public Safety in Olympia

From examples of racist interactions to suspected affiliations of public safety professionals with extremist and/or hate groups, many participants and respondents expressed that public safety in Olympia is significantly impacted by racism. Those impacts varied widely between participants and

respondents, but they can generally be grouped into two categories: (a) racism resulting in public safety, specifically OPD, practices that treat people differently based on their race; and (b) racism influencing which groups' or sub-communities' needs in Olympia are prioritized when it comes to public safety (e.g., prioritizing the safety or needs of a white group to the detriment of a non-white group).

Muslim Community Members Note: While racism and related racial dynamics have been present across other modes of data collection (surveys, listening sessions, etc.), it was most detailed and pronounced in the focus group with Muslim community members. There was both a focus on: (1) how hate crimes against Muslims have not received enough attention in the community, and (2) how Islamophobia (from subtle to overt) has almost been normalized in Olympia due to unconscious bias based on assumptions that flow from names, dress, and faith practices.

Areas of greatest tension

In addition to the primary and secondary themes, there were six tensions that emerged within and across respondent groups. These tensions have high value for considering future stages of this work where additional engagement is needed to hear more voices.

Tension One: OPD Funding

A consistent tension across all groups and mode of engagement was whether OPD needs more funding or less funding. These responses ranged from participants/respondents listing equipment that needed to be purchased and staffing levels that needed to be achieved to expressing that OPD's budget should be significantly reduced to align with OPD only being used for a narrow set of responsibilities.

Tension Two: OPD Discretion and Power

When it came to the optimal level of discretion and power that OPD should have for pursuing public safety in Olympia, there was no consensus. There were explicitly expressed differences across all participants/respondents. Responses ranged from believing that OPD's role should be restored to what it was before the perceived narrowing of their responsibilities to believing that OPD's public safety role should be limited to only very specific situations where no other group could effectively handle the situation to ensure safety for Olympians.

Tension Three: Optimal Treatment for Houselessness

One of the central topics brought forward across all groups and forms of engagement was houselessness. As reflected in earlier sections of this report, participants/respondents had a highly diverse perspective on the relationship between houselessness and public safety in Olympia. When it came to how best to treat or address houselessness, perspectives and responses could be grouped into three broad categories: (1) arrest those who are houseless; (2) do not arrest the unhoused, but don't provide them such a high level of services that enables them, makes them "too comfortable," and/or results in Olympia becoming a target destination for those experiencing houselessness; and (3) provide services to treat the causes of houselessness.

Tension Four: Traditional versus Non-Traditional Public Safety Approaches

While there was little to no disagreement about whether public safety is an issue in Olympia, there was significant disagreement about the optimal approach to pursuing and providing public safety. The responses ranged from belief that traditional public safety approaches are the “answer” to expressions that non-traditional public safety approaches are the only sustainable path forward. An area of central focus and tension was how best to address individuals with behavioral/mental health needs, whether OPD should be involved or not at all.

Tension Five: OPD Visibility

Participants/respondents consistently shared their ideas and perspectives regarding OPD visibility in Olympia. Sentiments were specifically focused on the presence of OPD vehicles and uniformed professionals in the community. The tension revolved around whether more visibility or less visibility is ultimately the best way to create feelings of public safety, as well as actual public safety.

Tension Six: Whether Olympia’s Public Safety Issues are Unique

As previously expressed, there was little to no disagreement about whether public safety is an issue in Olympia. However, there was not agreement regarding whether Olympia’s public safety issues are unique. Some participants/respondents expressed what could be characterized as “acceptance” that less public safety should be expected as Olympia grows³ and broader societal changes occur that are beyond the City of Olympia’s control (e.g., national economic shifts and statewide policies), while others conveyed that something has specifically changed in Olympia that needs to be addressed to restore public safety. This tension is connected to some suggesting that Olympia should employ techniques used by peer cities, others suggesting that Olympia’s public safety issues can only be successfully addressed by focusing on their Olympia-specific nature, and others suggesting that a mixture of the two approaches is needed.

Additional Observations

In addition to the primary and secondary themes addressed in the previous sections, there were also some observations that the consultants/researchers felt were appropriate to surface.

1. As with all complex issues in society, language matters. Close attention is needed to establish some degree of shared definitions for key terms (Secondary Theme Four), and attention is needed for so-called “dog whistle” words that are used to connote certain sentiments to specific groups. For the first area of needed attention, the concept of “public safety” was used in highly varied ways by participants/respondents. While this is not necessary a surprise given the complexity of the condition captured by the term, an effort to create a more shared understanding of the term could help with relationship building and overall clarity. With regards to “dog whistle” words, it’s by no means new for groups to use words like “accountability” and “control” to support traditional public safety approaches without using more overt terms. This is not inherently a distortion or issue, but instead something that all

³ Some described in terms of development or economic “growth” while others spoke about the natural progression of a city.

stakeholders need to be mindful of during this important time of reimagining public safety in Olympia. This is aligned with Secondary Theme Four (Important Terms Need to be Community Defined), as well as the established practice of building a shared or similar vocabulary when collaboration is occurring between a diverse group of stakeholders.

2. While not significant enough to include as a primary or secondary theme, civic pride, or a desire to restore civic pride was consistently addressed (directly and indirectly) by participants/respondents. When discussing what success in public safety would feel like, many discussed the restoration of pride they have in being a resident, business owner, or city employee in Olympia. While such a sentiment is not surprising, it reveals a powerful underlying relationship between stakeholders and the conditions of Olympia that should not be taken for granted.

Methodology – Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, guided by a constructivist grounded theory orientation, was used to analyze collected data. This specific methodology was selected because of two reasons: (1) the methodology is established as one that prioritizes participants' lived experiences and perceptions, and (2) the consultant's formal training and expertise in using the methodology as a qualitative social scientist. Collected data is analyzed along multiple dimensions, with a focus on remaining as close as possible to the expressed experiences and perspectives of participants and respondents instead of abstraction. What was heard (listening sessions and focus groups) and what was submitted (survey responses) was migrated to NVivo (qualitative data analysis software platform) for coding, followed by grouping codes into categories, and then themes were developed that link together categories. The foremost priority throughout data analysis was to remain as close as possible to the expressed beliefs, perspectives, and thoughts of the participants and respondents to honor their offerings.