

TRAJECTORY, FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Over the course of a 16-month period, AARO's Personal and Public Safety Working Group worked to better understand the complexities of policing within the public safety system, engage some of its most critical stakeholders in Central Texas, and identify opportunities for strategic, regional, long-term change.

The group began its study of policing through an exploration of books, articles, and reports on the topics of systemic racism, officer wellness, mass incarceration, use of force, evidence-based policing, and the intersection of public safety with public health¹. They then formulated a Big Beautiful Question (BBQ) that led them into the study of community approaches, strategies for reform, and best practices: What operating principles, shared approaches and tools can best equip our Central Texas' law enforcement and community leaders to achieve a shared vision of public safety?

To help answer this question, the group called on a series of stakeholders who each shared their unique perspective within the public safety space; from law enforcement and elected officials to community leaders and people with lived experiences. Through these conversations, the group surfaced a series of themes highlighted in the Findings below.

FINDINGS

There are severe and undeniable racial and ethnic disparities in policing.

Over the years, Austin Police Department has collected data that demonstrates an overrepresentation of Black and Latino populations and an underrepresentation of Whites and Asians in policing interactions, searches, citations and arrests². According to a report conducted by City of Austin's Office of Police Oversight, the Equity Office and the Office of Innovation, "once pulled over, Black/African Americans were three times more likely to be searched than White/Caucasians and were the only racial/ethnic group to receive more high-discretion searches than low-discretion searches (City of Austin)." During our conversations with public safety stakeholders, all guests recognized these disparities across agencies throughout the region and were open to engaging in conversations with AARO members and fellow panelists about solutions (Stakeholder Interviews).

Public Safety is a broad ecosystem that goes beyond criminal justice, lying at the crossroads of various other systems including health and education.

Agencies striving towards reform lean into this intersection and engage other systems to seek solutions. In the area of mental health, police departments throughout the region are partnering with local health authorities to embed clinicians with the 9-1-1 calling center, establish mental health deputy programs, set up health and wellness divisions and revise their discipline system to better support officers struggling on the field (Stakeholder Interviews). In Lakeway, annual psychological evaluations are mandatory for every officer. These evaluations incorporate leadership assessments as well as family wellness discussions (Stakeholder Interviews). In Pflugerville, the department engages nonprofit organizations, church groups and school counseling systems to understand what is happening in the community and identify pathways for collaboration. They are intentional in raising awareness amongst officers about the implications of arresting a child's parent and the trauma that seeds into the rest of their life. They also work on increasing sensitivity amongst their force by teaching on current movements like Black Lives Matter and bail system reform (Stakeholder Interviews). In City of Round Rock, the department has built a robust base of volunteers who support officers in uplifting the community (Stakeholder Interviews).

¹ The working group's readings can be found at <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1uk-L6PKyfDD9Crb98wYrbdFau0OtxgzPvsiW0xXK74/edit#gid=23475762>

² 2019 Joint Report: Analysis of APD Racial Profiling Data: https://joplin3-austin-gov-static.s3.amazonaws.com/production/media/documents/2019_Joint_Report_Analysis_of_APD_Racial_Profiling_Data_FINAL.pdf

There are significant barriers preventing police agencies from implementing staff reforms through the phases of hiring, retention and even dismissal.

According to the survey “*What is the state of officer mental health in 2020?*” 55% of the officers sampled in the national study reported that they “consider quitting their job on a daily or weekly basis,” feel “trapped or helpless in their job at least once per week,” and “are unlikely to recommend a job in law enforcement as a career choice.” This data was reinforced by regional anecdotes from policing stakeholders who expressed concerns about attrition rates in their departments. In the APD, attrition rates used to be 7.5 per month but have now jumped to 12-15 per month (Stakeholder Interviews). For smaller agencies, retention is also an issue as they struggle to compete with larger departments with more robust benefits packages and see a significant part of their workforce consistently transitioning to APD and other larger agencies (Stakeholder Interviews). As for dismissal, laws are in place to limit a police chief’s ability to fire officers over egregious disciplinary issues. Under Civil Service Code 143, the agency is restricted to administering discipline within 180 days of a violation having occurred unless there is a criminal component, then the 180 days starts the day the agency finds out (Stakeholder Interviews). Additionally, agencies often lack full information from applicants as there is no national database to track previous disciplinary investigations and reasons for dismissal from other agencies (Stakeholder Interviews).

Continuing to improve data infrastructure, research and evidence-based policing practices is critical for the path ahead.

APD’s data collection has resulted in strong evidence for equity driven measures and reform. As the City of Austin continues to conduct surveys through the city, and internally within the department, it is important to collect more data under a lens of equity, professionalism, and use of force practices (Stakeholder Interviews). This is critical not just for the City of Austin but for all Central Texas. Small agencies in the region often rely on the research of larger agencies like Austin to understand policing outcomes and to cross-reference (Stakeholder Interviews). More research is also critical to better understand some of the region’s most persistent questions such as, “What is the ideal patrol count?” While a community perception of strong police presence/response deters crime, there is widespread disagreement on the metrics necessary to calculate the adequate size of sworn strength needed to successfully enforce rule of law. Some assessments use officer-per-thousand-population while others use community engagement time as a metric for staffing calculations (Stakeholder Interviews).

The region should self-impose performance standards considering the state’s lack of enforcement regulations.

Nationally, Texas statewide enforcement regulations rank at the bottom (Stakeholder Interviews). Recently, the Sunset Advisory Commission reviewed the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (TCOLE), stating that it had found “the state’s current regulation [to be], by and large, toothless. Texas’ bifurcated approach has resulted in a fragmented, outdated system with poor accountability, lack of statewide standards, and inadequate training (Sunset Advisory Commission, A1). For Central Texas to make meaningful strides in basic and uniform standards/accreditation across agencies, training, misconduct and law enforcement protocols, the region should take the initiative to enhance what officers are learning in training academies and on the field— not just as cadets but as they work towards tenure. Regional universities ought to play a role in this.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are endorsements of a systemic approach to the challenges above and draw on systemic resources in our region.

A Central Texas Public Safety Network

To improve our regional public safety system, AARO sees a need to build trusting relationships among individuals with diverse voices. Working with Austin Community College (ACC), AARO will help stand up a region-wide public safety network composed of law enforcement and community leaders. This body may review policing outcomes in the region, facilitate strategic partnerships with mental health agencies and universities, support the improvement of staffing procedures within agencies, and uplift patrolling research and best practices.

A Center for Excellence in Policing

In the area of training and development, AARO is calling for the establishment of a Public Safety Center of Excellence that is recognized as a resource for the region and state. Through data and research, helping the center will adapt policing to the standards of new generations and help meet our diverse community needs. Lastly, the Center will ensure that the value of de-escalation is integrated into the formation of officers while racial bias is trained out.