Feedback from the Field: A Summary of Focus Groups with Baltimore Police Officers

Prepared by The Crime and Justice Institute for the Baltimore Police Department Monitoring Team

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A Division of Community Resources for Justice

Contents

Executive Summary

The Baltimore Police Department Monitoring Team contracted with the Crime and Justice Institute (CJI) to conduct focus groups of sworn police officers. The focus groups were conducted pursuant to Paragraph 26 of the Baltimore Consent Decree.[1] CJI conducted eight focus groups of sworn personnel from each shift over a three-day period in May 2019. Forty patrol officers, nine detectives, ten sergeants, and nine lieutenants for a total of 68 participants provided candid input on a selection of topics with an emphasis on community-police relations and community engagement in Baltimore. The Monitoring Team approved the focus group guide in advance.

The criteria for participating in the focus groups were decided upon by the Monitoring Team, the Baltimore Police Department (BPD), and the U.S. Department of Justice to ensure that the groups appropriately represented a cross-section of BPD. CJI worked with the Chief of Patrol Division to identify and assign officers to the focus groups that included two patrol officer groups that were gender specific (male only, female only) but mixed in race and ethnicity composition, three patrol officer groups that were separated by race/ethnicity (African American, Latinx, White) but mixed in gender, and three separate groups (one of detectives, one of sergeants, and one of lieutenants) that were mixed in race/ethnicity composition and gender. Officers from every shift and every district were represented. The average tenure in the Department among focus group participants was 13.2 years, ranging from a low of two years to a high of 33 years. Thirty-four percent of the participants was female and sixty-six percent of the participants was male. Focus groups lasted between 90 minutes and two hours.

Community Relations and Community Policing

The general consensus of participating officers is that the state of community-police relations varies significantly by district and ranges from positive and cooperative to negative and adversarial. Generally, officers believe that the majority of residents support and trust the police. However, officers reported that the people most likely to interact with the police—those involved in crime, victims of crime, or both—hold less trust and confidence in the Baltimore Police Department. Additionally, officers believe some residents choose not to engage with the police out of a fear that doing so might result in retaliation or intimidation from others in the community, particularly among the criminally involved. Finally, officers discussed a notable worsening of their relationship with community members following 2015 riots in the City.

Officers from every rank struggled to explain the Department's approach to and expectations for engaging in community policing and expressed concern that there was too little time for proactive policing. Instead, officers said that there is only time during their shifts to respond to calls for service and write accompanying reports. Patrol officers reported that the Department requires business checks whereby patrol officers check in on local businesses and sign a log sheet to document that the check occurred. Officers understand that the intent of a business check is to build rapport with business owners and customers. However, they expressed frustration that too many business checks are required during their shift, which limits the time available to build relationships and causes the business checks to devolve, in many cases, simply to signing the log. Officers from every rank perceive that community-police relationships and proactive policing efforts were

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[1] Paragraph 26 states that "BPD and the City will cooperate with the design and conduct of the surveys by, for example, providing previous survey instruments and data, and in the case of BPD, helping to organize focus groups of officers".

stronger when the Department assigned patrol officers to specific posts and maintained post integrity. Officers believe that post assignments allowed officers enough time to build trusting relationships with the community, understand the needs of the community, and feel a sense of ownership and pride over their post. Officers reported a desire to return to post assignments but believe that staffing shortages made a return unlikely.

Officers discussed how "corner boys," who are known to stake out sidewalk corners to sell drugs, generally have an adversarial relationship with the police. Some officers expressed annoyance that the Department now dissuades officers from conducting corner sweeps to force the groups to move, which was recounted as a common practice prior to the 2015 riots. While officers recognize that occupying public space on the corner is not in and of itself an offense that warrants arrest, they are frustrated by their inability to intervene in activities that seem to cause fear or are threatening to others. Some officers attribute the Department's stance that it is unconstitutional to "sweep" corners and sidewalks of loiterers through arrests or threats of arrest to the Consent Decree, with some expressing the belief that the Consent Decree constrains the Department from conducting its own affairs. These impressions indicate a lack of understanding on the part of patrol officers. Command staff and supervisors have not adequately communicated the expectations under the Consent Decree to officers nor have they explained why meeting the expectations of the Consent Decree will contribute to more effective policing and improved public safety.

Use of Force

Officers from every focus group expressed confusion and frustration over the Department's policy and supervisors' handling of use of force incidents. There was a misconception among some officers that the Consent Decree required a change in Department policy that classifies all arrests as a level one use of force. Officers admitted confusion as to whether revised Department policy defines all handcuffing and escorts as a reportable level one use of force. Officers fear and believe that too many documented uses of force will be used as evidence against them and result in disciplinary action, a criminal investigation, or restrict reassignment and advancement within the Department. Additionally, officers reported that supervisors send the message to patrol officers during roll call not to use force. Some of the patrol officers believe that their supervisors will not come to their defense for using force. Consequently, patrol officers feel that they are in a vulnerable position in the Department and less safe on the job as they are apprehensive to use appropriate force or make a good arrest.

Consent Decree

Many officers in the focus groups conveyed the belief that the Consent Decree results in a more conservative Department that is overly focused on compliance. Generally, patrol officers and supervisors reported that changes in Department policy and practice as a result of the Consent Decree are not well communicated down the chain of command. Officers discussed how this lack of communication made way for confusion and rumors about the Consent Decree and policies to spread across the Department. This was particularly frustrating for sergeants and lieutenants who sometimes were unclear on new policy and practice changes themselves and were, therefore, unable to lead their subordinates effectively through the changes.

Leadership and Staffing

Officers in the focus groups discussed how issues with leadership, supervision, and staffing have caused morale to suffer in the Department. Officers reported that frequent turnover in the Commissioner position has left the Department without clear and consistent direction for the future. Officers also perceived a disconnect between officers on the street and those higher up the chain of command. Particularly, officers felt that as the media and community have scrutinized the Department over the past several years, the command staff and the City have become more concerned with the Department's image than supporting officers and boosting staff morale. Department members at all levels seem to appreciate the pressure the ranks above experience and yet are frustrated by perceived micromanagement and lack of trust from the ranks above.

Staffing shortages were among the most common reasons officers in the focus groups provided for why morale is low. Officers perceive that staffing shortages result in overworked line staff. Patrol officers in particular felt that their entire shifts were spent going from call to call, leaving no time for other policing activities like community or proactive policing, which most recognized as valuable and necessary activities. Certain deployment strategies, including 10-7 — a practice of putting a patrol car "out of service" and assigning it to the site of a homicide for a determined amount of time — are viewed as a drain on patrol. These strategies increase the frustration of officers who already see themselves as providing low quality service to those who need help while another officer is stationary and relatively inactive. The practice of drafting – forced overtime to cover shifts – is having a very negative impact on patrol officer morale and making it increasingly difficult to retain officers. Drafting creates hardships on personal and family life and weakens the commitment to BPD. Additionally, officers believe that staffing shortages lead to officers being promoted too quickly without enough experience in their rank and being provided little to no training for their new supervisory roles as sergeants, lieutenants, and ranks above. Officers also hold the belief that promotions are based on whom one knows at higher ranks in the Department rather than based on merit. Together, these challenges are taxing on officers as they conveyed sentiments of job dissatisfaction, burnout, and feeling devalued and not supported by the Department.

Areas for Department Improvement

Officers discussed areas where they believe the Department could improve, which would help boost morale and improve retention. There was a strong sentiment that Department leadership could do a better job supporting officers and making them feel like valued personnel. As one example, rewarding exceptional police work is one way to make officers feel appreciated for a job well done. Officers also reported that command staff could do a better job communicating Department changes down the chain of command. New equipment, updated technology, and renovated district stations were suggestions offered that would improve work conditions and quality of day-to-day work experience. Although officers understood the constraints around the Department being understaffed, they suggested what they believe would be improved staffing strategies. For instance, officers suggested eliminating some specialty units and returning officers to post assignments, hiring civilians to fill administrative roles, and stopping certain deployment strategies that take officers off the streets. Finally, officers believe that a more efficient and timely Internal Affairs investigations process would boost Department morale.

Key Operational Takeaways

- Officers desire for the Department to return to post assignments.
- Officers want clarity around the UOF policy and whether all handcuffing and escorts are a reportable level one use of force.
- Officers are interested in greater communication, leadership, and support from command staff.
- Officers feel that the practice of compulsory overtime to make up for staffing shortages (i.e., drafting) is excessively taxing on officers and causing morale to suffer.
- Officers believe that specialized units, some deployment strategies (e.g., 10-7s), and using sworn personnel to fill administrative positions take too many officers away from patrol in a Department that is significantly understaffed.
- Officers think that some personnel are promoted too quickly without sufficient experience or training.
- Officers believe that updated equipment, technology, and facilities would improve their work experience and boost morale.
- Officers desire a more timely and efficient Internal Affairs investigation process.
- Officers would welcome efforts that show that the Department values them and wish that the Department would recognize officers for a job well done.

Introduction

As part of the Consent Decree being implemented to drive police reform in Baltimore, the Baltimore Police Department Monitoring Team (MT) contracted with the Crime and Justice Institute (CJI) to conduct police officer focus groups to hear the perspectives of officers with regard to the community they police and the Department that employs them. The focus groups were conducted pursuant to Paragraph 26 of the Consent Decree.[2] Over a three-day period in May 2019, staff from the Crime and Justice Institute and four members of the Monitoring Team facilitated eight focus groups of Baltimore Police Department sworn personnel. In total 68 sworn personnel provided candid input across a range of topics.

This report provides a summary of the comments, concerns, and feedback from the patrol officers, detectives, sergeants, and lieutenants who participated in the groups. The findings presented below indicate that there is a) work to be done on improving trust and confidence between the BPD and Baltimore residents, b) a desire for strengthened and sustained police leadership, c) an interest in improving staffing through retention, improved morale, and post assignment and post integrity, and d) a need for enhanced communication within the Department. Police reform work is challenging, often met with resistance, and takes time. City and BPD leadership have the ability to address some of the expressed frustrations related to these major reforms by supporting their officers and listening to their concerns. Without sufficient support of the Department leadership and clear communication around new and revised policies and expectations, officers report feeling unsure of how to behave in the field under certain circumstances, and lack the resources and guidance necessary to get through the learning curve of reform.

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[2] Paragraph 26 states that "BPD and the City will cooperate with the design and conduct of the surveys by, for example, providing previous survey instruments and data, and in the case of BPD, helping to organize focus groups of officers".

Methodology

The Baltimore Police Department employs approximately 2,500 sworn police officers that patrol approximately 92 square miles of land and sea with a diverse resident population.[3] A sample of sworn officers were identified to provide input that represents the varied experiences of officers. The criteria for participating in the focus groups were decided upon by the Monitoring Team, the Baltimore Police Department, and the U.S. Department of Justice to ensure that the participants represented a cross-section of the Department along a few dimensions. CJI worked with the Chief of Patrol Division to identify and assign officers to the eight focus groups that included:

- All male, mixed race/ethnicity
- All female, mixed race/ethnicity
- White, mixed gender
- African American, mixed gender
- Latinx, mixed gender
- Lieutenants, mixed race/ethnicity/gender
- Sergeants, mixed race/ethnicity/gender
- Detectives, mixed race/ethnicity/gender

CJI conducted the focus groups of sworn personnel from each of the three shifts (Adam, Baker, Charlie) over the three-day period from May 21 to May 23, 2019. Officers selected to participate in the focus groups were not provided additional compensation or incentives for their participation. Additionally, in order to facilitate a frank discussion and elicit candid responses, participants were informed at the beginning of each session that anything stated during the group would be reported anonymously. As such, care has been taken throughout this report to ensure that the identities of respondents are not revealed. Responses from the line officer, detective, sergeant, and lieutenant focus groups are presented collectively, with respondents generically identified as "officers." The rank of an individual who offered specific input is only provided in cases where it is clearly relevant. Quotes are, therefore, provided without attribution and may have been edited for clarity.

The focus groups ran between one and a half to two hours in length and were structured around a set of open-ended questions that had been developed by CJI. The Monitoring Team approved the focus group questions in advance. General topics covered during these groups included:

- Relationships and engagement with the community
- Use of force
- Community policing
- General experience with the consent decree
- Areas of Department improvement

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[3] https://www.baltimorepolice.org/

CJI staff took detailed notes on officer responses during focus groups. Audio or video of the focus groups were not recorded. CJI analyzed the notes to identify the salient themes that emerged across the groups.[4]

Forty patrol officers, nine detectives, ten sergeants, and nine lieutenants for a total of 68 participants provided candid input on a selection of topics with an emphasis on community-police relations and engagement in Baltimore. Officers from every shift and every district were represented. The average tenure in the Department among focus group participants was 13.2 years, ranging from a low of two years to a high of 33 years. Thirty-four percent of the sample was female and sixty-six percent of the sample was male.

Community Relations and Community Policing

Relationships with the community

The general consensus of participating officers is that the state of community-police relations varies by district and ranges from positive and cooperative to negative and adversarial. Generally, officers believe that most residents support and trust the police. In districts where community members positively regard the police, officers feel more appreciated for their service and more engaged by community members. For example, one patrol officer explained that residents in his district "show a lot more love" to the police by cooking food for officers to express gratitude, engaging officers in conversation, and not hesitating to flag down a patrol car to request help. These acts of kindness and positive interactions with some segments of the community contribute to officers feeling valued for their service.

Across the focus groups a number of officers indicated that community-police relations are better with older residents than with the youth of the City. Officers attribute this difference to older residents participating in community meetings more often, relative to youth, where police are present to discuss issues related to crime, safety, and other issues they deemed important. Conversely, officers believe the youth are more likely to get information about the police through social media and the internet, which can present more negative portrayals of the police.

While officers recounted positive relationships with some segments of Baltimore residents, they overwhelming discussed how community-police relations are largely negative and adversarial. Officers reported that the people most likely to interact with the police — those involved in crime, victims of crime, or both — hold less trust and confidence in the Baltimore Police Department. For example, a number of officers discussed how "corner boys," who are known to stake out sidewalk corners to sell drugs, generally have an adversarial relationship with the police. Officers described how attempts to ask the groups to move from a corner often resulted in officers' authority being challenged by being cursed at and ignored. Officers believe that the courts will not uphold officer actions to move people along and officers feel that not only is their power to respond eroded, but also, that those who seek their help lose faith in their ability to respond. However, officers recognize that occupying public space on the corner is not in and of itself an offense that warrants arrest, yet they are frustrated by their inability to intervene in activities that seem to cause fear or

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[4] The focus groups were stratified by race, gender, and officer rank to help identify any differences in perceptions across these groups. During the analysis of the focus group discussions, differences emerged in officers' attitudes and opinions across rank but not race or gender. Therefore, comparisons across race or gender groups are not presented in this report.

are threatening to others. Officers explained that supervisors often encourage patrol officers not to cite "corner boys" for loitering or other quality of life issues. Some officers expressed annoyance that the Department now dissuades officers from conducting corner sweeps to force the groups to move, which was recounted as a common practice prior to the 2015 riots. One officer reflected on this perceived change by saying,

> When I first came on the police force we did loitering arrests every day. We can't push people off of corners anymore, because it's a public space. The problem is that anyone is allowed to occupy sidewalks or the inside of businesses. But, store owners want them off the corner. They're frustrated because customers won't frequent their businesses. Citizens are frustrated with police because they don't think the police do anything about loitering.

Officers generally believe that community-police relationships worsened after the 2015 riots in the City, which made policing the City more of a challenge. Officers recalled how prior to the riots the police were more likely to proactively engage with people in the community and could more easily facilitate and resolve issues through conversation with community members. Now, officers are concerned that heightened hostility between the community and police could result in an interaction unnecessarily escalating. Therefore, officers reported conducting less proactive policing and generally only responding to calls for service. One officer reflected on how changes in the post-riots community-police relations affected policing practices. He said,

> I grew up in Baltimore and started policing in the late 90s. It is natural for me to get out and engage with the community. But, after Freddie Gray, things got worse. Residents, especially young men, are so angry with the police. Young people are mean mugging the police and they don't even know what for. I used to love engaging with the community, and we did it, but it is different now.

Despite the challenges officers face in their attempt to engage with members of the community, some officers developed creative strategies to help facilitate relationships with residents. For example, one officer explained that she delivered her business card to every household in her patrol area and encouraged residents to contact her if they needed help. By reaching out to each household in her patrol area, she was able to meet many residents and protect any individual resident from being singled out as someone who was cooperating with the police. Another officer carries a camera with her while on duty and uses her photography hobby to make a connection with residents. One officer said that she wears plain clothes to community meetings because she believes residents are more apt to speak with her in plain clothes than if she were in uniform. Finally, one officer explained that she consistently made an effort to speak with the "corner boys" until rapport, and eventually a relationship, was built.

Fear of retaliation and intimidation

Officers across the focus groups discussed that some residents choose not to engage with the police out of a fear that doing so might result in retaliation or intimidation from others in the community, particularly among people involved in crime. Some officers recognized the potential threat for residents who speak with the police, whether by providing information about a crime or simply carrying on a conversation, and temper their interactions with the community to keep residents safe. For instance, one officer explained how he

keeps his conversations with residents short and friendly as prolonged conversations could have harmful consequences. The officers said,

> *I keep my interactions with residents simple and brief. If I stop and talk to a person for twenty minutes, then that is going to signal to others in the neighborhood that the person might be a snitch. The next thing you know, that person is going to have their car windows smashed, their tires slashed, and their kid beat-up on the way home from school. I do community policing, but I do community policing with a light touch.*

Furthermore, officers indicated that the fear of retribution poses a challenge for solving crimes, as the community is hesitant to provide information to the police. Detectives reported that victims and witnesses are often reluctant to provide statements to the police or testify in court for fear of retaliation. One detective succinctly put it, "9 out of 10 residents won't cooperate. It's not that people don't want to help, it's just dangerous for them. We understand why they don't cooperate." When community residents do help the police by providing information about a crime, they can be cautious not to let others in the community know of their cooperation. For instance, one detective recalled that witnesses or victims he drives home after interviewing them at a district station often request to be dropped off a few blocks from the neighborhood to avoid being seen with an officer.

Community policing

Officers from every rank and tenure struggled to explain the Department's approach to and expectations for engaging in community policing. Veteran officers recalled that the Department most focused on community policing initiatives during former Commissioner Thomas Frazier's tenure in the 1990s. Those officers believe community policing to be a program that was in favor years ago and not a fundamental component of policing. Officers reported that the Department spends little time covering community policing during in-service training and in some years community policing is not explicitly covered during in-service training. Newer officers recalled that community policing was covered in the training academy, but not in much detail. Officers who had more years on the force believe that newer and younger officers (namely, millennials) do not possess the soft skills needed to engage and build relationships with the community. Some veteran officers felt that they could help teach and coach younger officers how to engage the community, if time and resources allowed.

Officers expressed concern that staffing shortages resulted in limited time for community policing. Instead, officers said that there is only time during their shifts to respond to calls for service and write accompanying reports. One officer said, "We are short on patrol and the City is violent, so we don't have the time to do community engagement." Supervisors admitted to harping on patrol officers to conduct community policing but also recognized that staffing shortages prohibit patrol officers from having the time to do so. Patrol officers expressed that although they feel pressure from supervisors to conduct community policing, many supervisors do not acknowledge or reward officers for good community engagement.

Patrol officers reported that the Department requires business checks whereby patrol officers check in on local businesses and sign a log sheet to document that the check occurred. Officers understand that the intent of a business check is to build rapport with business owners and customers. However, they expressed

frustration that too many business checks are required during their shift, which limits the time available to build relationships and causes the business checks to devolve, in many cases, to simply to signing the log.

Officers from the Community Collaboration Division (CCD), a BPD division devoted to community policing, expressed having better relationships with the community than other patrol officers. One officer from the CCD expressed dismay at the level of antagonism her fellow officers reported exists between the police and the community. The officer attributed her good relationship with the community to her ability to communicate with residents on their level, to suspend judgement and understand the root causes for why some people are involved in crime, and the creative ways she finds to humanize her interactions with residents. The officer perceives that other officers do not think the work she does is demanding or "actual policing," despite the fact that she also responds to calls for service in addition to her formal community engagement role. Indeed, another officer in that focus group made the claim that any patrol officer would happily trade places for the easier and more rewarding work of the Community Collaboration Division.

Finally, officers from every rank perceive that community-police relationships and proactive policing efforts were stronger when the Department assigned patrol officers to specific posts and maintained post integrity. Officers believe that post assignments allowed officers enough time to build trusting relationships with the community, understand the needs of the community, and feel a sense of ownership and pride over their post. Officers across the groups reported a desire to return to post assignments but believe that staffing shortages made a return unlikely. One officer recalled the benefits of the time when the Department assigned patrol officers to posts by saying,

> We used to know the people in our post. We knew who the players were and where all of the hot spots were. We knew business owners. We had conversations with kids and people on the street. We used to come to work to do policing and we were happy coming to work.

Use of Force

Use of force policy and practice

Officers from every focus group expressed confusion and frustration over the Department's policy and supervisors' expectations for and review of use of force incidents. Officers described confusion about the definitions and expectations of revised Department policy. Many wondered, are all handcuffing and escorts a reportable level one use of force? They believe that the Consent Decree requires this policy revision. Part of this confusion stems from inconsistency across supervisors who interpret the Department's use of force policy differently regarding whether the use of low-level force during an arrest, such as an officer restraining a person's arm who flinches during handcuffing, is reportable. Some supervisors believe that the policy should allow supervisors to review body worn camera footage of an arrest and use their discretion to decide if reportable force was used in such instances.

Supervisors and officers expressed frustration that the volume of paperwork associated with documenting use of force was overly burdensome. Supervisors reported that they cannot effectively lead patrol officers when they are stuck behind their computers reviewing use of force reports. Officers discussed that they receive the message from supervisors during roll call to "stay safe, back each other up, and don't get a use of force," because supervisors want their officers to be safe and do not want to be bogged down reviewing the

reports. Officers also think that supervisors sometimes downplay use of force incidents in order to avoid dealing with the associated paperwork.

Following the 2015 riots, supervisors and officers reported an increased hesitancy across members of the Department to use force of any kind for fear of the potential fall-out. Officers reported that they receive reminders from those up the chain of command that using force is the easiest way to lose their job. Officers reported feeling stressed that the types of force that previously resulted in a one-day suspension might now result in being fired or put through a criminal investigation. Officers discussed that using appropriate and reasonable force is part and parcel of policing work, but the fear of the consequences of using force and pressure from supervisors not to use force has resulted in officers not doing their jobs. One officer admitted, "We don't get out of our patrol cars like we used to, because we are afraid that if we do, then we might have to level-up." Moreover, veteran officers discussed that newer officers are more reluctant to use force when it is necessary and appropriate, which has the potential to create a dangerous situation. Finally, officers discussed that they were less likely to make arrests than in the past, since many officers believe an arrest is now a reportable use of force. One officer reflected on how using force is a necessary part of the job by saying,

> If a person pulls their arm away during an arrest, then the Department now says that is a use of force. In my whole career, maybe only once did a guy say, 'Go ahead. Put the cuffs on me.' You have to use force when making an arrest.

BlueTeam
BPD uses a database called BlueTeam to track use of force incidents. Some officers expressed frustration that inputting data into BlueTeam was time consuming and not user friendly. For instance, officers reported spending two or more hours of their shift submitting reports to BlueTeam. Officers discussed annoyance that there is no template for entering reports in BlueTeam and they sometimes have to correct a report rejected by the system multiple times before it is accepted. Officers would like better training on BlueTeam.

Officers also perceive that BlueTeam has the potential to be a tool used against officers, rather than a neutral database intended to track use of force incidents. For instance, officers believe that too many use of force incidents, even if they are appropriate uses of force, logged in BlueTeam could be used as evidence that an officer is overly aggressive. One officer said,

> If I am arresting a guy and he wiggles and I use an arrest technique, then I have to log that in BlueTeam. I don't feel pride for having 20 uses of force. Now, I am afraid to arrest anyone because I don't want to have so many uses of force against me.

Perceptions about Consent Decree
Many officers in the focus groups conveyed the belief that the Consent Decree results in a more conservative Department that is overly focused on compliance. Some of the officers believe that the Consent Decree constrains the Department's ability to conduct its own affairs by prescriptively outlining what the Department can and cannot do. For example, some officers attribute the Department's stance that it is unconstitutional to "sweep" corners and sidewalks of loiterers through arrests or threats of arrest to the

Consent Decree, with some expressing the belief that this is an effective practice to maintain public order and safety. One officer captured this sentiment by candidly stating, "The things that the Department of Justice calls unconstitutional used to work for us."

Officers from every rank lament that the additional paperwork required to demonstrate compliance with the Consent Decree is cumbersome and perceive that it takes away from other police work. For instance, an officer who works on the Community Collaborative Division said that she must report the number of youths she engages with during her tour of duty, which she believes impedes her actual engagement and relationship building with the public.

Officers are unaware of the ways that the data they collect and report are used to inform and improve policy and practice within the Department. Instead, there is a perception among officers that the additional paperwork is only used to satisfy the Department of Justice's demands rather than strengthen the BPD. Moreover, officers were generally unclear on what the Consent Decree required of the Department and where the Department stood in their efforts to achieve compliance with the requirements. For example, all of the patrol officers from one focus group were unaware that the BPD has a compliance division devoted to the Consent Decree that prepares a newsletter to provide updates on the Department's compliance status.

Generally, patrol officers and supervisors reported that they have not read the Consent Decree and that changes in Department policy and practice related to the Consent Decree are not well communicated down the chain of command. Officers receive official communication of policy changes through an electronic repository called PowerDMS. Supervisors expressed frustration that PowerDMS only tracks whether an officer received the updated or new policy without having a mechanism that tests if the officer read and understood the policy. Moreover, supervisors were sometimes confused about the policy changes resulting from the Consent Decree and interpreted the policies differently and were, therefore, limited in their ability to lead their subordinates effectively through the changes. Supervisors wish for there to be an opportunity to receive training on policy changes to gain a better grasp on the intended meaning.

Some supervisors expect that line officers do their due diligence to understand policy changes on their own without relying on supervisors to "spoon feed" officers the information. Newer officers from one focus group discussed how their supervisors come from "a different era in policing" where you do not ask questions of your supervisor. Therefore, line officers turn to each other to understand changes in the Department. Consequently, the lack of communication about the Consent Decree and related policy changes down the chain of command and confusion about new or revised policies' meaning among supervisors and line officers made way for rumors to spread through the Department. Many officers responded that the rumor mill is the main way information about the Consent Decree is communicated through the Department.

Leadership and Staffing

Leadership

Officers in the focus groups discussed how issues with leadership and staffing have caused morale to suffer in the Department. Officers reported that frequent turnover in the Commissioner position has left the Department without clear and consistent direction for the future. Officers also perceive current and former Commissioners as overly focused on appeasing members of the community, rather than supporting and

leading the Department. There was a sentiment among some officers that the City and those higher up the chain of command will not come to the defense of officers. Particularly, officers felt that as the Department has been scrutinized by the media and community over the past several years, the command staff and the City have become more concerned with the Department's image than supporting officers and boosting staff morale. One officer said, "They're ready to throw police officers under the bus to appease the media and don't support us even when our actions are appropriate." When asked during the focus groups what would make the current Commissioner a more effective leader than his predecessors, one officer responded by saying, "We need the Commissioner to be police-oriented first even though he is a mayoral appointee" and another officers said, "We need the Commissioner to stand on his own and independently lead the Department. In the past, Commissioners have been too persuaded by command staff and then the Commissioner can't affect the change he hoped for and the Department stays the same."

Officers and supervisors perceive a disconnect between officers on the street and those higher up the chain of command. For instance, patrol officers reported that they seldom interact with police leadership although they discussed that this was not always the case. One officer recalled, "The Department lacks comradery now. We used to do these cookouts on the lot. Everyone showed up for those cookouts, even if it was your day off. Back then we felt supported by our supervisors and those higher up." Another officer spoke of the disconnect between line officers and command staff by saying,

> *The command staff are old school. They don't understand what it's like to be an officer in today's world. They're out of touch with technology, like having to wear a body worn camera, and daily patrol life. I'll sometimes see lieutenants on the street, but other than that, you only see the higher ups on the streets whenever there is a major scene.*

Department members at all levels seem to appreciate the pressure the ranks above them experience and yet are frustrated by perceived micromanagement and lack of trust from the ranks above. The weight of this pressure bears down on patrol officers and makes them disillusioned with the job. One sergeant said,

> *A lot of officers join the Department wanting to make a difference in the community. But, then they get here and they're beat down by supervisors, who are beat down by commanders, who are beat down by City Hall. Then, the officers see City Hall beating them up on the local news. Everyone up the chain of command is afraid of losing their titles and everyone looks out for themselves. There is all of this pressure to make changes in the Department from higher up. Sergeants are the ones who have to be the bad guys and enforce the changes by telling patrol officers, "Hey you have to do this and, no, you can't do that." The higher ups don't want to hear that we don't have the staff to implement all these changes.*

Staffing

Staffing shortages were among the most common reasons provided by officers in the focus groups for why morale is low. Officers perceive that staffing shortages result in overworked line staff. Patrol officers, in particular, felt that their entire shifts were spent going from call to call, leaving no time for other policing activities like community or proactive policing, which most recognized as valuable and necessary activities. A newer patrol officer to the Department said, "In my short three-year career, we have always been understaffed. Our job is just reactive policing and running and gunning. We don't have staff to do proactive

policing." Supervisors also stated that there are too few patrol officers to effectively engage the community. For instance, a sergeant said,

> *Community engagement was an aspect of the job that officers just did back when we had enough staff. Now, community engagement is forced down patrol's throat and they resent it, because the call for service volume makes it difficult to respond to calls and engage the community. Patrol officers are multitasking, but there are too few staff to have time to engage community. We [sergeants] are squawking at them on the radio to respond to calls and it takes away from their ability to engage the community.*

Officers perceive the overspecialization of units and certain deployment strategies as pulling too many officers from patrol in an already understaffed Department. Officers think that some specialty units should be dissolved to free up more officers to patrol the streets. Further, some officers think doing away with specialty units may provide enough staff to allow a return to post assignments, which seems to be the preference of most officers from the focus groups. The use of 10-7s — a practice of putting a patrol car "out of service" and assigning it to the site of a homicide for a determined amount of time — is viewed as a drain on patrol and increases the frustration of officers who already see themselves as providing low quality service to those who need help while another officer is stationary and relatively inactive.

Officers expressed that the practice of drafting – or forced overtime to cover shifts – is having a very negative impact on patrol officer morale and making it increasingly difficult to retain officers. Drafting is believed to create hardships on personal and family life and weaken the commitment to the BPD. One officer stated that if she could start her career over, then she would not join the Baltimore Police Department because of the Department's use of compulsory overtime. She said, "The drafting hours are terrible. It's been hard to raise my kids because of the drafting. The only thing that is good about it is the pay."

Additionally, officers believe that staffing shortages lead to officers being promoted too quickly without enough experience in their rank and being provided little to no training for their new supervisory roles as sergeants, lieutenants, and ranks above. Supervisors reported that they might go months in a newly promoted supervisory role without any formal training. Supervisors do not feel empowered to lead effectively in their new roles and sometimes second-guess their leadership abilities because the Department does a poor job investing in personnel. One sergeant said,

> *We are thrown to the wolves when we get promoted. There is no training. There is no mentorship program, which we would like. Sometimes a new sergeant might have to step up and be a shift commander if, for example, a shift commander is on vacation.*

Finally, officers also hold the belief that promotions are based on whom one knows at higher ranks in the Department rather than based on merit. One officer bluntly put it, "The culture in Baltimore Police Department is one of jealousy and favors. You get a promotion by who owes who what, what did you do for me, and who you know." Together, the challenges related to leadership, staffing, and supervision are taxing on officers as they conveyed sentiments of job dissatisfaction, burnout, and feeling devalued and not supported by the Department.

Areas for Department Improvement

While officers conveyed that morale was low across the Department for the reasons discussed above—namely problems with leadership, understaffing, and poor communication within the Department—officers suggested ways that they believe the Department could improve with the hopes of boosting morale and retention.

Command staff

Officers and supervisors wish for a way to provide input on proposed changes up the chain of command prior to them taking effect and for their suggestions to be seriously considered in decision-making. Officers think that command staff need to do a better job understanding the lived experiences of patrol officers and how changes made from those at the top affect those on-the-ground.

Moreover, many patrol officers and supervisors want a change in Departmental culture whereby supervisors treat their subordinates with dignity and respect. Focus group participants reported that they do not feel valued from those higher on the chain of command and believe they are regarded by commanders as easily replaceable. One officer said,

> *We need a high command who knows the job of their subordinates and respect us. We have commanders who don't have a clue and think it is easy to accomplish the tasks they set out for us to do. Retention is based on how supervisors treat people. Treat people well and they will have pride in their jobs and stick around.*

Technology, equipment, and facilities

Officers and supervisors believe that up-to-date technology, equipment, and renovated facilities would greatly improve their work experiences. Officers reported that the technology and equipment the Department issues are decades old and make carrying out their work inefficient and challenging. Therefore, in some instances officers have purchased their own equipment to improve their work experience such as ID scanners, Etix software, and electronic printers for their patrol cars. Officers also reported that the condition of some district stations and the training academy are in abysmal shape. Officers think that the poor conditions of the facilities signal that the City does not care enough about officer wellbeing and find it difficult to work as professionals in an unprofessional setting. One officer said,

> *We need a better work environment. Some of our district stations are worse than jails. Our patrol cars are in bad shape, too.*

Staffing

Officers provided ideas on how they believe the Department could more efficiently use the number of sworn officers in the Department to relieve some of the burden caused by being understaffed. As discussed above, officers suggested that the Department get rid of decentralized and specialty units, place more sworn officers back in district stations, and reinstate patrol posts. Officers also suggested that the Department hire civilians to fill administrative positions, so that sworn personnel currently occupying administrative positions could patrol the streets, respond to calls for service, and engage the community.

Internal Affairs investigations

Officers suggested that a more efficient, timely, and transparent investigation process by Internal Affairs would boost department morale. Officers reported that IA does not always notify officers when they are under investigation for a violation or complaint and sometimes it takes months to close an open investigation. Officers were particularly frustrated with the length of time it takes to investigate allegations that could be resolved promptly as unfounded, unsustained, or sustained through negotiated resolution. Officers discussed that they cannot be promoted, transfer units, or leave for a different police department with an open investigation. Officers perceive this lag in closing investigations as an impediment to their career advancements. While a few officers believe that the excessive time it takes to close a case is a purposeful retention tactic aimed at keeping officers from leaving BPD for a different department, more voiced the belief that the slowdown is due to IA officers' insufficient training and the unit being understaffed.

Rewards and acknowledgements

Officers discussed that some supervisors acknowledge officers for exceptional service, but the Department overall could do a better job recognizing and honoring the hard work and dedication of its officers. Officers recalled that in the past the Department provided training (e.g., training on responding to protests) to reward an officer who went above and beyond in the line of duty. Officers reported that these trainings were enriching and made them feel appreciated. Officers also suggested the Department host an annual awards banquet to acknowledge and celebrate the achievements of BPD officers. Officers believe that these acknowledgements of a job well done will improve morale, revitalize a sense of pride for being a Baltimore Police officer, and foster comradery among the Department.

Conclusion

Candid discussions with a diverse group of BPD officers revealed several themes about engagement with the community and the Department that employs them. Officers generally believe that most Baltimore residents support the police. However, members of the community that the police most often interact with—those involved in crime, victims of crime, or both—have a negative and adversarial relationship with the police that became further strained following the 2015 riots. Officers discussed that in some districts residents do not cooperate or engage with the police out of a fear that doing so might result in retaliation or intimidation from others in the community. Officers believe that community-police relations were strongest when the Department deployed officers to a post assignment and wish to return to post assignments but think that staffing shortages make a return unlikely.

What constitutes a use of force during an arrest was a major source of confusion and concern among officers in every focus group. Many officers believe that hands-on engagement during any arrest constitute a level-one use of force that results in far too much paperwork for line staff and supervisors. Officers reported that they receive the message not to use force from their supervisors and fear that using force, even appropriate force, might result in job termination or a criminal investigation.

Officers believe the Consent Decree results in a more conservative Department that is overly focused on achieving compliance and micromanagement by the ranks above. Officers reported that information about the

Consent Decree is not communicated down the chain of command and a desire to communicate input on proposed Department changes to their superiors.

Officers in the focus groups discussed how issues with leadership and staffing have caused morale to suffer in the Department. Particularly, officers discussed that a lack of leadership, trust, and support from command staff has resulted in line staff feeling devalued by the Department. Officers and supervisors believe that officers are too quickly promoted to the next rank and lack adequate training for the position. Officers reported being overworked and burned out by staffing shortages.

Officers reported a number of areas where the Department could improve to boost officer morale. Officers discussed that more staffing, better leadership, opportunities for professional development, and updated technology, equipment, and facilities would greatly improve the quality of officers' work experience.

Despite the challenges discussed throughout this report, many officers consider it an honor to serve the City of Baltimore. Many are proud to be police officers and are committed to the work. Officers reported that the best part of their jobs and motivation for joining BPD were to positively impact people's lives by helping them in difficult situations and contributing to the public good and safety of the City. The Crime and Justice Institute hopes that the findings from this report will inform policies and practices that contribute to a Department that values and supports its dedicated officers.