For generations, Black Chicagoans have fought tirelessly to resist systems of racially targeted violence, abuse, and corruption within the local police department. Over the years, community members have united voices to amplify their collective outrage over practices of racialized police harassment, anti-Black use of force, and a long succession of heinous murders at the hands of city law enforcement. Chicago’s grassroots movement for Black Liberation has waged a decades-long battle to advance transformative policy change aimed at abolishing structural police brutality.

And yet, members of state and city government have routinely dismissed constituents’ demands for justice, electing instead to exert their authority to shield the Chicago Police Department (CPD) from accountability and regulation. Year after year, the city has steadfastly increased funding to law enforcement, expanded CPD ranks, and upheld toxic police union contracts that enshrine the officer code of silence.

Through the Campaign for Safety and Liberation, the Worker Center for Racial Justice (WCRJ) will leverage the collective power of the community behind a common vision of truly safe and free neighborhoods. We have released a transformational policy agenda that calls for democratic control of the police, an end to officer impunity, and a large scale reinvestment in systems that promote real public safety. In the weeks and months ahead, WCRJ will work strategically with our leaders, community members, and key lawmakers to advance our demands for universal safety, equity, and justice.
CHICAGO'S EXORBITANT POLICE BUDGET

Despite a steady decrease in citywide crime rates over the past three decades, Chicago has continuously increased funding to police. Adjusting for inflation, the city has nearly tripled its per capita spending on law enforcement since 1964. Chicago’s current budget allocates a staggering $1.78 billion to the police department, which represents 40% of the city’s total operating fund.

Exorbitant public payouts to CPD have resulted in a steady influx of cops on city streets. With more than 13,000 police among its ranks, Chicago employs the second highest number of officers per capita of any major U.S. city.

The astounding size of the city’s police force has had devastating implications for communities of color which are targeted by systems of racialized surveillance, harassment, and brutality. Moreover excessive funding to CPD draws public resources away from vitally needed city services, such as schools, mental health, social services, and housing. Such mismanagement of taxpayer dollars perpetuates austerity conditions which, in turn, exacerbate inequality and undermine public safety.

CITY POLICE SPENDING: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Public funding of city law enforcement in Houston, Texas offers an instructive point of comparison to Chicago. While the two cities share similar demographic and population profiles, Chicago’s police budget is nearly double that of Houston, and it employs a police force that is more than two and a half times greater than that of its southern counterpart.

Despite its leaner police budget, Houston’s murder rate is less than half that of Chicago. It stands to reason that Chicago’s tremendous taxpayer investment in the law enforcement system has not improved, but rather undermined, public safety.
Most 911 Calls Do Not Require Law Enforcement

In 2018, the Chicago’s Office of Emergency Management fielded an average of 8,000 police dispatch calls per day. And yet despite the high volume of police service requests, the city reported a daily average of only 75 incidents of violent crime. This discrepancy indicates that the overwhelming majority of 911 police dispatches pertain to situations outside of the purview of emergency law enforcement.

At least 150 police calls a day stem from mental health emergencies, and countless more involve situations requiring human services, such as homelessness, drug overdose, and interpersonal disputes. Moreover in cases related to nonemergency law enforcement, like traffic incidents and police report filing, armed officers are not necessitated and often directly undermine public safety.

In order to improve the city’s emergency response, Chicago must replace a significant number of dispatch officers with on-call city professionals, including social workers, mental health providers, mediators, and human services employees, who are better equipped to respond to the majority of public safety emergencies.

Police Union Contracts Drive Officer Violence

For decades, the city’s collective bargaining agreement with the local police union has reliably shielded officers from investigations of racialized violence and systemic abuse. In 2014, Chicago’s Fraternal Order of the Police (FOP) renewed a watertight agreement with the city that obstructs almost any effort to reform the department or hold officers accountable for wrongdoing.

In the event of a fatal police shooting, the FOP contract permits officers to postpone statements for a full 24 hours after the incident and amend testimony upon reviewing case evidence. The city also agreed that complaints filed against law enforcement will not be examined without a signed affidavit, and investigations will be restricted by a five year statute of limitations.

Furthermore, the union contract requires the department to delete officer disciplinary records after five years.

Armored by union protections, police officers are emboldened to exceed the limits of their powers. States that recently authorized collective bargaining powers for police unions, witnessed a subsequent increase in brutality by on-duty law enforcement. After Florida legalized union contracts for deputy sheriffs in 2003, complaints of officer violence rose by 40%.

In order to advance accountability and end systemic anti-Black violence within CPD, Illinois must enact legislation that prohibits police unions from engaging in any collective bargaining, outside of wage and benefit negotiations.
AS AN APPOINTED BODY, THE CHICAGO POLICE BOARD LACKS THE INDEPENDENCE REQUIRED FOR ACCOUNTABLE GOVERNANCE

The Chicago Police Board wields tremendous influence over city law enforcement, vested with the authority to nominate the police superintendent, establish department rules, and oversee disciplinary action in cases of officer misconduct. However, in its capacity as appointed body, the panel has historically lacked the independence and grassroots representation required to eradicate corruption, violence, and impunity within CPD.

Through the nomination process, the mayor and City Council implicitly confer their unwavering political loyalty to city law enforcement upon police board members. As a result, the commission has served as an obstruction rather than an instrument of independent reform. The board consistently abstains from exercising its authority to issue policy recommendations to the police department, and in reviewing incidents of officer wrongdoing, seldom pursues justice. Even in the rare cases where the police superintendent calls for disciplinary removal, the committee overwhelmingly rules in favor of the officer.

In 2018, the Chicago Police Board upheld the superintendent’s recommendation for termination in only 38% of the cases it considered.

In order to promote true accountability and justice for communities impacted by systemic anti-Black police violence, Chicago must establish a democratically elected police board.

INCREMENTAL REFORMS ARE NOT A Viable SOLUTION

For decades, Chicago has attempted to address patterns of abuse within CPD through a series of modest reform measures. Ignoring public demands for transformational systemic change, the city has historically favored incrementalist policies, such as body cameras, appointed oversight entities, and increased officer training.

This approach has proven to be entirely ineffective in reversing anti-Black policing, and has often served to only further empower police departments to advance unjust law enforcement practices. Since the adoption of the most recent round of reform measures, racial disparities in officer use of force incidents have steadily increased.
KEY POLICY SOLUTIONS

1. WITHDRAW TAXPAYER FUNDING FROM THE CHICAGO POLICE DEPARTMENT AND EQUITABLY INVEST IN MORE EFFECTIVE PUBLIC SAFETY SERVICES

   Significantly scale back operational spending on local law enforcement and reduce the police force commensurately. Replace dispatch officers with on-call city professionals - including social workers, mental health providers, mediators, and human services employees - who are better equipped to address public safety emergencies. Abolish private policing agencies.

2. PROHIBIT POLICE UNIONS FROM ENGAGING IN ANY COLLECTIVE BARGAINING ACTIVITIES OUTSIDE OF WAGE AND BENEFIT NEGOTIATIONS

   Police union contracts have historically shielded officers from accountability for their actions, even in cases of racialized harassment, brutality, and murder. Such agreements serve as a driving force of police violence, by emboldening officers to exceed the limits of their power with the explicit assurance of absolute impunity.

3. ESTABLISH A DEMOCRATICALLY ELECTED POLICE BOARD TO GOVERN THE CHICAGO POLICE DEPARTMENT

   This entity will hold the exclusive authority to hire senior officers, investigate reports of police misconduct, discipline and terminate officers who are found guilty of wrongdoing, and determine department budgets and rules.