

CAMPAIGN REPORT

JUNE 2021

MAKE THE RIGHT CALL

A COMMUNITY RESPONSE FOR NEW JERSEY



**Salvation
and
Social Justice**
Liberating Public Policy Theologically

INTRODUCTION

The tragic murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Daunte Wright, Ma’Khia Bryant and countless others have cast a new spotlight on the destruction of Black bodies by the police. Since 2015, New Jersey police have fatally shot 73 people¹ and, while Black people make up about 15 percent of New Jersey’s population², they account for 47 percent of police shooting victims³. Even as police departments implement new reforms and require additional training, aggressive policing, discriminatory enforcement, and excessive use of police force are commonplace in our communities.

Conventional wisdom has maintained that strict enforcement of low-level crimes and a large police presence are necessary to ensure public safety. But that is simply not the case for Black individuals, families, and communities that face a disproportionate risk for police violence.

At the same time, we face an unprecedented crisis of substance use and overdose. These have always been issues in our communities, due to chronic underinvestment and insufficient supportive resources. But with the current pandemic forcing many into social isolation and restricting access to services, substance use and overdose have reached catastrophic proportions.

More than 81,000 people across the United States have died from fatal overdoses in the 12 months ending in May 2020 — the highest number of overdose deaths ever recorded in a 12-month period⁴. This, in addition to increased depression, grief, anxiety, and other mental health challenges brought on by the pandemic, has taken a devastating toll on many of our neighbors and loved ones.

In affluent white communities, these crises are treated as health issues — as they should be. However, in low-income Black communities, substance use and other behavioral health issues

are treated criminally and handled by police, resulting in violent arrests and mass incarceration. In 2019, more than 51,000 people were arrested for drug-related violations in New Jersey with Black people accounting for 43 percent of these arrests⁵.

Because our communities are so reliant on local police departments, officers are forced to respond to crises like substance use, overdose, and other mental health concerns — these dire situations are well beyond their qualifications. This leads to unnecessary police interactions, particularly in Black communities where over-policing already poses a dangerous threat to Black lives. Anti-Black police violence and the mental health crisis response are inextricably linked.

The current system presents a serious challenge for our communities. The aggressive police response to substance use and the resulting police violence are not only ineffective ways to handle these crises; they undermine public safety. With that challenge, however, comes a tremendous opportunity to reimagine crisis response and the entire system of policing.

Historically, efforts to combat police violence that excluded impacted individuals and communities have been unsuccessful in the face of strong local resistance and a lack of community cooperation. And so, any solution must center those impacted communities and uplift the voices of those with lived experiences.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Salvation and Social Justice (SandSJ) and Vital Strategies (Vital) have partnered on a multi-faceted initiative to envision and actualize a community-led first response to substance use, overdose, and other mental health crises. The goals of the initiative are: 1) empowering local residents to determine how best to deliver public safety in their communities; 2)

¹The Washington Post. Fatal Force Database (2021).

²U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: New Jersey (2019).

³The Washington Post. Fatal Force Database (2021).

⁴Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “Overdose Deaths Accelerating During COVID-19.” December 17, 2020.

⁵New Jersey Department of Law and Public Safety. (2020). Arrests for Drug Abuse Violations in 2019.

minimizing the role of police in crisis response and; 3) creating viable alternatives to modern policing through investments in community resources.

The initiative arises from SandSJ's mission as a Black-led organization working in the Black faith tradition. Rooted in Black faith and liberation theology, SandSJ works to transform systems through lamentation, prophetic outcry, rituals of resistance, salvation, and liberation. By centering the voices of those impacted by systemic racism, SandSJ identifies evil and injustice and helps communities shape the demands for just public policy. SandSJ leads strategic organizing aimed directly at unjust systems to promote community healing and structural change. And as systems are transformed and new policies are established, SandSJ bears witness to Black joy and liberation.

Now, through a shared vision for non-violent, community-led crisis response, SandSJ and Vital are tapping into that rich tradition to uplift community voices and transform public safety in a way that protects Black lives.

SandSJ and Vital have piloted their vision through a four-month-long community visioning process in two

New Jersey communities: the city of Elizabeth and Gloucester County. These sessions, facilitated by SandSJ and held virtually in light of the pandemic, encouraged 24 community members to share their own experiences with the police, the justice system, mental health, and substance use. Through a series of discussions and exercises, participants described systemic issues and challenges and identified community solutions, including key areas in need of major investment, to reimagine the existing system.

This report, which will be used to develop a strategic communications campaign to address community needs, details the feedback and findings from SandSJ and Vital's community visioning process. It also provides a brief overview of that campaign, including calls to action informed by the community visioning process, and ways for community members to stay involved.

This report is intended to complement a separate quantitative analysis, asset mapping exercise, and a white paper on funding opportunities and priorities by New Jersey Policy Perspective.



METHODOLOGY

Between January and April 2021, SandSJ and Vital held 16 virtual community visioning sessions — eight in Elizabeth and eight in Gloucester County — on a bi-weekly basis. The two-hour sessions addressed different topics with large-group conversations facilitated by SandSJ and small-group exercises facilitated by appointed coordinators. Allowing for an introduction and wrap-up process, the topics were as follows:

- Lived Experience
- Substance Use
- Mental Health
- Intervention Possibilities
- Barriers

Community members in Elizabeth and Gloucester County were nominated to participate in the visioning process, either by SandSJ, other community-based organizations, or by local faith and community leaders. Then, SandSJ designated a local faith leader, an impacted persons coordinator, a youth coordinator, and a local community advocate in each community to lead small-group discussions and activities. The full list of participants is below.

Elizabeth

- Deborah Blow
- Rev. George Britt (Local Faith Leader)
- James Carey (Local Community Advocate)
- Ramon Collazo
- Christopher Etienne (Impacted Persons Coordinator)
- Salaam Ismial
- Janay Martinez (Local Youth Coordinator)
- Crystal Paz
- Justice Rivera
- Guy Flash Thomas
- Fatima Laurent
- Eugene Bell

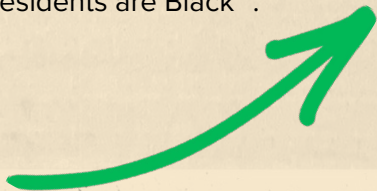
Gloucester County

- Andrew Alexander
- Rev. Charles Boyer (Local Faith Leader)
- Terry Collins (Local Community Advocate)
- Dominique Danielle (Local Youth Coordinator)
- Stephanie Davis
- Nafeesah Goldsmith
- Jada Green
- Jared Hunter
- Tamara Jenkins
- Devon Purnell
- Devon Rhodes
- Ashlee Sanders (Impacted Persons Coordinator)
- Seandra Greer

Fenton staffed each visioning session and took detailed notes on large-group discussions, small-group exercises, and guest presentations. Because Fenton was only able to join one small-group exercise per session, we relied on readouts from small group coordinators at the conclusion of each exercise.

WHY ELIZABETH AND GLOUCESTER COUNTY?

At first glance, Elizabeth and Gloucester County could not be more different. Elizabeth, located in northern New Jersey approximately 21 miles outside of New York City, is a largely urban community with more than 129,000 residents — 19 percent of whom are Black⁹. Gloucester County, on the other hand, is a largely rural community in southern New Jersey made up of nearly 25 towns and small cities — the largest of which has a population of fewer than 70,000 people. About 11 percent of Gloucester County residents are Black¹⁰.



But despite their differences, Elizabeth and Gloucester County face similar challenges when it comes to police violence. From October 2020 to February 2021 alone, there were 57 documented cases of police force in Elizabeth, only one of which included a white victim. From October 2020 to February 2021, there were 183 documented cases of police force in Gloucester County and 72 of these incidents (39 percent) included Black individuals.

Together, Elizabeth and Gloucester County represent communities across New Jersey and across the United States struggling to deliver an effective crisis response and combat police violence. By piloting their initiative in these two communities, SandSJ and Vital hope to provide a representative sample for a widely applicable campaign with a statewide, or even national, audience.



⁶New Jersey Policy Perspective hosted the eighth session, which featured a presentation on budgetary findings and needs (particularly as they pertain to police budgets and community funding) and asset mapping.

⁷During the session on mental health, participants also watched a presentation by Melissa Fox, Chief Operating Officer at Acenda Integrated Health.

⁸During the session on intervention possibilities, participants also watched presentations by Dr. Robin Tanner, Chief Change Officer at SandSJ, and Angelica Almeida, Deputy Director of Behavioral Health Services at the San Francisco Department of Public Health.

⁹U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Elizabeth, New Jersey (2019).

¹⁰U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Gloucester County, New Jersey (2019).

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

LIVED EXPERIENCE

This visioning session explored the direct and indirect impact of unjust policing on individuals in Elizabeth and Gloucester County, their families, and other community members. Upon sharing their lived experiences, participants expressed an overwhelming sense of distrust when interacting with law enforcement. One stakeholder recalled being stopped by a police officer he knew personally, simply because he had a previous record. Despite there not being cause for suspicion, the police officer searched this individual and insinuated that he was in possession of drugs, ultimately damaging their previous friendship and building a negative perception of police for this community member.

Participants emphasized that Black people are in a constant state of stress because instances of unjust policing — like George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Ma'Khia Bryant, and so many others

— can lead to death. These tragedies, they said, feel like everyday occurrences and happen so often that, just as their communities begin to heal from one tragedy, another one occurs. These ever-present killings of Black people by police have contributed to a sense of hypersensitivity-yet-numbness in the community, because people feel deprived of a chance to heal. One stakeholder solemnly noted that, “As Black people, I don’t think we’ll ever heal from this.”

While many community members believe that Black people will never heal from the individual and collective trauma brought upon by police violence, others made the case that healing can only begin once deep systemic reforms are in place. What all community stakeholders agree on, however, is that violent, often deadly interactions with police must stop in order to ensure the safety of all communities.



SUBSTANCE USE



Participants directly impacted by the “War on Drugs” were encouraged to share their stories and outline the damage of punitive drug policy in order to inform harm reduction interventions. Community members examined the current law enforcement response to overdose, possession and intoxication, community needs and gaps, and substance use resources. A majority of community stakeholders emphasized that, “The War on Drugs is used as a political tool against us as a community. It’s really been a war on Black people for the past 30 to 40 years.” Community members also noted that the term “War on Drugs” implies that there are two sides, when in reality it’s a one-sided attack that directly targets and criminalizes Black and brown people.

Many participants highlighted the societal need to shift the way people think and speak about the issue of substance use. Instead of labeling someone by their illness in using the term “addict,” people must see others first through a human lens. Language is important when framing these issues, in order to move away from the criminalization of drug users and move towards treating them as people with a public health problem who need support.

On a macro level, the significant contributors to the opioid epidemic are the failed policy of the “War on Drugs,” the pharmaceutical industry, and the prison-industrial complex. Apart from the racial dimensions of over-incarceration, prisons are major economic engines in predominantly white, rural communities. Because private prisons are profit-driven, correction officers and the pharmaceutical industry thrive off the misery and addiction pushed towards Black and brown people. On a micro level, these systems have torn families apart and ravaged communities.

As a solution, community stakeholders proposed investing in health care and mental health services while eliminating private prisons that only serve to harm vulnerable populations. “I don’t believe in policing ourselves. I believe in a system that keeps us safe without oppressing us,” claimed one participant. A community organization that can advocate on behalf of individuals struggling with substance use and serve as a resource and provide a safe space for people to seek help will make transformative strides towards progress.

MENTAL HEALTH

A recurring theme in each visioning session was the outsized role police officers play in every emergency situation — including mental health crises. The lack of comprehensive support for those experiencing a mental health crisis can have dangerous, even deadly, consequences.

Many participants recalled situations in their communities where armed police officers exacerbated a fragile situation, using confrontational tactics and language when a helping hand would have been most useful. Yet, even now, when a friend or family member needs urgent assistance, a call to 911 is still the default. While Elizabeth and Gloucester County residents have access to some emergency mental health services, it is difficult to contact them, particularly in an urgent situation. Additionally, some of these mental health services are underfunded or not available quickly due to budget constraints or

lack of political will to shift funding from traditional law enforcement.

It is clear that a program that gives communities an alternative to police in non-violent emergencies would be welcome if it is quick, efficient, and readily available. Mental health crises can widely vary based on condition, experience, or personality, and there are few one-size-fits-all solutions. Therefore, it is essential that the responsibility of emergency responders should be one of de-escalation and understanding, a role best suited for trained mental health professionals who can respond appropriately. The goal identified by visioning session participants is the creation of a safe environment for those experiencing mental health crises and a long-term treatment plan within the family unit or community that will connect them to the services they need.



BARRIERS



Visioning session participants discussed the barriers they believe are impediments to making progress on these issues. Police departments themselves represent one of the greatest barriers to public safety reform. According to participants, many police officers will admit that they are not trained or equipped to respond to mental health crises. Yet, police departments, police unions, and other law enforcement groups are often reluctant to reduce department budgets or redefine the role officers play in communities. Police groups have spent decades increasing their access to funds and solidifying their political power through detailed contract negotiations and narrative control. Therefore, one of the greatest barriers to change will be the immense influence of police departments themselves, which can hamper any efforts that reduce their budgets or community role.

Another identified barrier is the perceived political risk in developing these new programs. The traditional calculation among elected officials was that there is no political price for giving more funding to law enforcement. Yet, as communities, particularly communities of color, work to redefine how public safety can be achieved, increasing police

department budgets is no longer as politically safe. Additionally, as state and local budgets rebound from the economic devastation of COVID-19, legislators may be hesitant to fund anything seen as untested. Political will and budget concerns will continue to be a barrier to new public safety programs, but public education and community action can help to move the needle on the alternatives to policing by ensuring that community resources are adequately funded.

Finally, those who wish to keep the status quo of law enforcement will likely seek to connect any community violence to shifting public safety strategies. Already, as urban violence has increased in the past year due to the pandemic and the accompanying unemployment and economic instability, police defenders were quick to blame it on the Black Lives Matter protests that spread across the world in 2020. While there is no evidence to support that claim, community participants identified the need to control the public safety narrative and not allow detractors to create a sense of unfounded fear of increased community violence.

RECOMMENDATIONS & POSSIBILITIES

Following sessions that grappled with lived experiences of community members, the need for a local response to substance use and mental health crises, and the barriers to implementing a new public safety strategy, participants turned to developing an alternative vision to traditional policing.

Participants noted the long-lasting effects of encounters with police, distrust within communities, and the dangerous actions of many police officers as primary reasons for advocating for a different approach to safety. Additionally, the lack of accountability for misconduct and abuse leaves community members feeling like they have little recourse to call out mistreatment. Elizabeth and Gloucester County residents described an almost adversarial relationship, in which too many police officers fail to respect the communities they are meant to serve. Visioning session participants also described incidents of substance use and mental health crises that were met with an armed response and incarceration, rather than assistance or connection to services.

To mitigate these interactions, participants described an alternative to 911 that community members could

call when someone needs help but does not require a police presence. The response team would include trained mental health professionals, social workers, and medical personnel who can assess, de-escalate, and recommend additional services and solutions that keep people within their communities. Alternatively, 911 could continue to serve as the primary emergency number, with dispatchers trained to quickly assess the situation and redirect the call to the relevant team. Participants recognized the need for cooperation with existing police departments, particularly in case of a violent escalation. However, residents stressed the need for independence, and for police to stay off-site unless specifically called in by this team, as their presence may worsen the conflict.

Through comprehensive support including the key elements of a crisis response system — someone to call, someone to respond, a place to go, and a connection to ongoing care — as well as long-term investment in the care of neighborhoods and community members, participants were optimistic that a new vision for public safety could be implemented.



CAMPAIGN OVERVIEW

Having received thoughtful and comprehensive feedback through its community visioning process, SandSJ and Vital will now use those insights to develop a strategic communications campaign to elevate community needs and advocate for viable solutions. This campaign will include a multimedia effort to educate the public on alternatives to policing and urge policymakers to invest in community solutions. The campaign will be named through a collaborative process involving SandSJ, Vital, and local community members.

Throughout the community visioning process, several key themes emerged, such as alternatives to policing, community investment, and increased access to social support and services. Centering these themes and the voices of those with lived experiences will be crucial to the success of this campaign. Based on input from the visioning process, expert presentations, and stakeholder interviews, the campaign will be structured around the following calls to action:

- Create and fund community-led alternatives to 911 to expand options for intervention that do not involve law enforcement;
- Invest in new programs and resources like mental health counseling, affordable housing, and employment opportunities, to build and restore communities;
- Support existing programs, providers, and resources working to fill gaps in the social safety net;
- Develop a more robust system for police accountability;
- Focus on harm reduction in crisis response; and
- Establish community-approved accountability measures to ensure that interventions are responsive to community needs and concerns.



CONCLUSION

Community members have a deep understanding of their needs and safety concerns, but for too long, leaders and policymakers have refused to acknowledge them. As a result, our communities have been subjected to a dangerous system of modern policing that is violent, discriminatory, and ineffective, especially for Black residents. The system also fails to do what it promises — deliver public safety — and undermines the support and services that communities actually need to respond in times of crisis.

Communities everywhere are calling for change and proposing vibrant, transformative solutions. Government leaders and policymakers must listen and take action.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

SandSJ and Vital are continuing to engage with members of the Elizabeth and Gloucester County cohorts on a follow-up basis. In the coming months, members will receive additional information about the upcoming campaign, launch activities, and direct campaign actions.

Community members who wish to participate or learn more are encouraged to visit SandSJ's website at sandsj.org, join the mailing list for its e-newsletter, or follow SandSJ on Facebook or Twitter.

APPENDIX

Detailed notes from each of SandSJ and Vital's community visioning sessions are available [here](#).