

***Ending Police Violence to Improve Public Health:  
Statement from Medical and Graduate Students from Miami-Dade County***

Dear Miami-Dade County Commissioners,

The deaths of George Floyd, Tony McDade, Breonna Taylor, Nina Pop, Ahmaud Arbery, and more recently, Robert Fuller, Riah Milton, Dominique Fells, Rayshard Brooks, and Oluwatoyin Salau and countless other Black Americans have painfully reminded us, as healthcare providers and public health and biomedical scientists, of the unjust health inequities that exist against Black Americans. Systemic racism is a complex and formidable risk factor for health inequities, and police- or law enforcement-related violence is one of the most deadly consequences of such a system.

***We write to you as students of medicine, public health, and biomedical science to strongly advocate for the divestment of the police and investment in our Miami-Dade communities.*** In this letter, we will outline the differences in budget allocation for Miami-Dade County, our rationale for divesting in police using a public health approach, and our demands with action items, using the best evidence from public health science in hopes that you will consider a new conception of public safety in our communities.

**I. Budget Information: Too Much Money for Police, Not Enough Money for Communities**

According to the FY 2019-2020 Miami-Dade County Budget<sup>1</sup>, the Miami-Dade Police Department was allocated **\$771,629,000**, which amounts to about **43%** of the total Operating Budget for Public Safety (**\$1,786,715,000**, or **31%** of the total County Operating Budget)<sup>2</sup>.

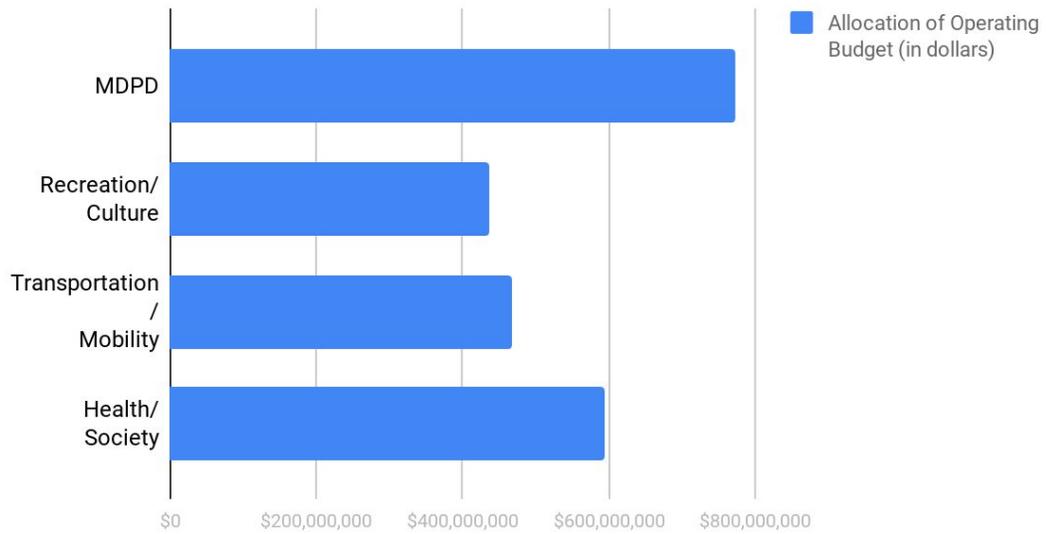
In contrast, community-strengthening departments received a fraction of this budget. For example, *Recreation/Culture* received **\$436,550,000 (8%** of the Operating Budget), *Transportation and Mobility* received **\$466,888,000 (8%** of the Operating Budget), and *Health and Society* received **\$593,537,000 (10%** of the Operating Budget) (illustrated in Figure 1).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.miamidade.gov/budget/library/fy2019-20/adopted/police.pdf>

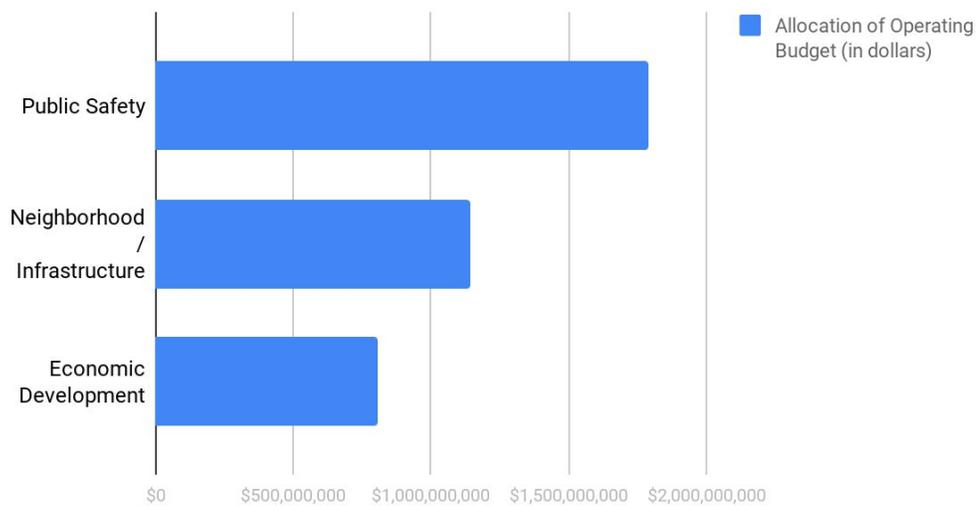
<sup>2</sup> <https://www.miamidade.gov/budget/library/fy2019-20/adopted/adopted-budget.pdf>

Figure 1. Comparison of FY 2019-2020 Operating Budgets for Departments vs. MDPD



It is also worth noting that the Public Safety Budget in general is larger than the Budgets for *Neighborhood/Infrastructure* (\$1,142,718,000, or 20% of the Operating Budget) or *Economic Development* (\$803,000,000, or 14% of the Operating Budget) (illustrated in Figure 2).

Figure 2. Comparison of FY 2019-2020 Operating Budget of Departments vs. Public Safety



## II. **Argument to Divest in Police and Invest in Communities: A Public Health Approach**

The *American Public Health Association* has declared law enforcement violence as a public health issue<sup>3</sup>. As future caregivers to the community and researchers of future medical therapies, we can no longer stand by as Black Americans continue to disproportionately suffer at the hands of law enforcement.

The Miami-Dade Police Department released a statement to the community to argue that safe policing policies are already in effect<sup>4</sup>. Many police departments across the nation have already employed basic safer policing policies, such as banning chokeholds and strangleholds, requiring de-escalation, implicit bias, and “community policing” retraining for officers in response to previous public outcry regarding police brutality<sup>5</sup>. While these paint a positive picture of police reform, the data on police brutality and police killing of unarmed civilians - particularly Black civilians - demonstrates that these and similar reforms are incapable of decreasing police-related violence and only encourage more funds allocated to police. In summary, safer police reform is not sufficient to improve public health.

Decades of public health research on social epidemiology have consistently shown that environmental racism, unhealthy built environments, racial residential segregation, disproportionately high rates of incarceration and policing, lower socioeconomic status, and sustained economic hardships are risk factors for poorer health, especially in Black communities<sup>6</sup>. These risk factors, unlike many medical risk factors, represent entities that are largely under governmental control. To translate this research into practical, real-world solutions requires that governments reflect on this abundance of evidence and invest money toward programs and infrastructure that substantial data and experience indicates will improve these factors.

Divesting in the police and investing in communities will, in turn, benefit police as well. The current system necessitates that police are called to deal with domestic disputes, drug-related issues, homelessness, and mental health crises that they are not trained to handle. In other words, police are often used to treat issues in society that could be

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<https://www.apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2019/01/29/law-enforcement-violence>

4

<https://www.local10.com/news/local/2020/06/08/miami-dade-police-department-releases-letter-to-community-amid-protests/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.8toabolition.com/why>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112305>,

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1497358/>,

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(17\)30569-X/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(17)30569-X/fulltext)

prevented by investing in communities, especially housing, education, mental health services, healthcare, and social work.

The disbandment of the police force is not unprecedented in the US. In 2012, Camden, New Jersey successfully dissolved their police department, laying off all their police officers and requiring them to reapply with a new interview process that included a psychological evaluation<sup>7</sup>. Camden incorporated new policies, such as requiring new recruits to introduce themselves to the neighborhood, improving the diversity of their police force, with a focus on gaining the public's trust. Overall, this radical change initially saved the city millions of dollars and reduced violent crime by an estimated 42%<sup>8</sup>.

Similarly, Minneapolis City Council recently voted to disband their police department and instead reallocate funds toward community-led programs in response to George Floyd's horrific and preventable murder by a police officer<sup>9</sup>. This comes after the City of Minneapolis was selected alongside five other cities to benefit from a \$4.5 million federal grant for the National Initiative for Building Community Trust and Justice<sup>10</sup>. This program sought to address police brutality through trainings on implicit bias and community policing<sup>11</sup>. These trainings, while promoted by police departments nationwide, have not proven effective at preventing future harms. Recent investigations behind the murder of Rayshard Brooks at an Atlanta Wendy's have revealed that Officer Garrett Rolfe underwent trainings on use of force and cultural awareness within the six months prior to the shooting<sup>12</sup>. Public health research and incidents like these urge us to critically consider whether these institutions benefit from further costly reforms.

The only reasonable and evidence-based solution is to shift financial investment on the county-levels from the Miami-Dade Police Department to other departments that strengthen our communities, improve social determinants of health, and allow them to focus on alternative forms of safety and prevention.

### **III. Demands and Action Items**

*These demands are based on the decades of work from countless Black scholars and activists who came before us and are continuing to fight for stronger, safer communities.*

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/06/12/camden-policing-reforms-313750>, <https://www.newsweek.com/minneapolis-not-first-disband-police-department-1509327>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/09/us/disband-police-camden-new-jersey-trnd/index.html>

<sup>9</sup>

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/tommybeer/2020/06/12/minneapolis-city-council-unanimously-votes-to-replace-police-with-community-led-model/#2fcca8d71a52>

<sup>10</sup> <https://theintercept.com/2020/05/29/george-floyd-minneapolis-police-reform/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://trustandjustice.org/pilot-sites/info/minneapolis-minnesota>

<sup>12</sup>

<https://www.thv11.com/article/news/local/protests/what-do-we-know-about-garrett-rolfe/85-64b07e39-6ccb-4f0f-b26b-024de863a782>

*We by no means take credit for these ideas, and simply are standing on the shoulders of Black feminists, abolitionists, and activists who have paved the way for us. Please see a summary of important works here:*

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1a-lzdtxOIWuzYNGqw/YwxMWADtZ6vJGCpKhtJHrS54/edit?usp=sharing>

We based the following demands on the following campaigns and resources: American Public Health Association 2018 Statement to End Police Violence (<https://www.endingpoliceviolence.com/>) and 8toAbolition.com.

**A. Reject Any New Proposals to Increase the Police Budget, including Proposals to Increase Policing in Neighborhoods.**

*We will not accept any increases to the Police budget for this upcoming FY or any foreseeable FY. This includes but is not limited to: addition of police officers, proposing new equipment, and/or public relations. We also will not accept attempts to increase policing in neighborhoods.*

**B. Divest in Police: Decrease Police Budget FY 2020-2021 and Consider Further Reduction for Subsequent FYs.**

*Public health evidence suggests that divesting in the Police and starting to invest more in our communities will improve the public health of the population, especially those most vulnerable to “deaths of despair”. We expect that decreases in the Police budget will be progressive for each subsequent fiscal year.*

**C. Invest in Communities: Allocate Money Saved from Reduced Police Budget to Departments that will Improve Community-Centered Programs.**

*This demand will allow money saved from the reduction of the Police budget to be allocated for community-based programs and initiatives. Instead of funding police to essentially treat the consequences of various social determinants of health, we argue that funding should go to programs and initiatives that will improve these determinants and prevent crime. We propose community initiatives to improve outcomes for the following risk factors:*

- Mental Health
- Drug Abuse and Addiction
- Domestic Violence
- Housing and Homelessness
- Education
- Public Transportation
- Food Banks and Security

- Youth Programs
- Police Violence Data Tracking System

**D. Do Not Fund Creation of New Jails in Miami-Dade County.**

*We will not accept the creation of a new jail in Miami-Dade County or the City of Miami. A recent proposal for a new jail by Miami-Dade County would cost nearly \$400 million dollars<sup>13</sup>. This money is better spent on improving our communities and not exacerbating the racist systems of incarceration in this country. Black and Brown people are more likely to be incarcerated compared to white people, and this has been consistently related to worse health outcomes overall<sup>14</sup>. This has been most recently shown during the COVID-19 pandemic, where outbreaks in jails forced governments to release inmates in an effort to quell the spread of infection<sup>15</sup>.*

**E. Increase Police Accountability by Establishing a System for Tracking Use of Excessive Force by Officers and Acts of Police Brutality.**

*Data should be collected on cases of police violence in Miami-Dade County as well as the City of Miami and this data should be publicly available. This will not only increase transparency among the public, but also allow researchers to examine the dynamics of police violence to better target interventions. Funding for this initiative can come from divestment from police as well.*

**F. Eliminate the Use of Military Equipment by Police and Decrease the Number and Deployment of SWAT Teams.**

*Finally, militarizing the police is not only brutal and excessively violent, but it also costs the taxpayers millions of dollars a year. Many tactics and techniques used by police are not allowed in a war zone, and therefore should not be considered tools of the law against members of our communities. Though police claim that rubber bullets and tear gas, for example, are non-lethal, the physical and emotional damage they cause is completely immoral and a direct threat to public health<sup>16</sup>.*

We look forward to partnering with you, our government, to improve the public health of the citizens of Miami-Dade County. Our ultimate goal is to ensure that our citizens can live prosperous, dignified, and healthy lives. For our Black communities in Miami-Dade, this reality has not been possible for generations from the very beginning of this country's history.

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<sup>13</sup>

<https://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/miami-dade-county-proposes-building-new-jail-facility-for-393-million-11539341>

<sup>14</sup> <https://jech.bmj.com/content/72/8/715.long>, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/socf.12361>

<sup>15</sup> <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamainternalmedicine/fullarticle/2765271>

<sup>16</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2053168017712885>

Miami-Dade County has an opportunity to be on the right side of history by reevaluating the concept of public safety. We can no longer tolerate police violence in our communities.

We, as students of medicine, public health, and biomedical science, have dedicated our lives to improve the lives of others. We wholeheartedly implore you do the same by following public health recommendations to divest in the police and invest in the community.

Signed<sup>17</sup>,

<b>Name</b>	<b>Pronouns</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>
Michelle Caunca	she/her/hers	MD/PhD Student, MS4	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Amy Amanda Nwaba	she/her/hers	Medical Student	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Christopher Garcia-Wilde	they/he	medical student (MS3)	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Kasha J Bornstein	they/them	Medical Student/Paramedic	University of Miami School of Medicine
Jordan Baeker Bispo	she/her/hers	Graduate student	Epidemiology
Antonio Fontanella	He/his	Medical Student	Miller School of Medicine
Zinzi Bailey	She/her/hers	Epidemiologist (ScD, MSPH)	University of Miami
Elizabeth Jacobs	she/her/hers	MD/PhD Student	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Anya Hall	he/his	medical student	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Courtney Goodman	she her hers	Medical student	Miller school of medicine university of miami
Will Pavlis	He/him/his	Medical student	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Ashly Westrick PhD	She/her/hers	Public health professional	
Abigail Ness	She/Her/Hers	Medical student	
Varsha Prabhakar	she/her/hers	Medical student	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Akshata Gunda	She her hers	Medical student	UM Miller School of Medicine

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<sup>17</sup> Updated list as of 07/05/20.

Malaika Woody	she/her/hers	medical student	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Steven Di Lauro	he/him/his	Medical Student (MS3)	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Samuel Hinkes	He/him/his	MD/MPH Student	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Lauren Hucko	She/her/hers	Medical Student	
Christina Barkas	She/her/hers	Medical Student	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Cameron S Bader	he/him/his	Graduate Student	University of Miami
Julia Fritsch	she/her/hers	PhD Student	University of Miami
Maria Yao	she/her/hers	Medical Student	University of Miami
Lindsay Richards	she/her	MD/MPH student	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Daniel Kvistad	he/him/his	PhD Candidate	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Brandon Rose	he/him	medical student	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Jonathan Martinez	he/him/his	Medical student	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Julie Heger	she/her/hers	medical student	University of Miami
Kristiana Morgan	She/her/hers	Medical student	University of Miami
Jasmine S. Edwards	She/her/hers	Biomedical graduate student	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Tamara de Souza	she/her/hers	Resident Physician	University of Miami/ Jackson Memorial Hospital
Nareka Trewick	she/her/hers	medical student	
Margaret Ginoza	She/her/hers	MD/MPH student	University of Miami
Joanna Farina	She/her	Nurse	Florida international university
Meera Nagarsheth	She/her/hers	Medical student	
Rachel Womack	she/her/hers	Medical Student	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Emily Ramos	She/her/hers	Medical student	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Colin Mackenzie	He/him/his	Medical student	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Brittany Hedgepeth	She/her/hers	Resident physician	

Lily Ostrer	she/her	Resident Physician	Jackson Memorial Hospital/University of Miami
Hope Hua	She/her/hers	Medical student	University of Miami
Brittany Hedgepeth	She/her/hers	Resident physician	
Anya Hall	He/his	Medical school	University of Miami
Brittany Hedgepeth	She/her/hers	Resident physician	
Irene Goo	she/her/hers	Medical student	University of Miami Miller SOM
Iris Escobar	She/her	Scientist	University of Miami
Rainya Heath	She/her/hers	Medical student	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Saltenat Moghaddam	she/her/hers	medical student	University of Miami Miller School of medicine
Shirley Li	she/her/hers	Medical Student	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Tatiana Campuzano	She/her/hers	Medical Student	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Daniel Beckerman	He him his	Medical student	UM miller
Brea Willey	She/her/hers	Medical student	University of Miami
Christian Roa	Him, His	Medical Student	University of Miami
Alex Silverman	He, Him, His	Medical Student	UMMSM
Joyce Abiodun	She/her/hers	Physical therapy student	University of Miami
Ashley Vesotsky	She/her/hers	Physical therapy student	University of Miami
Victoria Tiley	She	Physical therapy student	University of Miami
Shana Bergal	she	Physical therapy	
Ashley Vesotsky	She/her/hers	Physical therapy student	University of Miami
Lauren Bystrom	She/ her/ hers	Mstp student	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Jaclyn Perreault	she/her/hers	Medical Student	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Julie Graves	she/her/hers	Physician	Nurx
Daniel Schwartzbaum	He/him/his	Medical student	University of Miami
Maya Lubarsky	She/her/hers	Medical student	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Amanda Thiele	She/her/hers	Medical Student	UMMSM

Ashley Vesotsky	She/her/hers	Physical therapy student	University of Miami
Jovanka Ravix	she/her/hers	MSTP student	University of Miami
Amanda Thiele	She/her/hers	Medical Student	UMMSM
Adriana Baez	She/her/hers	Medical Students	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Mak Djulbegovic	He/his/him	Medical Student	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Zahra Ukani	she/her/hers	Medical Student	FIU Herbert Wertheim College of Medicine
Sofia Oluwole	she/her/hers	Medical Student	University of Miami Miller School of Medicine
Caroline Nicotra	She, her	Medical student	University of Miami Miller school of medicine
Ameena Payne	She	Higher education educator	
Ian Motie	He/Him/His	Medical Student	FSU College Of Medicine
Brian	He	Medical Student	LECOM - Bradenton
Jacob Musinsky	He/him/his	Medical student	Florida Atlantic University Charles E. Schmidt College of Medicine
Julia Telischi	She	Medical student	
Kay McMonigal	he/him/his	Scientist	Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences, University of Miami
Matt Pendo	he/him/his	Medical Student	Florida International University HWCOM
Lindsey Stavola	She/her/hers	Medical Student	Florida International University
Allison Lindsey	she/her/hers	medical student	Florida International University Herbert Wertheim College of Medicine
Sarah Stavros	She/her/hers	Medical Student	FIU Herbert Wertheim College of Medicine
Devika Dholakia	She/Her/Hers	Medical Student	FIU HWCOM
Alexander Black	He/him	Medical Student	FIU
Matthew Sturm	He/him	Medical student	University of Miami
Allison Chin	She/her/hers	Medical Student	FIU HWCOM

Abby Cartus	she/her/hers	PhD candidate	University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health
Crystal Gianvecchio	She/her/hers	Medical student, M2	Florida International University Herbert Wertheim COM
Wayne Parks	He/Him	Social Worker	Florida International University
Dominika Seblova	She/her	Scientist	Columbia university
Nicole Schmidt	she/her/hers	MSW Student	Florida International University
Chiara Pavon	She/her/hers	Student doctor	IU
Annette Peluffo	she/her/hers	Staff	FIU Herbert Wertheim College of Medicine