



Public Safety



... as defined by Black community members within the recent Black Brilliance Research Project, public safety is “learning how to keep each other safe without police, coercion, or the threat of systemic violence and oppression.” Public safety isn’t just physical, it starts with mental, psychological, and emotional safety.

Contextual Factors Related to Public Safety

Washington state’s history of leading the way ...in harm

It is important to know Washington state’s history of criminalization. It was the first in 1993 to enact the harmful 3-strikes sentencing policy. Washington blocked state funding from funding education of people it incarcerated. It eradicated parole, gave juveniles life without the possibility of parole, and led national models for long-term solitary confinement.

In 1887, it was the horrific treatment of people in Walla Walla in which local sheriffs rented out jailed people for free labor that created what we know as the Washington State Penitentiary, now

run by the government. Washington was the last state with active gallows; the Washington Supreme Court only ruled the death penalty unconstitutional in 2018.¹¹²

Change has been extremely slow. Only in 2021, following the Blake Decision, a simple drug possession is now a misdemeanor rather than a felony.¹¹³ Better aligned with principles of transformative justice, rather than charging a person with a crime and incarcerating them, they are to be diverted to services at least twice.¹¹⁴



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– Washington domestic violence advocate¹¹⁸

Understanding abolition and transformative justice

Transformative justice, whether interpersonal or systemwide, is about addressing harm in ways that don’t cause more harm or profit off of people being harmed. More than that, it’s about focusing on healing, connection, and restoring us all to a right relationship with one another. It means abolishing harmful systems.

Our vision does not stop at addressing the incarceration and overrepresentation of Black people in Washington prisons and jails. Across our communities, we are discussing what needs to happen for Black Washingtonians to be and feel safe. Most community solutions don’t mention incarceration or more policing, which we know originated from slave catchers. Enslaved people were the first abolitionists in this country. Locally, we can look to the 1965 Freedom Patrols as a part of the foundation for the conversation on police accountability.¹¹⁶ Today, many of us are remembering, learning, and revisiting the concept of abolition.¹¹⁷

*“It appears African Americans enter homelessness with higher incomes and lower rates of mental illness, drug addiction, and other health problems than white people. It seems like folks of color who are experiencing homelessness are generally better off by almost every indicator than their white counterparts. It’s almost as if more has to go wrong in a white person’s life for them to become homeless.”*¹²⁶

— Marc Dones,
Director of the Regional
Homelessness Authority

The impact of structural violence

Often when we think of violence, we think about direct violent actions like domestic violence. What became clear to many during the mid- to late-2020s following the murder of George Floyd is that entire social systems in the U.S., like the legal system, have been and continue to be violent toward Black people. The continued murders of Black and brown people across the nation, including Black and brown trans people and detained individuals, have had profound impacts on our health and well-being.

“It is extremely hard for the advocates doing this work to show up each day when they see their communities being harmed and killed,” said Washington domestic violence advocate.¹¹⁸

Structural violence undermines our basic sense of safety, greatly impacting our mental health. “According to the U.S. Census Household Pulse data, in the week following Floyd’s death, depression and anxiety severity increased among Black Americans at significantly higher rates than that of white Americans.”¹¹⁹ Yet, as of 2020, Black people represented only 4% of the psychology workforce, making it difficult for us to talk to someone who personally understands our racialized experiences.¹²⁰

Structural violence doesn’t have a single perpetrator. It shows up as harms caused by the social arrangements of our society (e.g., education, transportation, housing, and government systems). It results in group-wide harm to health and well-being and shows up as racism, ableism, sexism, and other abuses of social power.

A focus on creating social systems that heal and restore is the single most important contributing factor to public safety.¹²¹

Housing and housing stability contribute to healthier people and communities

When people are housing unstable they are subject to trauma, disruption in education and employment, and disconnection from people who can support them.¹²² It costs so much more — financially, psychologically, and emotionally — to be unhoused or face housing instability.¹²³ To afford a 2-bedroom apartment without being cost burdened (more than 30% of income), you would need to make \$61,000 per year on average across the state, which is more than the median income of Black Washingtonians.¹²⁴ In addition, there are not enough affordable units on the market in Washington.¹²⁵

When people are deciding between healthy housing, food, and health care needs, they are no longer experiencing safety. Turning to one another for help often means turning to others who are also struggling to make ends meet. And, in these conditions, every human being is more likely to experience stress and be impacted by or turn to crimes of survival. Once someone is incarcerated, they are seven times more likely to experience homelessness — 13 times more likely if they are incarcerated more than once.¹²⁷

*“I want every neighborhood to be like the most affluent neighborhood you live near that has very low policing. Everyone has jobs. Every child has an education. Everyone has health care. You don’t see folks going to jail from those communities because they’ve been invested in the ways that we know make a difference.”*¹²⁹

— Rep. Kirsten Harris-Talley
(37th L.D.)

Neighborhood accessibility, conditions, and trust

How close people live to a stable job, parks, clinics, schools, transportation, and healthy food all contribute to public safety.¹²⁸ Where we live and what's accessible to us greatly influences our likelihood of successfully utilizing those resources. If getting to school, work, or a doctor's appointment means walking several miles and long bus rides, everything becomes more stressful and our quality of life is impacted. The impacts are that much greater for those of us with disabilities. When people have familiar, vibrant, well-maintained places in which they feel good about spending time together, social cohesion happens. When social cohesion happens, community members can build and maintain trust.

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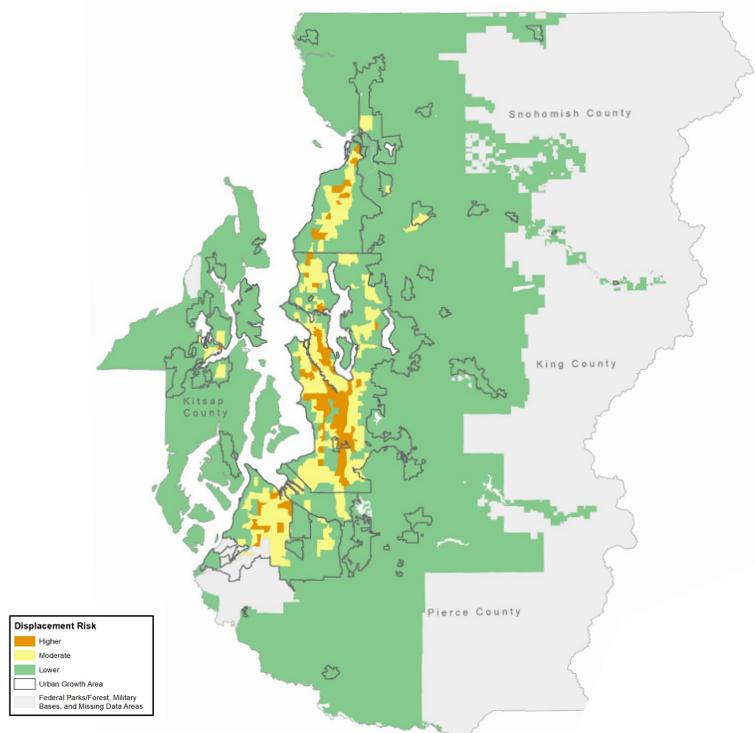
The impact of "regional growth"

When cities and counties don't work with the existing local community to ensure resources are in place where they are needed most, displacement happens. When they do, public safety is possible.¹³⁰ It is an ever present reality for so many Black families in our state. It is a disruption to the very resource we need the most, each other.

The Puget Sound Regional Council reports that over 400,000 people in the Puget Sound region are at risk for displacement. In the neighborhoods marked for development, places like light rail stations and identified regional growth centers, people of color are a higher percentage of the population and at greater risk for displacement.¹³¹

"Due to a chain of discriminatory choices made by government agencies, people of color earn less income, have less wealth, and are more likely to be renters.¹³² Lower incomes and wealth make even slight increases in housing costs difficult to afford. Additionally, rents are more susceptible to price increases than mortgages, only further increasing the likelihood of displacement."¹³³

Regional Displacement Risk Map



Source: Puget Sound Regional Council

Access to economic opportunity

Research shows that every \$10,000 increase in spending per person living in poverty was associated with 0.87 fewer homicides per 100,000 population or approximately a 16% decrease in the average homicide rate.¹³⁴

Caring for people produces caring people. Increasing economic opportunity through policies like universal basic income,¹³⁵ baby bonds,¹³⁶ investment in youth programming,¹³⁷ and workforce development go a long way to increase public safety. Such policies would provide a basis for people to feel secure, safe, and happy, not fearful. Knowing we have what we need encourages us to dream and physically manifest the abundance within us.

Community Identified Approaches to Public Safety

We want the freedom to be, to take up space, to be spontaneous. We want to feel relief, ease, peace, and joy. Our vision is one where we have land to care for and homes in which we can care for each other.

We envision radical inclusion and validation, of laughter and joy, and of listening, trust, and curiosity. Despite the conditions of society, we have always managed to find moments and spaces of safety. To make those moments a constant reality, the conditions of society need to shift.

Educate, motivate, and empower Black communities, especially youth

This looks like raising a generation of critical thinkers who are hungry for not only information, but wisdom — the ability to apply what they know appropriately in the context. We can channel the imagination and energy of youth constructively from an early age toward building a world in which our norms are freedom and joy. Every one of us has a role in this.

- Take an intergenerational, multisector approach to learning and organizing; we keep us safe.
- Put resources toward Black innovation — Black storytelling, Black projects, Black creativity — to educate and mobilize our community.
- Deeply integrate civics education into the school curriculum to show how historical and present day decisions are relevant to students' lives.
- Hire more Black teachers. They are important mentors and role models.

Fund Black brilliance to ideate, plan, and implement nuanced public safety solutions

Black people, like any grouping of people, have different, sometimes opposing, sometimes intersecting needs and wants. Rather than expecting that we all have one approach, it is important to recognize that in a diversity of approaches we're stronger. Cultural, geographic, historical nuances matter to our approaches.

- Factor in that it takes time (and therefore money) to convene so we can plan and implement the public safety solutions we know work.
- Direct funding to Black organizations and community members so we can advocate and organize for what keeps us safe.
- Fund free advocacy training for Black organizations — advocacy is our legal right. Knowing how laws work is critical to public safety.
- Get clear about which experts are needed during which parts of the conversation and work — elevate Black leaders across all sectors of society to participate in planning and implementation.
- Design funding and planning cycles that are responsive to community, not the other way around. Removing a false sense of urgency give us the space do be thorough and effective.

Dismantle systems that harm us and replace them with systems that heal

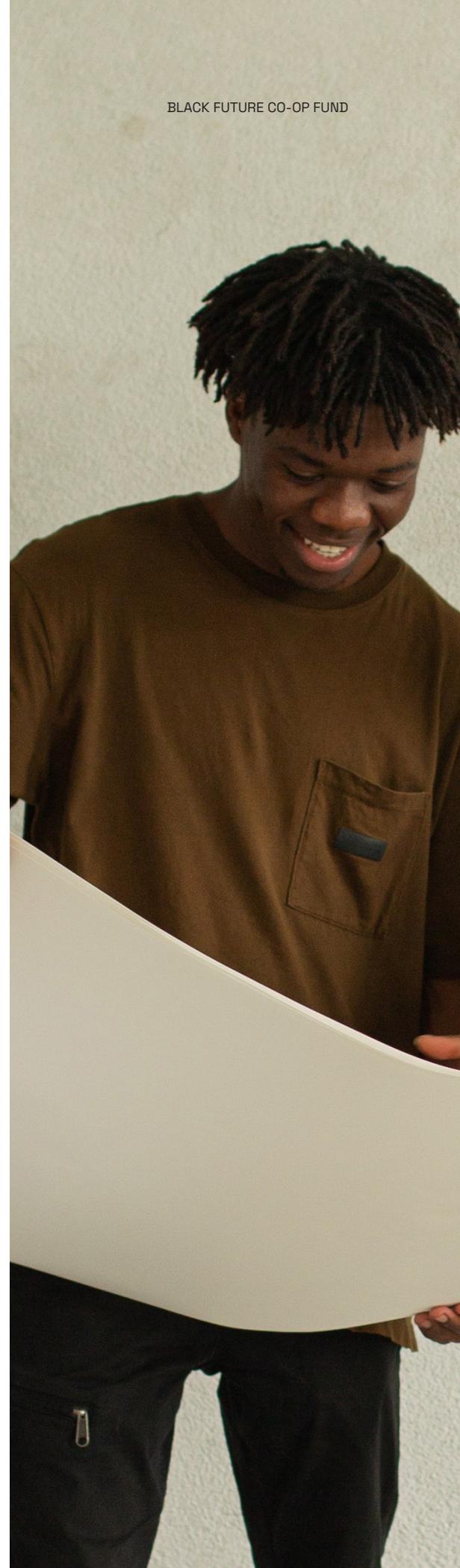
Trauma is peeled away in layers and found within interactions. A system is the sum of its parts — a series of people, rules, norms, and actions. Once we see how they function together, those parts can be rearranged and replaced to cultivate well-being.

- Know our rights under current laws and policies.
- End performative investments in equity offices, positions, plans, and statements that have no real power to make structural, budgetary, and policy changes.
- Give decision-making authority to Black people who can implement community-designed solutions.

Hold people, not systems accountable

Organizations, agencies, groups, and teams are all made of people. Each of us within these systems are responsible to some degree for that system functioning. Simply putting a Black person in a leadership role does not automatically change how that role functions within that system. Nor does it immediately equate to the system changing.

- Normalize compassionate accountability — personally, in community, in organizations, and across systems.
- Assess the impact of your role and individual choices. We are all capable of harm. Get support to repair harm and prevent it from happening again.
- Don't ignore harm just because we like the person causing harm, especially if that person is you.
- Get help noticing the ways you may be conforming to a broken system.
- Build transformative justice approaches into our systems and community interactions.





Focus resources toward incarcerated people and their families, until we get rid of systems of punishment

Many of us have a family member who is being detained. They are miles and miles away from the people who love them, furthering social disconnection. And, we know that connection is critical to life.

- Love and care for people who are incarcerated by ensuring access to their community, to programs, to healthy food, and to high quality health care.
- Pay for family members' transportation, hotel, and food to go visit their loved ones.
- Offer paid time off and flexible working arrangements for family members of incarcerated people.
- Fund Black-led organizations who are supporting people re-entering society following incarceration.
- Strengthen the network of services and resources — food, housing, mental health, family proximity, healthcare, employment, and transportation — available to Black people following incarceration.
- Invest in policy change, legal aid, and support services to stop wrongful convictions.

Fund and create social systems that keep us safe while also addressing immediate needs

We've heard so much about stopping the school to prison pipeline. In reality, it's designing an ecosystem of well-being that will achieve public safety.

- Fund Black-led and -owned community care models, recognizing health is essential to our safety.
- Elevate Black leadership in public education and make options available for Black families of all income levels to pursue education alternatives that reflect their values.
- Fund diversion programs to prepare and connect young people to opportunities aligned with their interests.
- Develop and elevate Black-owned recruiting firms that can be a resource toward system re-design across multiple sectors.