

Advancing Community-Driven Public Safety: Empowering Safer Communities with Urban Alchemy

FINAL REPORT

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(Shear, 2023)



Executive Summary

Urban Alchemy is a nonprofit organization, established in San Francisco in 2018, that has recently expanded its reach to Austin, Texas. Urban Alchemy employs over 1,200 staff, most of whom are former long-term incarcerated individuals. These staff members, called Practitioners, are integral to Urban Alchemy's mission of rehabilitating urban areas affected by poverty, homelessness, and violence through trauma-informed community restoration. The unique model capitalizes on the Practitioners' lived experiences and interpersonal skills, facilitating not only urban transformation but also their reintegration into society. As a Policy Research Team at the LBJ School of Public Affairs, we have closely examined the expansion efforts of Urban Alchemy in Austin.

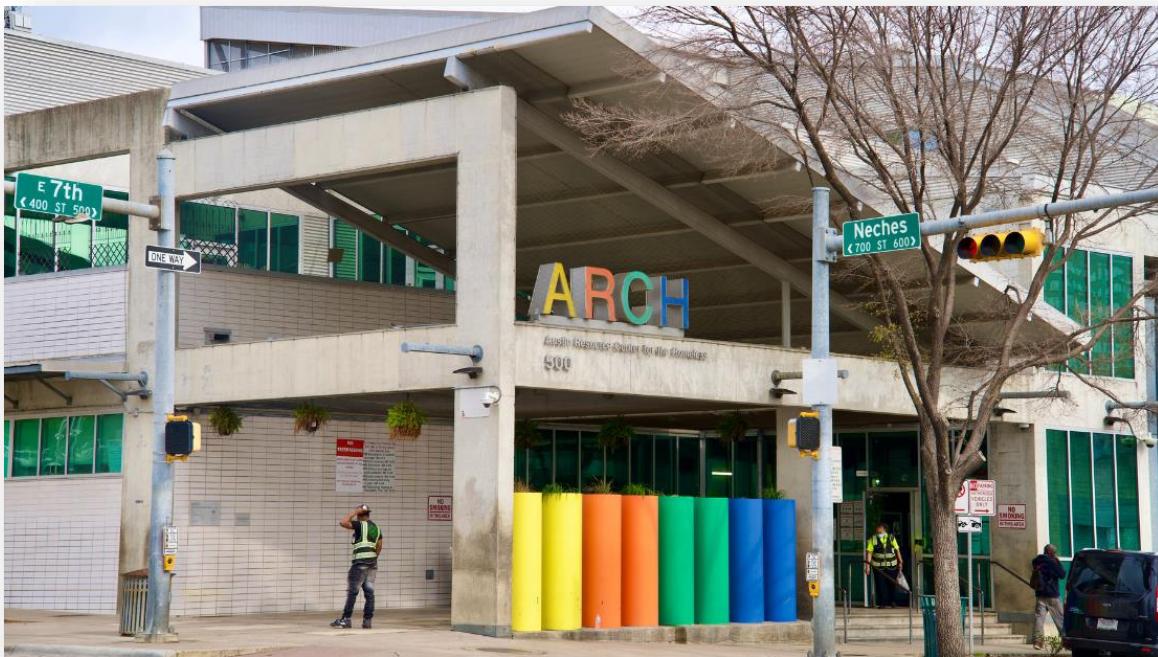
In Austin, our analysis focused on the initiation and implementation of the Urban Alchemy's model for community-based public safety. The Homeless Engagement Assistance Response Team (HEART) program, a collaborative effort with the Downtown Austin Alliance, is a pilot program designed to provide non-police responses to community issues, particularly addressing the needs of the homeless population. The ultimate goal is for the HEART program to be adopted by the City of Austin, integrating it into the city's broader public safety operations. Our report evaluates the potential for this model to be scaled and adapted based on Austin's unique urban and social landscape, providing a community-focused alternative to traditional public safety measures.

Throughout our project, we engaged in comprehensive research and partnership-building with key local stakeholders, including policymakers, community organizations, and business leaders. These efforts were vital for tailoring Urban Alchemy's approach to fit Austin's specific needs. Through a series of structured interviews and rigorous data analysis, we identified best practices from similar initiatives nationwide, which have significantly informed our recommendations. This strategic alignment with Austin's public safety frameworks aims to enhance service integration, manage public perceptions effectively, and address the operational challenges influenced by local policy and economic conditions. Our findings and recommendations lay a solid foundation for Urban Alchemy's successful integration into Austin, aiming to enhance community health and safety through innovative public service strategies.

Strategic Goals and Future Orientation

- 1. Expand into Austin with comprehensive service offerings:** Align and adapt HEART to Austin's existing public safety frameworks to enhance community relations and service effectiveness.
- 2. Develop a proactive communications strategy:** Urban Alchemy should showcase its capability to transform public spaces and improve safety through its unique model, thereby securing ongoing support and funding.
- 3. Empower and mobilize local champions:** To optimize its impact, Urban Alchemy must deepen collaborations with local authorities, non-profits, and community groups, ensuring that its initiatives are well-supported and effectively implemented.
- 4. Invest in monitoring and evaluation:** Proactively adapt to the evolving public safety and community needs of Austin, incorporating feedback and emerging trends into service delivery to stay relevant and impactful.

Urban Alchemy is poised to make significant contributions to Austin's public safety and community health through its innovative use of rehabilitated workforce and trauma-informed care. By strategically navigating the local policy environment and fostering strong community partnerships, Urban Alchemy aims to establish a sustainable model that not only addresses immediate public safety needs but also enhances the overall social fabric of Austin.



(Downtown Austin Alliance, 2022)

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	2
Introduction	5
Policy Environment	7
Research Questions and Methodology	10
Literature Review	13
Discovery Findings	30
Recommendations	41
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Our Team	46
Bibliography	49



(Graf, 2021)

Introduction

Client and Project Overview

Urban Alchemy is a nonprofit organization based in San Francisco and has most recently expanded to Austin, Texas. Urban Alchemy was born as a response to the deterioration in urban areas that have seen a mix of extreme poverty, homelessness, mental illness, addiction, and increased violence. To bridge the existing gaps in managing these public spaces, Urban Alchemy employs a unique model that uses formerly incarcerated individuals - called Practitioners - to bring healing to an ailing community. The model leverages the Practitioners' interpersonal skills as a tool in trauma-informed community restoration. Having experienced long-term incarceration, they are uniquely qualified to serve and engage the most vulnerable populations.

Urban Alchemy is relatively new to the city of Austin and has already begun providing homeless services to the community in a bid to build sustainable, valuable relationships. The organization is also currently piloting its Homeless Engagement Assistance Response Team (HEART) program with the Downtown Austin Alliance, with the ultimate aim of program adoption by the City of Austin. HEART is a unique model of community-based public safety specifically responding to non-emergency calls involving people experiencing homelessness. In order to maximize their success in Austin, Urban Alchemy seeks to understand the local public safety landscape and determine whether there is demand for alternative/non-police response services. In doing so, the organization will be able to understand the priorities of public safety stakeholders and the community at large. They must understand the current landscape to position themselves within it and develop the most effective expansion strategy.

This policy report examines the feasibility of expanding Urban Alchemy's HEART program in Austin by adapting its public safety model to the local context. It assesses how Urban Alchemy's model compares with other alternative response programs and identifies best practices for such initiatives. The report aims to provide Urban Alchemy with go-to-market strategies to engage policymakers effectively and support local expansion. It includes an overview of the current public safety policy environment, details of the research methodology, a literature review, discovery findings, and strategic recommendations for Urban Alchemy.



Our goal is to equip Urban Alchemy and its stakeholders with a nuanced understanding of the community public safety landscape in Austin. We hope to ensure future strategies that will resonate with Austin's current community's genuine needs and values.



Policy Environment

This section provides an overview of the current policy environment. Understanding this landscape is critical to situating the project and Urban Alchemy's intended work in the local sociopolitical context, which allows us to better tailor our recommendations. There are several complex issues at play, which informed the direction of our project as well as our interviewee selection.

There have been different narratives in the news when it comes to public safety in Austin. In 2023, there was extensive media discourse surrounding a post-COVID crime wave nationwide. This manifested locally, with some news outlets calling the situation in Austin a "homeless and crime crisis" (Altus 2023).

Austin does face similar challenges as other urban districts, such as rising homelessness and property crimes; these are symptomatic of the city's population growth and the increasing cost of living. Downtown business owners have expressed discontent with the growing homeless population in the area, stating that the increase in panhandling and nuisance behaviors has negatively impacted their businesses (Hubbard 2023). They are concerned that customers feel less safe and may choose to shop elsewhere. Furthermore, downtown business owners lament the lack of enforcement of local ordinances, some of which is attributed to the staffing shortage within the Austin Police Department (APD).

APD and the 911 call center's understaffing issues have led to slow response times and, in some cases, no response at all to emergency calls. This situation resulted in a significant backlog of non-emergency calls rerouted to APD (M. Thompson 2023). As a result of growing concern around APD's responsiveness, the city established a partnership between APD and the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS), called the Austin Violent Crimes Task Force. Beginning in March 2023, DPS deployed 130 state troopers to Austin to supplement APD's shortage of approximately 300 officers (Dey and Bach 2023). Although city leadership suspended the partnership in July, the task force continued operations until December at Governor Abbott's direction. Despite an initial decrease in violent crime, the DPS partnership also raised concerns around racial profiling and overpolicing of Black and Latino Austin residents (McCullough 2023). In December 2023, DPS troopers stopped patrolling Austin as the agency redirected its efforts toward border security.

The City of Austin has a complicated relationship with its police department, which exacerbates the staffing shortage, according to former Austin Police Association President Thomas Villarreal. In 2020, the City Council voted unanimously to reduce APD's budget through reallocation of police funding to departments in the city. The following year, the state passed a law to penalize cities that defund their police departments (McGlinchy 2021). Funding has since been restored, but the staffing shortage remains. APD retirements and resignations - as well as high attrition rates - at the Training Academy both contribute to this shortage. In May 2023, Austinites voted to approve the Police Oversight Act, which the Austin Police Association regarded as "anti-police activists [operating] with blatant disregard for state law" (Lopez 2023). This further fuels the strained relationship between APD and the City.

Despite challenges with policing and narratives around a crime wave in Austin, the data suggests that crime has remained fairly stable, if not gone down. While there was an increase in homicides following the pandemic, Austin maintains the lowest homicide rate of all the largest cities in Texas (i.e., Houston, Dallas, and San Antonio) (Seipp 2024). Violent crime is down nearly 20% between March 2023 and March 2024 (Price and Contreras 2024). Likewise, property crime is also on the decline (Radford 2023). Part of the challenge that Austin has faced in countering the crime wave narrative is the lack of readily accessible crime and policing data. In September 2023, City Council passed Resolution 20230914-132, which requires APD to publish more robust data on its portal. In addition to a crime dashboard broken down by month, APD is also required to publish data regarding the supply and demand for police and mental health services. While the crime dashboard is now available online, it only reports raw numbers for each offense rather than a rate.

Improved data transparency for policing and mental health will provide a better picture of how the city is currently addressing this issue. In 2018, the Office of the City Auditor found that Austin had highest per capita rate of people killed by police during mental health calls, of the 15 largest cities in the U.S (Austin City Auditor 2018). This precipitated the creation of the 911 Mental Health Diversion Program in 2021, which diverts 911 calls to mental health clinicians (Lawrence 2022). Those who call 911 are asked if they need police, fire, EMS, or mental health services; the mental health clinician will triage the call and determine the appropriate response. Local mental health authority Integral Care has established a co-responder program called the Expanded Mobile Crisis Outreach Team (EMCOT). EMCOT responds to emergency mental health crises and provides short-term stabilization. While this is a form of alternative response, it still involves police presence.

Given all the current issues in Austin around crime narratives, police staffing shortage, state intervention, data transparency, and mental health, it is clear that Urban Alchemy is wading into a complex environment. Understanding this public safety landscape is key to navigating the different local dynamics and stakeholders as they look to offer a non-police response model.



(kvue.com,2023)

Research Questions & Methodology

To better understand what was needed to help Urban Alchemy expand its public safety component into Austin, we developed four guiding questions for our research:

1. What is the current state of public safety in Austin?
2. How do local stakeholders - community organizations, business groups, and policymakers - define public safety in Austin?
3. What are the best practices for community-based safety approaches?
4. What is the most effective strategy to engage Austin policymakers around community-based safety initiatives?

The research questions were essential to structuring our work and gathering the information that guided our strategic policy recommendations.

Methodology

Our research methodology was hinged on Urban Alchemy's intention to expand its current offerings to include community-based public safety in Austin. As a result, our methods were designed to gather comprehensive insights, identify best practices, and inform strategic decision-making. Central to our approach were interviews with structured questions, comprising two sets of interviews: stakeholders and best practice interviews.

Semi-Structured Interviews with Guiding Questions: We conducted interviews with guiding questions to examine diverse aspects that we thought would be valuable to Urban Alchemy's desire to expand its community-based public safety in Austin. These interviews were carefully crafted to gather detailed information on stakeholders' views on the current state of public safety in Austin, gain insights on what stakeholders believed was a safety need in Austin, and understand what other best practice organizations were doing. By utilizing structured questions, we ensured consistency and focused data collection.

Stakeholder Interviews: The stakeholder interviews formed a crucial part of our research methodology. We engaged with diverse stakeholders, including policymakers, community organizations, and a downtown business representative in Austin. These interviews provided valuable perspectives on the community's needs, perceptions of Urban Alchemy, and potential avenues for collaboration and growth. Stakeholder insights were instrumental in understanding the local context and providing insights that would help shape Urban Alchemy's expansion strategy.

Interviewees included:

- Vanessa Fuentes, Austin City Council Member for District 2
- José "Chito" Vela, Austin City Council Member for District 4,
- Michelle Myles, Manager of the Office of Violence Prevention at Austin Public Health
- Chase Wright, Executive Director of the Hungry Hill Foundation
- Antony Jackson, Founder and CEO of We Can Now
- Bill Brice, Senior Vice President of Investor Relations at Downtown Austin Alliance

Best Practice Interviews: Aside from the stakeholder interviews, we also conducted best practice interviews to draw insights from organizations and initiatives with proven success in community-based public safety. These interviews allowed us to identify innovative approaches, effective strategies, and lessons learned that could be applied to Urban Alchemy's expansion efforts in Austin. By studying best practices, we aimed to inform Urban Alchemy's approach and enhance its impact on the community.

The organizations interviewed included:

- Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets (CAHOOTS) in Eugene, Oregon
- Portland Street Response in Portland, Oregon
- Holistic Action Response Team (HART) in Harris County, Texas
- Support Team Assisted Response (STAR) in Denver, Colorado

Data Analysis and Integration of Findings

Data collected from interviews with structured questions, stakeholder interviews, and best practice interviews were analyzed using qualitative research methods. Thematic analysis techniques were employed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and key findings. Data analysis enabled us to distill insights, draw conclusions, and develop evidence-based recommendations for Urban Alchemy's expansion into community-based public safety in Austin.

The findings we obtained from our stakeholders' interviews, best practice interviews, as well as data analysis were integrated to form a comprehensive understanding of what was needed for Urban Alchemy's expansion goals and the landscape of community-based public safety in Austin. By organizing data from multiple sources, we ensured the reliability and validity of our findings. Integration of findings facilitated the development of actionable recommendations tailored to Urban Alchemy's aspirations and the specific needs of the Austin community.

In summary, our research methodology for Urban Alchemy's expansion into community-based public safety in Austin centered on interviews with structured questions, including stakeholder and best practice interviews. Through rigorous data collection, analysis, and integration of findings, we aimed to provide valuable insights and guidance to support Urban Alchemy's mission of fostering safety and resilience in the Austin community.



(Shear, 2023)

Literature Review

Introduction

In the ever-evolving landscape of urban environments, the concept of Community Public Safety has emerged as a crucial focal point in recent years. As communities like Austin continue to grow and transform, the imperative to ensure the safety and well-being of residents takes center stage. For example, the Austin City Council is actively working to improve public safety within new developments. This initiative, led by Council Member Mackenzie Kelly, aims to integrate essential services like police, fire, and EMS into the growing urban fabric, directly addressing the needs of a booming population (B. Thompson 2023). This proactive approach in Austin provides a tangible example of how urban development can incorporate public safety, setting a precedent for cities like those where Urban Alchemy operates, enhancing community safety and well-being in rapidly evolving urban landscapes.

Within this context, our client, Urban Alchemy, a nonprofit entity committed to enhancing the fabric of urban life, is at the forefront of initiatives aimed at redefining and strengthening the concept of public safety. Urban Alchemy's mission to foster vibrant and safe communities has prompted them to explore the intricate tapestry of public safety policies, with a particular focus on the dynamic city of Austin, Texas. This literature review seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted elements that comprise Community Public Safety, offering insights into various dimensions of the field.

As Urban Alchemy endeavors to seamlessly align its initiatives with traditional policing methods in Austin, the need for a nuanced comprehension of policy adjustments becomes apparent. This literature review covers key topics, including: definitions of community public safety; community engagement in developing safety initiatives; impacts of traditional policing practices; non-police patrols in business improvement districts; and the development of alternative response models. The analysis of these topics will inform Urban Alchemy's efforts to refine policies and integrate them into Austin's comprehensive public safety strategy.

Definitions of Community Safety

Community safety is a multifaceted and evolving concept that shapes the well-being of societies around the world. It encompasses a wide range of policies, strategies, and initiatives aimed at ensuring the safety and security of individuals and communities. Over the years, the discourse on community safety has undergone significant transformations, driven by shifts in social, political, and economic landscapes (Brown 2021). This evolving landscape has prompted scholars and policymakers to critically examine the nature of community safety policies and their implications.

The multifaceted nature of community safety extends far beyond crime prevention and encompasses broader social, economic, and environmental determinants. Daniel Gilling describes community safety as the merger of criminal justice and social policy (Gilling 2001). One key characteristic of community safety is the use of a holistic approach to deal with the symptoms and causes of crime, incorporating both social crime prevention and fear/insecurity reduction. In his work, Gilling traces the evolving landscape of community safety policies in the last century, noting a significant paradigm shift from the broader approach of situational crime prevention to a more narrowly defined crime reduction strategy. This shift is particularly pronounced in the UK, which has experienced a larger trend in public safety and social policy that leans towards prioritizing specific crime metrics over the comprehensive welfare of communities. This raises a question about the balance between addressing crime directly and tackling the underlying social and environmental factors that contribute to it. Gregg Caruso's work also broadens the lens through which community safety is viewed, linking it to a wide array of social determinants (Caruso 2017). He explores the relationship between public health and safety, looking specifically at how systemic issues influence health and safety outcomes. Caruso asserts that poverty and socioeconomic status is one of the primary determinants of criminal behavior due to its negative effects on human development. The stress of poverty, limited educational opportunities, and exposure to negative life events influences both social and cognitive development. Likewise, lack of access to housing and healthcare is strongly associated with crime.

By and large, current public safety scholarship recognizes the significance of addressing the root causes of safety concerns. Gilling and Caruso's analyses on the social nature of community safety lead them to call for a holistic or public health model that emphasizes social welfare (Gilling 2001; Caruso 2017). The Brookings Institute offers evidence-based violence prevention policy recommendations across various categories, including public health, economic opportunity, youth development, built environment, and institutional transformation (Sebastian et. al 2022). This approach resonates with the call for comprehensive and multifaceted strategies. The Brookings Institution's community safety blueprint complements the insights provided by Caruso and Gilling by reinforcing the importance of a public health approach, addressing root causes, and recognizing the value of equitable access to resources and opportunities in fostering safer communities. Similarly, the Prevention Institute's Building Healthy Communities (BHC) initiative offers a practical model that emphasizes prevention, equity, and community-driven strategies (Prevention Institute 2015).

The BHC initiative highlights the critical role of community safety in fostering healthy communities and underscores the necessity of addressing the root causes of violence and safety concerns. The BHC approach is comprehensive, focusing on improving public spaces, schools, economic opportunities, and community cohesion, while also fostering youth leadership and encouraging cross-sector collaboration. It emphasizes the need to address structural drivers of violence, such as inequitable resource distribution and lack of economic opportunities, which are often overlooked in traditional safety strategies. To enrich this discourse, it would be beneficial to include a broader range of perspectives, particularly from communities that are directly impacted by these safety policies. Engaging with marginalized and underrepresented groups could provide valuable insights into how these policies are experienced on the ground and highlight potential areas for improvement. In synthesizing the insights from these scholarly works and initiatives, we arrive at a holistic framework for understanding and enhancing community safety. This framework recognizes that safety extends beyond crime prevention to encompass broader social, economic, and environmental determinants.

From the critical analyses of Gilling and Caruso to the community-driven approach advocated by the Building Healthy Communities (BHC) initiative, we can begin to see the multifaceted nature of community safety. The discourse on community safety has evolved over time, reflecting changing paradigms in public policy and society as a whole. Gilling's analysis detailed a spectrum of community safety strategies, from a holistic approach, addressing a wide array of social and environmental factors, to a more focused crime reduction strategy, driven by the emphasis on measurable outcomes. Caruso's work underscored the intricate relationship between social determinants and safety, advocating for a public health-quarantine model that prioritizes prevention and social justice. Likewise, the perspectives of residents in various communities will inform the specific strategy used. It is evident that community safety is not a one-size-fits-all concept. Rather, it is a complex and dynamic endeavor that demands a similarly flexible approach to address the interconnected factors that influence safety and well-being. One of these approaches entails getting the community involved in their own safety, which we discuss in the following section.

Engaging the Community in Public Safety Initiatives

Community-driven safety models are emerging as more inclusive and participatory approaches to ensuring public safety. These initiatives involve active engagement with community members, allowing them to have a voice in decisions related to the management of public spaces (Sloan and Choi 2016). By integrating the insights and perspectives of residents, these models aim to tailor safety measures to the specific needs and characteristics of each community. Moreover, communities are well-positioned to define their own problems and solutions precisely because they understand the community's context, needs, and assets. Getting communities involved can help to address issues before they arise as they are able to think ahead and avoid potential dangerous situations.

Using a community-driven, participatory approach allows members of the community to be actively involved in shaping policies and strategies that will impact their daily lives. For example, soliciting feedback from residents about the resources and amenities lacking in their community is a crucial step in ensuring that interventions are not only effective but also align with the community's actual needs (Sakala et. al 2018). In addition to the benefits of

community engagement, the Prevention Institute forewarns practitioners about the challenges of implementing the participatory approach across diverse communities. Adapting initiatives to suit the varied cultural, economic, and social landscapes of different communities requires a deep understanding of local dynamics and a flexible approach to program design (Prevention Institute 2015). Furthermore, achieving long-term, sustainable change necessitates ongoing investment and collaboration among a wide range of stakeholders, from community organizations to government agencies. Government agencies in this case have to hold town hall meetings with community members to build a tool kit plan that serves to guide both government and community alike to attain the common goal of safeguarding the community. This demands not only financial resources but also a commitment to building and nurturing partnerships across different sectors, which can be complex due to competing interests and priorities.

Another key element of community-driven safety models is the ongoing process of establishing trust between law enforcement and community members. This trust is built through dialogue, transparency, and shared decision-making processes. The aim is to move away from top-down policing approaches and foster a sense of collective responsibility for public safety. In addition to building trust, community-driven safety models promote a sense of ownership among residents regarding the safety of their neighborhoods. When individuals actively contribute to the design and implementation of safety strategies, they are more likely to feel invested in the success of these initiatives, fostering a stronger sense of community cohesion. As these alternatives gain traction, especially with the skepticism of colored citizens in the police, it becomes increasingly evident that a community-centric approach to public safety holds the potential to not only address the negative impacts of violent policing but also create more resilient, empowered, and harmonious communities. The evolving landscape of public safety strategies underscores the importance of recognizing the unique needs and strengths of each community while collectively working towards a safer and more just society. As community-driven public safety initiatives gain traction, it is important to understand the source of communities' distrust of status quo safety approaches (i.e., police). The following section will discuss how conventional policing affects community safety.

Effects of the Police on Public Safety

The impact of law enforcement officers on society is profound, as they play a crucial role in maintaining law and order and ensuring the safety of community members. However, the execution of their duties can sometimes result in unforeseen consequences. Duarte et. al delved into the issue by discussing the American Public Health Association's (APHA) policy statement, which recognized law enforcement violence as a public health concern (Duarte et. al 2020). An extensive literature review consistently linked such violence to adverse health outcomes, including physical injuries, mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder, and even fatalities. Cooper and Fullilove

reinforced these findings, discovering that excessive police violence had a detrimental impact on public health (Cooper and Fullilove 2016). They highlighted those neighborhoods with higher stop-and-frisk rates exhibited poorer health in a staggering 80% of cases analyzed. Both articles emphasized a disturbing trend: the disproportionate effect on Black, Latinx, and other marginalized communities, a perspective echoed by DeVylder et. al. (2022). Moreover, the focus extended to mortality rates, revealing that fatal encounters with the police accounted for 8% of annual homicide deaths. Physical health was not spared, with violent police encounters leading to severe injuries, some of which resulted in chronic illnesses. Notably, the lack of comprehensive data for such incidents emerged as a critical challenge, hindering efforts to track and document these occurrences, as pointed out in the articles. This data deficiency is essential for future researchers, who could build upon these studies and assess any improvements in data collection.

Another significant repercussion of police actions is observed in the impact on youth. Interactions involving arrests, court proceedings, and incarceration of teens and young individuals were found to have lasting effects on educational achievements. Gottlieb and Wilson, as well as Turney et. al, utilized data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a cohort study of children born around the 21st century in urban areas. Both studies concluded that criminal legal contact adversely affected academic performance, employing various analytical tools such as direct arrests, contact without arrests, and no contact at all.

Gottlieb and Wilson suggested that such contacts were linked to adolescent delinquency, aggressive attitudes toward teachers, and mental health issues (2019). Turney et. al delved into the racial disparity aspect, highlighting how marginalized groups continue to bear the brunt of these interactions (2023). This pattern was further supported by Legewie and Fegan, who found that exposure to the police in minority neighborhoods diminished test scores for African American boys (2019). These findings collectively underscore the broader impact of police actions on the educational trajectories and well-being of the youth, necessitating a comprehensive approach to address these challenges. This comprehensive approach becomes extremely necessary in addressing public safety concerns as earlier stated public safety is all encompassing and addressing the social welfare of a community is one way that helps their safety.

Excessive policing and the use of violent tactics contribute significantly to the erosion of confidence in law enforcement, particularly within communities that are already marginalized. The frequent occurrence of confrontations with the police in these communities shapes residents' perceptions and trust levels in law enforcement's ability to restore order and uphold public safety. Research conducted by Kane (2005) and more recent findings by Jackson (2021) emphasize the negative impact of over-policing on community trust. Residents who witness instances of violent policing or any form of police misconduct tend to develop strong reservations about cooperating with law enforcement when necessary. This reluctance to engage with the police poses a substantial threat to the legitimacy of law enforcement agencies in these areas. Studies further highlight the disproportionate impact of police violence on Black and Latino communities, revealing a higher likelihood of these groups experiencing violent encounters with law enforcement. Consequently, individuals within these communities often live with the anticipation of police violence occurring at any given moment, contributing to a distressing normalization of such incidents within urban policing practices (Jackson 2021).

Moreover, the prevailing mistrust in the police has broader implications for public safety. Residents, harboring suspicions, and reservations may refrain from providing crucial information or reporting criminal activities to law enforcement. This reluctance to cooperate, as noted by Cheryl Boudreau and her colleagues, creates a chilling effect on community-police relationships and impedes the collaborative efforts essential for maintaining public safety.

(Boudreau, MacKenzie, and Simmons 2019). In essence, the intertwining issues of over-policing and violent policing not only diminish trust in law enforcement but also hinder the effective functioning of police within marginalized communities. Addressing these challenges necessitates a comprehensive approach, encompassing community engagement, policy reforms, and strategies to rebuild trust between law enforcement and the communities they serve.

The repercussions of violent policing extend far beyond immediate community relations, permeating various aspects of society. Existing research highlights several domains where these negative effects become apparent, underscoring the necessity for holistic interventions to address these challenges and restore the reputation of law enforcement. Violent policing has been associated with adverse economic outcomes (DeVylder et. al 2020). Instances of excessive force and police misconduct can disrupt local economies, potentially leading to downturns. Businesses may suffer, and residents may face challenges in securing employment opportunities, contributing to a cycle of economic instability within affected communities.

Instances of violent policing frequently trigger social unrest, manifesting in protests as a common response to police-related fatalities (Olzak 2021). These demonstrations serve as a societal outcry against systemic injustice and inequality, drawing attention to the imperative for reform in law enforcement practices. Violent policing contributes to heightened fear of law enforcement within affected communities (Browning et. al 2021). This pervasive fear negatively impacts the overall well-being of residents, creating an environment of constant apprehension and stress. Mental health outcomes may suffer as a result, necessitating interventions to address the psychological toll on community members. Certain communities, such as East Austin, face stigmatization due to perceived unsafe tendencies resulting from policing practices (Desmond et. al 2016). This criminalization further marginalizes these communities, perpetuating a cycle of negative interactions with law enforcement. Violent policing has spurred calls for changes in police strategies, including recent advocacy for defunding the police and reforms to prevent law enforcement from responding to non-violent crimes (Cobbina-Dungy and Jones-Brown 2021). These calls underscore the need for a reevaluation of law enforcement practices to better align with community needs and expectations.

Addressing these multifaceted challenges is imperative to rebuild the reputation of law enforcement, foster community trust, and create safer cities for everyone. Comprehensive reforms, community engagement, and initiatives aimed at restoring faith in law enforcement are essential components of this process. By tackling the economic, social, and psychological ramifications of violent policing, a more equitable and just relationship between law enforcement and communities can be forged. Having considered the documented, detrimental effects of the police, we now turn our attention to other players in the safety landscape, such as non-police patrol and BID ambassadors.

Non-police Patrol/BID Ambassadors

There is extensive literature on the role of non-state actors in the public safety and security provision landscape within urban areas. Much of this scholarship is centered on downtown business improvement districts (BIDs), which evolved out of the movement to revitalize deteriorating urban cores (Lee 2018). A BID is an entity created to provide services to a subdivision of a city. It is funded through an additional tax levied upon property owners within the subdivision. The services provided by the BID supplement local public services from the municipality and are typically focused on making the district cleaner, safer, and more attractive to consumers.

One key feature of BIDs is the deployment of a street patrol team (also referred to as ambassadors or security staff) to assist visitors and essentially provide a sense of security in the area (Briffault 1999). For example, the Downtown Austin Alliance - the entity that manages the BID in Downtown Austin - operates a Downtown Ambassadors program. In addition to providing other services, Downtown Ambassadors are responsible for escorting visitors, reporting public disturbances, and connecting people to social services. While they are not law enforcement officers with any legal authority, ambassadors effectively supplement police surveillance of public space and are empowered to leverage the law in order to remove 'nuisance' behavior (Hoyt 2004). As such, ambassadors play a role in the public safety landscape as private actors who contribute to producing public safety as a social good. In this sense, the analysis for BID ambassadors can also apply to Urban Alchemy practitioners, who are non-police actors serving a patrol and security function in each area.

The effects of BID implementation on crime are well-documented, with research finding that such districts experience lower rates of property crime and nuisance crimes (Han et. al 2017). In their work, Han et. al define nuisance crimes as graffiti, illegal dumping, and disorderly conduct. BIDs' provision of street cleaning and ambassador services are largely targeted at deterring nuisance crimes. Despite some crime reduction impacts for certain crimes, the research is less clear on whether the presence of BIDs reduces violent crime. Criminologist John MacDonald and his colleagues conducted two separate studies in Los Angeles, focused on violence broadly as well as youth violence. In the first study, the authors found a reduction in violent crimes in neighborhoods that adopted a BID (2010). However, violence reduction varied based on the share of BID resources dedicated to crime prevention efforts (rather than cleaning or beautification). By comparison, the study on youth violence found that youth living in BID neighborhoods faced similar levels of exposure to youth violence as those who did not (MacDonald et. al 2009). This finding holds even in BIDs that spend a greater proportion of their budgets on public safety services. MacDonald et. al suggest that there are other factors contributing to youth violence, aside from neighborhood. Given that BID services do not address all the factors that contribute to violence broadly, it is reasonable that BIDs would be more successful in reducing the property and nuisance crimes at which their surveillance and beautification services are targeted.

One concern regarding geographically targeted crime reduction efforts is the potential for crime displacement into adjacent non-BID neighborhoods. Cook and MacDonald find that BIDs do not have any statistically significant spillover effect for robbery, assault, burglary, or auto theft (2011). Although this may be interpreted as the BID successfully 'containing' crime to its geographic boundaries, this containment is not accompanied by increased police arrests. In studying multiple BID neighborhoods, Cook and MacDonald found, on average, a 32% decline in arrests following the adoption of a BID (2011). This is promising for organizations looking to improve public safety within a given area without relying on the criminal justice system.

While some scholars argue that BIDs are a cost-effective way to harness public-private partnerships in controlling crime, others criticize BIDs for contributing to the privatization of public space and exclusion of homeless populations (Selbin et. al 2018). Critics have also raised concerns around governance and accountability. Given BIDs' private financing, the entities managing BIDs are inherently invested in protecting the interests of their constituent members. Because BIDs are creatures of city government, however, there is a gray area regarding their responsibility to the public. The nebulous nature of this public-private arrangement creates a contested public space; there is a tension between the rights of property owners and that of unhoused individuals or others characterized as contributing to disorder or nuisance behavior (Mitchell and Staeheli 2013). The focus on cleanliness and safety - as defined by the BIDs - often manifests in the exclusion of the homeless population and expulsion to other areas. A Vancouver BID, in its own report, noted that it was able to achieve a 90% compliance rate in street persons 'moving along' when requested by ambassadors (Huey, Ericson, and Haggerty 2005). Ambassadors, backed by their relationships with law enforcement and property owners, are able to exert informal power to move unhoused individuals out of sight.

Despite the criticisms levied against BIDs' private security functions, Wonhyung Lee argues that BIDs have the potential to take on a human service role in addressing homelessness (2018). 65% of BIDs included in Lee's nationwide survey indicated that they provide referrals to social services; the Downtown Austin Alliance's ambassador program is consistent with this practice. Beyond that, some BIDs provide direct need assessment and outreach services to the local homeless population. Although this is not common, it is an emerging alternative practice that demonstrates the potential for BIDs to shift their approach to homelessness as mediators and service providers. Urban Alchemy, as a private actor working in a patrol and security capacity, employs an approach that would align with this alternative. While non-police patrol is one element of Urban Alchemy's model, its work also includes non-police response to nonviolent crises. The following section discusses the literature on alternative crisis response broadly, before analyzing non-police response in the context of current alternative models.

Emerging Alternative Response Models

Alternative crisis response is a growing area of research and practice as more localities begin to explore complementary public safety strategies to fit their community's needs. The scholarship on alternative crisis response largely coalesces around three different models: Crisis Intervention Teams (CIT), co-response, and non-police response. CITs and co-response both involve law enforcement personnel, while non-police response does not. These alternative models emerged out of the deinstitutionalization movement of the 20th century, during which policymakers shifted away from the traditional practice of institutionalizing mentally ill people in asylums (Pifer 2019). Without an adequately resourced, community-based mental health system in place to support this population, deinstitutionalization marked a broader shift in access to mental health treatment. First responders - primarily police - became the conduit through which people experiencing mental health crises received access and transport to treatment (Dempsey et. al 2019). The history around the deinstitutionalization movement and emergence of subsequent alternative response models is increasingly relevant as cities focus more attention on addressing homelessness.

Within the last several decades, the number of people with mental illness who came into contact with police and the criminal justice system increased dramatically. As law enforcement became the de facto party tasked with responding to and managing issues involving mental health, it became increasingly clear that police were ill-equipped to handle this responsibility. Following several incidents of injury and death of people with serious mental illness as a result of police involvement, policymakers began looking to alternative response models (Marcus and Stergiopoulos 2022). It is important to note that while these alternative models were developed primarily around responding to mental health crises, various jurisdictions are also experimenting with their applications to homelessness, substance use, and other low-level offenses.

The Crisis Intervention Team model was created in 1988 in an effort to reduce lethal encounters between police and people in acute mental health crisis. It was developed in Memphis, Tennessee after a police officer shot and killed a man experiencing a schizophrenic episode (Watson et. al 2017). Under this model, police departments staff specialized units comprised of officers who

have undergone 40 hours of training on identifying mental health symptoms, de-escalation, and diversion practices to community mental health resources. These specialized police officers are then dispatched to calls related mental health crisis. Since its inception, the CIT model has been adopted by thousands of police departments across the United States (Dempsey et. al 2019). Despite the rapid proliferation of CITs in the U.S., people experiencing mental health crises still account for approximately 25% of fatal police shootings (Steadman and Morrisette 2016).

The scholarship is mixed on whether CITs produce better outcomes for people with serious mental illness. Furthermore, there are multiple dimensions along which CIT outcomes can be evaluated: officer attitudes, arrest rates, use of force, and linkage to mental health treatment. A study on six different police departments in Georgia found that CIT-trained officers demonstrated greater knowledge and skills related to mental illness, de-escalation, and referral decisions (Compton et. al 2014a). While this appears promising, the results remain inconclusive regarding the effect of CIT training on officer behavior and decision-making. One study in Georgia found that CIT-trained officers are more likely to use verbal de-escalation and make referrals to mental health providers and less likely to arrest people (Compton et. al 2014b); other researchers in Chicago found no difference in arrest rates (Watson et. al 2010). There is considerable variation in outcomes across different jurisdictions. A systematic review of CIT studies suggests that CIT generally improves referral to services, but has little impact on arrest rates or use of physical force (Marcus and Stergiopoulos 2022).

Research on the co-response model is far more limited compared to the older CIT model. In spite of this, co-response is growing rapidly. The co-response model entails a collaborative approach in which police officers and mental health clinicians respond to mental health crisis calls together. In theory, police officers can mitigate and manage potential violence while clinicians provide mental health consultation and treatment in acute crisis. This allows both the police and mental health systems to work together and serve the target population more effectively (Rosenbaum 2010). One key element of co-response is increased access to emergency mental health services through the presence of a mental health clinician. This contrasts with the traditional police-only crisis response, in which individual officers are largely the gatekeepers of

access and transport to care (Scott 2000). In Tennessee, researchers compared a co-response program in Knoxville with the CIT model in Memphis. In the Knoxville co-response program, individuals were more likely to be referred to mental health treatment, whereas individuals in Memphis were more likely to be taken to emergency psychiatric treatment by police (Steadman 2000). This is consistent with other research conducted in Georgia, in which 72% of emergencies handled by traditional (non-CIT) police resulted in psychiatric hospitalization compared to 45% with co-response teams (Scott 2000). This reveals differences in approaches taken by clinicians and law enforcement; in particular, the co-response model promotes stronger linkages with a continuum of care in the community. Furthermore, clinicians appear more sensitive to the trauma that can be caused by coerced treatment or hospitalization.

One challenge that emerges in the co-response model is the cultural differences between police and mental health system actors. This is evident in the diverging hospitalization decisions, but it is also present in the working relationship. In Cincinnati, Ohio, CIT-trained officers indicated that working with mental health clinicians had no impact on effective call response; moreover, less than 40% of officers surveyed preferred working with clinicians (Ratansi 2005). Despite growing adoption of co-response models, lethal encounters between police and people experiencing mental health crisis persist. In the wake of George Floyd's death in 2020, communities and policymakers are increasingly looking to a non-police crisis response model.

The first iteration of the non-police response model in the U.S. emerged at around the same time as the CIT model. However, most applications of this model have been at the grassroots level until recently. The academic literature on non-police response in the U.S. is sparser compared to the CIT and co-response models. Within the umbrella of non-police response, there is significant variation in program implementation. Each community employing a non-police response model takes a unique approach in program structure, funding mechanisms, call diversion procedures, and staffing (Beck, Reuland, and Pope 2020). The most prominent example of this model is the CAHOOTS (Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets) program based in Eugene, Oregon. CAHOOTS is a program operated by White Bird Clinic, a nonprofit organization running several crisis intervention and human service programs (White Bird Clinic 2020). CAHOOTS contracts with the city government to

provide mobile crisis response services for nonviolent calls. 911 dispatchers in Eugene are able to divert calls related to mental health and homelessness to CAHOOTS, which will send out an unarmed team comprised of an EMT and mental health crisis worker trained in trauma-informed care, de-escalation, and harm reduction. Most non-police response programs in the U.S. today are modeled off CAHOOTS (Frazier 2023).

Public health scholars argue that a key characteristic of non-police response is structural independence from police (Spolum et. al 2022); the program may not be housed within a police department or include police in the response team. This takes several forms across different localities. Some programs are located within public health departments, fire departments, or community organizations separate from government entirely. The structure and location of the program will inform its funding mechanism. CAHOOTS, which contracts with the municipal government, is funded through the police budget (Gonzalez Miranda, Shetty, and Ehlke 2023). Call diversion is another key consideration in developing a non-police response program. Calls for service may be made to 911 or a separate number; for either one, clear procedures must be established so that appropriate calls are diverted to the non-police responders. Lastly, staffing can also take several forms across programs; this includes medical specialists, crisis workers, and/or peers with lived experience.

In discussing the spectrum of alternative response models, which vary in the degree of police involvement, this section provides important context for understanding Urban Alchemy's own model. On one end of the spectrum is the fully police-based CIT model, whose widespread adoption began earlier than co-response and non-police response. On the other end of this spectrum is non-police response, which would include Urban Alchemy's model. The alternative response models build off of one another, with each subsequent model emerging as a refinement of the one before it, in terms of non-police actor involvement and trauma-informed practices. As previously mentioned, the CIT model established the foundation for incorporating mental health into emergency response; however, a meta-review of CIT studies shows that the model fails to meaningfully reduce use-of-force incidents or arrest frequency (Marcus and Stergiopoulos 2022). These are two measures of success for stakeholders who are interested in reducing lethal police encounters and/or incarceration of people with mental health conditions.

The findings suggest that a fully police-based response, even with mental health training, is inadequate for addressing the needs of more vulnerable and volatile populations, such as those served by Urban Alchemy. Likewise, while a co-responder model is an improvement on CIT in terms of including mental health clinicians, the international CIT training body itself notes that the mere presence of police can escalate crisis situations (CIT International 2021). Furthermore, in considering the framework around determinants of public safety as well as law enforcement's detrimental public health effects on marginalized populations, it is clear that police cannot be the sole purveyor of safety.

The shortcomings of CIT and co-response position non-police response – including Urban Alchemy's model – as a natural evolution for how localities can implement alternative response programs. However, as previously mentioned, the academic literature on non-police response is severely lacking.

Policymakers looking to launch non-police response programs in their own communities will find a dearth of information around how frequently non-police responders need to call for police backup, for example. This is critical for assessing the programs' effectiveness and designing the working relationship between non-police response programs and local law enforcement. Given that most of the currently operating non-police response programs have been established in the last five years, we can expect to see more research and evaluation on these emerging programs moving forward. Ideally, future research will also include cross-jurisdictional comparisons. Alternative response is a new, but promising area of research and practice; Urban Alchemy's work can contribute to building this knowledge through its own public safety programming.

Conclusion

This literature review brings together scholarship from a variety of disciplines and covers topics that are all relevant to the work of our client, Urban Alchemy. In defining community safety and setting up a framework for the social determinants of safety, this review provides the foundation upon which Urban Alchemy's multi-pronged model is built. Understanding community safety as the function of a broader social, cultural, and economic context expands the scope of any proposed public safety solutions beyond simply crime reduction. The analysis of the effects of policing on public safety reveals the insufficiency of police as the sole response to issues that threaten people's safety and wellbeing. The documented history of police violence itself is a threat to safety,

in addition to eroding communities' trust in police. For this reason, community-driven safety initiatives that center the needs and perspectives of residents are key to developing a public safety strategy that is responsive, builds trust, and promotes collective responsibility for safety.

As researchers begin exploring non-police solutions to public safety issues, two models recur in the literature: BID ambassadors and mobile crisis response units. The former relates to patrol and outreach, while the later focuses on responding to crises. Urban Alchemy's work encompasses both the proactive and reactive elements of these two models. The analysis of BID ambassadors provides some key considerations for working with business communities to co-produce public safety, which is of interest to Urban Alchemy. The review of non-police alternative response details the current gold standard in this area, CAHOOTS, with a breakdown of the unique typologies of alternative response models. This demonstrates the different forms that such a program can take, tailored to the specific context in which the program is operating. This will be helpful for Urban Alchemy as it works to develop and market a community-based public safety program that serves Austin's unique needs.

Discovery Findings

This section shares the discovery findings from our two main research buckets: Austin stakeholders' public safety views and alternative response best practices. This provides a more comprehensive overview of the local public safety landscape and generalized approaches for community-based public safety.

Austin Stakeholder Discovery Findings

The findings from our stakeholder discovery in Austin are organized into several key sections:

- **General Safety Perceptions**
- **Public Safety Challenges**
- **Shifting the Public Safety Narratives**
- **Insights from Literature Review**

By organizing the results in this manner, the report aims to not only present the challenges and insights clearly but also to lay out a path forward for addressing public safety in Austin through informed, community-centered approaches.

Is Austin Safe?

Austin is generally safe, but perception shapes people's sense of safety. The general consensus among local stakeholders is that Austin is a safe city, boasting the lowest homicide rate among the largest cities in Texas. However, despite this positive outlook, many residents don't feel as safe as they should. This discrepancy is fueled by factors such as increasingly visible unsheltered homelessness, concerns about mental health, slow or inadequate response from the Austin Police Department, and a lack of transparency in data. These challenges present a complex landscape of public safety hurdles for the city. While interviews with stakeholders indicate a prevailing sentiment of safety, there remains a significant gap between perception and reality, leading to a sense of insecurity among constituents. It's crucial for Urban Alchemy to acknowledge and address these challenges, as simply recognizing them isn't enough to ensure the city's safety measures are adequate.

Public Safety Challenges

1. Policing
2. Homelessness
3. Mental Health
4. Social and Cultural Challenges

Policing

In terms of policing, investigations reveal that low morale and staffing deficiencies severely impact the Austin Police Department (APD).¹ A noticeable decline in police personnel has been observed since around 2020, resulting in limited data availability stemming from both staffing shortages and a reluctance to disclose information.² Consequently, efforts are underway to address these data gaps, yet concerns persist regarding the APD's sluggish response times or, in some cases, complete lack of response, which directly correlate with the aforementioned staffing shortages. Moreover, an increased presence of Texas state troopers has been noted in Austin to address the staffing deficits within the city's police force. However, despite these efforts, the specific concerns prompting calls to 911 or the responses of law enforcement remain unclear, contributing to prolonged response times or, in some instances, no response at all, particularly in cases where police are stretched thin due to overwhelming call volumes.

Homelessness

Homelessness exacerbates these challenges, with insufficient resources available to support this vulnerable population.³ Law enforcement often serves as the default responder to incidents involving homelessness, including instances of individuals sleeping in public spaces.⁴ Consequently, police are burdened with addressing a wide range of issues related to homelessness, further straining their capacity to respond effectively to other public safety concerns.

Mental Health

Additionally, mental health services are in short supply, lacking the necessary resources, facilities, and expertise to adequately support individuals experiencing mental health crises.⁵ This deficiency is particularly critical for those exhibiting severe symptoms such as mania or aggressive behavior, who may require urgent intervention beyond what law enforcement alone can provide. As a result, individuals in crisis are left with limited options, often relying solely on emergency services like 911 without access to the comprehensive mental health support they urgently need. Furthermore, responding to mental health crises often creates complications, highlighting the pressing need for treatment rather than resorting to arrest. This underscores the growing concern for mental health issues in Austin.

Social and Cultural Challenges

Additionally, social and cultural factors play a significant role, as revealed in our interviews. The lack of collective responsibility for safety is exacerbated by gentrification, driven by economic forces that push individuals into survival mode.⁶ This phenomenon is underscored by a cultural gap between those in need and those offering help. Our findings underscore the impact of mass gentrification in Austin, which has led to widespread resident displacement. Previously close-knit communities, where neighbors knew each other and fostered a sense of communal support, have been disrupted by the construction of large apartment complexes and high-rises within established neighborhoods. Consequently, the cohesion and effectiveness of neighborhood watch programs have been compromised. The influx of residents who are unfamiliar with the community further erodes social bonds, creating a fragmented sense of belonging and weakening community support networks.⁷ The issue is compounded by a lack of cultural understanding among newcomers moving into historically significant areas in Austin, often housed in recently built apartment complexes or other modern developments. These newcomers are typically unaware of the rich cultural history and dynamics of the neighborhoods they are entering, which can also contribute to mental health concerns.

In tight-knit communities, residents typically look out for one another, such as checking in on neighbors like “Jerry from down the street” if they’re facing issues. However, in areas affected by gentrification, long-term residents may be perceived as outsiders or even threats to the new order, leading to situations where individuals like Jerry are treated as nuisances requiring police intervention. Furthermore, the impact of gentrification extends beyond mere displacement, disrupting the social fabric of communities and pushing essential resources like grocery stores further away. This displacement not only creates practical challenges, such as access to necessities, but also erodes the communal spaces where diverse community members once gathered, diminishing the vibrant cultural tapestry that once defined these neighborhoods. The impact of gentrification has pushed many residents into survival mode, significantly altering their daily lives. Basic necessities such as food and essential resources have become increasingly difficult to access. For individuals in affected communities, the need to find alternative sources for sustenance and support has become a pressing concern. This shift in circumstances underscores broader social and cultural implications, as revealed through our interviews.

Shifting the Public Safety Narratives in Austin

In the discourse surrounding public safety in Austin, Austin stakeholders have provided valuable insights into reshaping the prevailing narrative. Through these interviews, the inquiry has focused on identifying necessary changes to address community needs and perceptions regarding safety. We can shift the narrative and address our public safety challenges by:

- Promoting trust and the use of credible messengers.
- Addressing gentrification and the culture war around policing.
- Creating safety beyond policing.

Promoting Trust and the Use of Credible Messengers

One key theme that emerged from these discussions is the crucial role of trust and credible messengers in fostering a sense of security within communities. The erosion of trust within neighborhoods has been attributed to the shifting demographics and dynamics resulting from gentrification.⁸ With communities undergoing rapid transformation and residents experiencing displacement, there has been a breakdown in longstanding bonds and communal ties.

Consequently, the absence of trusted figures or organizations has left residents feeling isolated and lacking in support systems.

Addressing Gentrification and the Culture War Around Policing

Moreover, Austin stakeholders highlighted the paradoxical reliance on traditional law enforcement as the sole response to safety concerns. Without viable alternatives or credible messengers to address community issues, the burden falls heavily on the police, leading to delayed response times and diminished effectiveness in addressing nuanced challenges.⁹ Council members, such as Venessa Fuentes, have drawn attention to the cultural tensions surrounding policing, with Austin often labeled as "anti-cop".¹⁰ However, stakeholders emphasize that the call for alternative measures does not negate the need for law enforcement but rather seeks to augment existing approaches with community-based solutions. This nuanced perspective aims to dispel misconceptions and promote a more inclusive discourse on public safety.

Furthermore, there is a growing recognition of the need to broaden the definition of safety beyond traditional crime prevention measures. Beyond addressing incidents such as car break-ins, stakeholders advocate for a holistic approach that encompasses various factors contributing to community well-being.¹¹ Austin Stakeholders' insights underscore the multifaceted nature of public safety challenges in Austin. By prioritizing trust-building, fostering alternative responses, and expanding the scope of safety considerations, efforts can be made to reshape the safety narrative and address the diverse needs of the community.

Creating Safety Beyond Policing

The concept of safety extends beyond conventional notions of crime prevention to encompass a broader spectrum of concerns, including the well-being of vulnerable individuals within the community. Austin stakeholders have emphasized the importance of recognizing and addressing the safety needs of those who may not fit traditional definitions of crime victims.¹² For instance, individuals experiencing mental health crises or homelessness may find themselves in precarious situations that jeopardize their safety and well-being. Observations of individuals without proper attire or footwear roaming the streets highlight the multifaceted nature of safety concerns. While such individuals may not be directly involved in criminal activities, their vulnerability to harm underscores the need for proactive intervention and support services. In response, stakeholders advocate for a more inclusive approach to safety that goes beyond law enforcement responses.¹³ By expanding the scope of safety considerations to encompass social services, mental health support, and community outreach programs, efforts can be made to address the underlying issues contributing to individuals' vulnerability. Additionally, stakeholders stress the importance of addressing systemic factors such as gentrification and cultural displacement, which can further exacerbate community safety challenges.¹⁴ The displacement of longstanding residents and the influx of newcomers into culturally significant areas can disrupt social cohesion and erode trust within communities.

In light of these complexities, stakeholders emphasize the need for comprehensive strategies that address the root causes of safety concerns while promoting social inclusion and community empowerment. By expanding the array of services and resources available to vulnerable populations and addressing the underlying societal factors contributing to safety risks, communities can work towards fostering environments that prioritize the well-being of all residents.

Austin Stakeholders give insight that safety within communities transcends mere policing and law enforcement measures. Rather, safe communities are characterized by the availability and accessibility of essential resources that cater to the diverse needs of their residents. When referring to resources, stakeholders emphasize the importance of a comprehensive approach that extends beyond emergency response services.¹⁵ While such services are undoubtedly crucial, they represent only a fraction of what constitutes safety within a community. True safety encompasses a wide array of resources and opportunities that contribute to the overall well-being and cohesion of the population. For instance, access to job opportunities, particularly for marginalized individuals, plays a significant role in enhancing economic stability and reducing the likelihood of engaging in criminal activities.¹⁶ Similarly, after-

school programs provide a safe and constructive environment for youth, offering educational support, mentorship, and recreational activities that foster personal development and social integration.

Moreover, the provision of various services and amenities, such as community centers, recreational facilities, and cultural events, serves to strengthen social bonds and promote a sense of belonging among residents. By creating spaces where community members can come together, share experiences, and forge connections, these resources contribute to the establishment of resilient and cohesive communities. In essence, safety without police necessitates a holistic approach that prioritizes the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities within communities.¹⁷ By investing in initiatives that address the underlying social, economic, and cultural determinants of safety, communities can cultivate environments where all individuals feel valued, supported, and empowered to thrive.

Insights from the Literature Review

After the interviews, it becomes apparent that the insights provided by Austin stakeholders align closely with existing scholarship on community safety. These findings underscore the potential of alternative responses to traditional law enforcement measures in addressing safety concerns effectively. The convergence of research findings and stakeholder perspectives reinforces the importance of adopting a multifaceted approach to community safety. One key theme that emerges from both the interviews and the literature review is the significance of fostering strong community relationships. These relationships serve as the foundation for social cohesion and contribute to the creation of shared experiences within public spaces. By prioritizing community engagement and collaboration, communities can enhance their resilience and ability to address safety challenges collectively. Moreover, the literature review highlights the role of social determinants of safety, emphasizing the importance of addressing underlying socio-economic factors in crime prevention efforts (Gilling 2001). The public health framework provides a valuable lens through which to approach safety issues, emphasizing the need for holistic responses that address the diverse needs of individuals and communities.

In addition, Austin stakeholders and research alike advocate for the establishment of collateral partnerships, which seek to diversify the actors involved in addressing safety concerns. By moving beyond reliance on traditional law enforcement agencies, communities can create space for the involvement of community groups and other stakeholders. This collaborative approach not only enhances the effectiveness of safety initiatives but also promotes community empowerment and ownership of safety outcomes. Overall, the alignment between stakeholder insights and existing research underscores

the importance of adopting comprehensive approaches to community safety. By integrating the principles of community engagement, addressing social determinants of safety, and fostering collaborative partnerships, Urban Alchemy can bring communities that can work towards creating safer and more resilient environments for all residents. As our exploration of Austin's safety challenges draws to a close, it is evident that a paradigm shift is needed in how Urban Alchemy conceptualizes and address these issues. By integrating the voices of stakeholders with the findings of scholarly research, we have uncovered the potential for alternative responses to traditional law enforcement measures. Emphasizing community engagement, addressing social determinants of safety, and fostering collaborative partnerships emerge as key strategies for building safer and more resilient communities in Austin. As we move forward, it is our goal to fill in Urban Alchemy on the lessons learned from these dialogues and work towards a future where safety is a shared responsibility and a fundamental right for all residents in Austin.

Best Practice Discovery Findings

Our best practice discovery findings are organized into two key sections:

- [**Best Practice Program Overview**](#)
- [**Best Practices Shared by Interviewees**](#)

Best Practice Program Overview

The Holistic Assistance Response Teams (HART) program in Harris County, TX, launched on March 21, 2022, dispatches unarmed, interdisciplinary teams trained in behavioral health and medical assistance to 911 and other calls. Aimed at enhancing community health and safety, HART addresses the needs of those experiencing homelessness, behavioral issues, or non-emergency health concerns, reducing unnecessary police or hospital interventions.

Response units - staffed by third-party vendor DEMA Consulting & Management - consist of a certified EMT and a crisis intervention specialist. The teams operate daily from 7 am to 10 pm. Since its inception, HART has redirected 486 calls from law enforcement and helped over 300 vulnerable residents connect with essential services.

The Support Team Assisted Response (STAR) Program in Denver dispatches behavioral health clinicians and paramedics to assist individuals experiencing mental health distress or substance use disorders. Operating as alternative to emergency response, STAR handles low-risk situations without significant safety concerns, including issues related to mental health, poverty, homelessness, and substance misuse. STAR's program is a collaboration between three different organizations. Denver Health provides the medics, WellPower provides the mental health clinicians, and Servicios provides the follow-up case management. The team, which is dispatched through Denver 9-1-1, provides medical assessment, crisis intervention, de-escalation, transportation, and resource connection to help community members in urgent need.

Portland Street Response, part of Portland Fire & Rescue, provides assistance to individuals facing mental and behavioral health crises. The program operates citywide and can be accessed by calling 911. Response units consist of an EMT and mental health crisis responder. Unlike the other programs studied, Portland Street Response is fully staffed in-house by city employees. In addition to the response teams, Portland Street Response also staffs an aftercare team consisting of community health workers and peer support specialists, who provide longer-term case management.

CAHOOTS (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets) operates a 24/7 mobile crisis intervention service in the Eugene-Springfield Metro area. Dispatched through Eugene's police-fire-ambulance center and Springfield's non-emergency number within the urban growth boundary, each team consists of a medic and a crisis worker. They provide immediate stabilization for urgent medical needs or psychological crises, along with assessment, information, referral, advocacy, and transportation to further treatment when necessary. For crimes in progress, violence, or life-threatening emergencies, police or emergency medical services may also respond. CAHOOTS offers a wide range of services including crisis counseling, suicide prevention, conflict resolution, grief support, substance abuse interventions, housing crisis help, first aid, resource connections, and transportation to services.

Best Practices Shared by Interviewees

In our interviews with the identified best practice peer organizations, several recurring themes emerged to form the basis of best practices for establishing and operating an alternative response program. These practices can be classified as programmatic, logistical, and strategic. Although Urban Alchemy's public safety model is not identical to the models we studied, there are valuable lessons to be learned from these organizations as it relates to non-police response more broadly. Specifically, three-fourths of the programs (Harris County HART, Denver STAR, and Portland Street Response) are newly established in localities that sought to explore alternative response models in the wake of George Floyd's death in 2020. Austin policymakers are facing a similar challenge, which creates a similar environment for Urban Alchemy to navigate. As such, the programmatic, logistical, and strategic best practices identified through our discovery work hold great promise for any organization looking to bring a non-police response model to the current public safety landscape in Austin.

Programmatic Best Practices

- Integration with local police dispatch systems.
- Providing additional services beyond immediate crisis response/de-escalation.

Integration with local police dispatch systems

Every organization we spoke to indicated that their program is integrated with the local police dispatch system. While some programs have a separate non-emergency phone number that residents may call, all calls are routed through police dispatch and triaged accordingly. In Portland, integration with 911 dispatch was a deliberate decision made during the program design process, in order to leverage the trained dispatchers' triage skills.¹⁸ While the 911 integration is valuable for ensuring that an appropriate response is sent to the crisis scene, it is also the greatest barrier to program uptake in Portland. There are several reasons for this: 1) People may not believe a mental health crisis warrants calling 911; 2) People fear calling 911 because they do not want a police response; and 3) People do not want to risk clogging the phone line.

Harris County's HART program faces similar challenges but continues to utilize the 911 dispatch system. In doing so, however, HART had considerable control over the design of the triage process for non-violent calls.¹⁹ During the initial program design process, HART worked with the Sheriff's Office to identify the specific call codes that would be diverted to HART. Additionally, HART was involved in designing the training curriculum for dispatchers. This demonstrates the potential for an alternative response program to meaningfully impact the current practices of the broader public safety system in its jurisdiction through system integration.

Additional Services Beyond Immediate Crisis Response/De-escalation

Another shared characteristic of all the programs we studied is the provision of medical care and case management services as part of the alternative response. Each crisis response unit is staffed by an EMT and crisis intervention specialist or mental health clinician. For Portland Street Response, approximately 60% of the calls for service involve some medical care component.²⁰ Because the target population for these programs often struggles to access medical care, bringing the care to them meets their immediate need and reduces ER visits in the long-term. Likewise, follow-up case management ensures that people are connected to services and signed up for eligible benefits. Generally, the people served by these programs are difficult for service providers to reach; by having program staff go out to meet the individual where they are, they can improve service uptake. Including medical care and case management in the program model is an easy, visible value-add for non-police response programs.

Logistical Best Practices

- Establishing working relationships with resource and service providers in the community prior to launching the program.
- Maintaining communication with other agencies at different levels of government.
- Leveraging multiple sources of funding to support program operation.

Building Partnerships with Community Resources and Services

Although case management is a key best practice for operating an alternative response program, interviewees spoke about the challenges of not having resources to which they can refer their clients. To make use of existing resources most effectively, it is important to establish relationships with other social support systems in the area, ideally before implementing the program. Harris County HART recommends mapping out the resources in the community before launching an alternative response program; in doing so, staff will learn about the resource gaps and be more equipped to plan around them. For example, HART recently received a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice to

provide transportation services to their clients.²¹ Denver STAR is in the process of formalizing referral pipelines with local mental health service providers. This will allow them to better serve their clients and improve service delivery.²² CAHOOTS - in addition to having an in-house medical clinic - also has longstanding agreements with other service providers in the community.²³

Maintaining Communication with Other Agencies

While it is important for alternative response programs to maintain relationships with community organization, it is equally important to establish relationships with public agencies across different levels of government. Portland Street Response - which is a city program - cautioned us about the potential for duplication of services when city and county agencies are not in communication with one another.²⁴ For example, while PSR serves as a behavioral health response, Multnomah County also operates its own crisis line with a behavioral health component. This can not only lead to confusion for people calling for service, it also produces resource allocation inefficiencies. Travis County has established a similar mental health crisis call diversion program, which could have some overlap with a city-level alternative response program. As such, it is a best practice to communicate with county-level agencies and coordinate where necessary.

Leveraging Multiple Sources of Funding

Lastly, several interviewees mentioned the value of finding creative sources of funding, particularly when first establishing the program. For example, Portland Street Response funded its pilot using money from COVID funding, the state cannabis fund, the state CAHOOTS fund, and the city's general fund.²⁵ This enabled them to launch the pilot and secure more stable funding upon demonstrating programmatic success. CAHOOTS - in addition to being funded through its city and county contracts - also receives money through Medicaid reimbursements.²⁶ To maximize resources, organizations looking to launch their own alternative response programs would benefit from not relying solely on a municipal contract.

Recommendations

The following recommendations culminated in an in-depth analysis of Austin's policy landscape, guided research questions, relevant literature exploration, stakeholder interviews, best practice insights, and collaborative workshops with Urban Alchemy and stakeholders. These strategic directives aim to solidify Urban Alchemy's position and expand its efforts from addressing homelessness and managing shelters to comprehensive community-based public safety in Austin.

We've structured our recommendations around four primary areas: expanding into Austin, enhancing communication strategies, mobilizing local champions, and implementing monitoring and evaluation measures. These categories address key aspects crucial for Urban Alchemy's growth and effectiveness. However, it's essential to highlight the importance of Urban Alchemy's established de-escalation services already offered in San Francisco and other cities where they have a presence and its community-focused approach. To this end, we have tailored our recommendations in a way that incorporates these existing offerings:

1. Expansion into Austin with Comprehensive Services Offerings:

Urban Alchemy's aspiration to broaden its service offerings to include community-based public safety initiatives in Austin is commendable. The ongoing HEART Pilot program serves as a crucial foundation. Success in this pilot endeavor is pivotal for securing a contract with the City of Austin. Our best practice interviews with the HART program for Harris County, Portland Street Response, and The Denver STAR program revealed they all began as a pilot that was later expanded, showing how important excelling at a pilot can help guarantee expansion. Moreover, Urban Alchemy's existing de-escalation services, rooted in community relationships, represent a vital component of its comprehensive approach to public safety.

To ensure a seamless expansion into Austin and integration of comprehensive services, Urban Alchemy should:

- 1.1 **Educate Stakeholders on Comprehensive Service Offerings:** Urban Alchemy's model, which encompasses homelessness services and community-based public safety initiatives, including de-escalation services, should be effectively communicated to

stakeholders. Educating Stakeholders is paramount for these kinds of programs as found in our

best practice interview with HART. Demonstrating the breadth and effectiveness of these services is essential for garnering support and understanding.

1.2 Establish New Strategic Partnerships: Collaborations with governmental entities, law enforcement agencies, and community organizations are vital for Urban Alchemy's expansion. For instance, the CAHOOTS interview revealed that systemic partnership is crucial for success. By leveraging existing partnerships and forging new ones, Urban Alchemy can enhance its capacity to provide comprehensive services and respond effectively to community needs.

1.3 Consider Incorporating De-escalation and Medical Services: Urban Alchemy's existing de-escalation services, founded on community relationships and trust, should be well integrated into its expansion strategy. Additionally, considering the insights from the discovery findings, Urban Alchemy should consider incorporating a medical component into its service offerings. These services play a critical role in diffusing conflicts, preventing violence, and ensuring the well-being of individuals in crisis. By prioritizing de-escalation training as already offered by Urban Alchemy in San Francisco and other cities, medical interventions, for instance, Portland Street Response revealed during the best practice interview that in most cases when they respond to calls there is usually a need to provide immediate medical care or first-aid in minor instances, and partnerships with healthcare providers, as in the case of Harris County Holistic Response Team (HART) program that partners with Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) in the fire department in the city to provide medical services, Urban Alchemy can foster safer and healthier communities in Austin.

2. Development of Proactive Communication Strategies:

Effective communication is essential for enhancing Urban Alchemy's visibility, countering negative narratives, and fostering community support. To this end, Urban Alchemy should focus on the following strategic initiatives:

2.1 Harness Positive Messaging: Urban Alchemy's provision of comprehensive services, including de-escalation interventions, represents a unique and valuable contribution to public safety in Austin. Effectively communicating the positive impact of these services through media channels, community outreach, and advocacy efforts is essential for countering skepticism and garnering support for its initiatives.

2.2 Engage with Local Communities: Strong community engagement is paramount for the success of community-based public safety initiatives. This strategy was emphasized as very important by our HART interviewee as a strategy that has worked for them. Urban Alchemy should actively engage with local stakeholders, including community organizations, religious institutions, and grassroots initiatives, to solicit feedback, build trust, and foster collaboration. By fostering meaningful dialogue and partnerships, Urban Alchemy can enhance its visibility and credibility within the community.

2.3 Enhance Online Presence: Leveraging digital platforms and social media channels is essential for amplifying Urban Alchemy's message and impact. A strategic overhaul of Urban Alchemy's online presence, including the regular dissemination of success stories, testimonials, and program updates, can significantly enhance visibility and credibility. By effectively utilizing digital platforms, Urban Alchemy can cultivate a broad base of support and advocacy for its initiatives.

3. Empowerment and Mobilization of Local Champions:

Mobilizing local champions is instrumental in advancing Urban Alchemy's objectives and fostering community support. To harness the power of local advocacy, Urban Alchemy should pursue the following strategic initiatives:

3.1 Empowerment Through Data and Resources: Equipping local advocates with the requisite data, resources, and advocacy tools is essential for amplifying Urban Alchemy's message and impact. Urban Alchemy should develop comprehensive toolkits, including informational materials, case studies, and training resources, to empower local champions in their advocacy efforts. This is a strategy used by HART as they worked towards expanding their pilot, they continued to educate deputies and other stakeholders who helped promote them to ensure city-wide support. By arming advocates with credible information and resources, Urban Alchemy can cultivate a network of passionate advocates who champion its cause within their respective spheres of influence.

3.2 Leverage Positive Feedback: Building on positive feedback and testimonials from stakeholders and beneficiaries, including success stories related to de-escalation interventions, is instrumental in bolstering Urban Alchemy's credibility and advocacy efforts. By strategically leveraging these testimonials in advocacy materials and outreach initiatives, Urban Alchemy can showcase its impact and effectiveness, enhancing its credibility and influence within the community.

3.3 Facilitate Community Engagement: Hosting community forums, workshops, and engagement events provides valuable opportunities for fostering dialogue, soliciting feedback, and building partnerships within the community. All our best practice interviews emphasized the importance of community for any program to excel. Urban Alchemy should organize regular community engagement events, inviting stakeholders, community members, and elected officials to participate in discussions and activities. By facilitating meaningful engagement and dialogue, Urban Alchemy can strengthen community ties, build trust, and garner support for its initiatives.

4. Investment in Monitoring and Evaluation:

A robust monitoring and evaluation framework is essential for assessing program impact, ensuring accountability, and informing strategic decision-making. In the words of our interviewee for the HART program Lupe Washington “Be data-driven.”. Urban Alchemy should prioritize the following measures:

4.1 Comprehensive Impact Measurement: Urban Alchemy should develop a comprehensive framework for measuring the impact of its services, including de-escalation interventions, across various domains. By systematically tracking key performance indicators and outcome metrics, Urban Alchemy can assess program effectiveness, identify areas for improvement, and demonstrate its impact to stakeholders and funders.

4.2 Integrate Programmatic Data: Integrating Urban Alchemy's programmatic data, including data on de-escalation interventions, with local law enforcement records and emergency response systems is essential for enhancing coordination, responsiveness, and service delivery. Urban Alchemy should explore opportunities to integrate its data systems with Austin's existing emergency response infrastructure, facilitating seamless communication and collaboration between it and local authorities.

4.3 Utilize Evaluation Findings: Leveraging evaluation findings and data analytics is critical for informing strategic decision-making, program refinement, and advocacy efforts. Urban Alchemy should systematically analyze evaluation data, identify trends and patterns, and translate findings into actionable insights and recommendations. Urban Alchemy can enhance program effectiveness, accountability, and sustainability by utilizing evaluation findings to inform program design, resource allocation, and advocacy strategies.

By diligently implementing these strategic policy recommendations, Urban Alchemy can solidify its position as a leader in community-based public safety initiatives, foster meaningful partnerships, and create safer and more resilient communities in Austin and beyond.



Our Team

Justin Carter



Justin Carter is an accomplished leader in public affairs, social work, and public health, with a Bachelor's degree from The Ohio State University. His expertise spans mental health, public safety, community wellness, and social justice. He is a passionate advocate for ending violence and promoting healthy masculinity, diversity, and inclusion. Throughout his career, Justin has

emerged as a prominent voice for change, speaking at conferences, podcasts, and rallies on various platforms. His collaborative efforts with universities, non-profits, and governmental agencies have fostered inter-group cooperation and created inclusive environments for community safety and violence prevention. At the University of Texas at Austin, Justin plays a pivotal role in the Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention Campaign, ensuring the mental well-being of the student community and advancing inclusive, resilient community initiatives.

Ashley Nguyen



Ashley earned her bachelor's degree in sociology from Rice University. Prior to graduate school, she worked as a client advocate at the Harris County Public Defender's Office in Houston, TX. In this role, she provided case management services, wrote mitigation memos for sentencing hearings, and advocated for clients' release from pretrial detention.

While at the LBJ School, she has worked as a graduate research assistant for the on-campus Prison and Jail Innovation Lab. In summer 2023, she interned for the U.S. Government Accountability office, where she honed her skills in research design, policy analysis, and program evaluation.

Abundance Ogodogu-Chima



Abundance was born and raised in Nigeria. She obtained a diploma in law from the University of Jos Nigeria and proceeded to obtain her bachelor's degree in international relations/strategic studies from Novena University, Nigeria. Upon graduation, she served in her country's compulsory National Youth Services Corps as a teacher and during that time she became the head of her community development service group the Red Cross Society and was a member of other community development groups. From there, she proceeded to work as a volunteer Project Officer with the Gender and Economic Advancement Initiative (GEANI) where she led projects on youth development. She then went on to work as a legislative intern at the National House of Assembly Nigeria in the Senate Committee for Foreign Affairs. Upon completion of her internship, she moved on to various roles in the banking and education industry. Abundance began working for Center for Gender Economics Africa (CGE) as the Monitoring and Evaluation Officer and worked on various community projects before joining the LBJ School in 2022 for a dual master's degree in Women and Gender Studies/Public Affairs.

Interview End Notes

¹ Vanessa Fuentes (Austin City Council Member - District 2), in interview with LBJ team, February 5, 2024.

² José “Chito” Vela (Austin City Council Member - District 4), in interview with LBJ team, February 12, 2024.

³ Chase Wright (Executive Director, Hungry Hill Foundation), in interview with LBJ team, January 8, 2024.

⁴ Bill Brice (Senior VP of Investor Relations, Downtown Austin Alliance), in interview with LBJ team, January 16, 2024.

⁵ Fuentes, interview.

⁶ Antony Jackson (Founder and CEO, We Can Now), in interview with LBJ team, January 8, 2024.

⁷ Jackson, interview.

⁸ Wright, interview.

⁹ Wright, interview.

¹⁰ Fuentes, interview.

¹¹ Michelle Myles (Manager, Austin Public Health Office of Violence Prevention), in interview with LBJ team, January 19, 2024.

¹² Vela, interview.

¹³ Myles and Vela, interview.

¹⁴ Jackson, interview.

¹⁵ Vela, interview.

¹⁶ Jackson and Wright, interview.

¹⁷ Fuentes and Myles, interview.

¹⁸ Portland Street Response, in interview with LBJ team, January 23, 2024.

¹⁹ Harris County Holistic Action Response Team (HART), in interview with LBJ team, January 29, 2024.

²⁰ Portland Street Response, interview.

²¹ Harris County HART, interview.

²² Denver Support Team Assisted Response (STAR), in interview with LBJ team, February 26, 2024.

²³ CAHOOTS, in interview with LBJ team, January 25, 2024.

²⁴ Portland Street Response, interview.

²⁵ Portland Street Response, interview.

²⁶ CAHOOTS, interview.

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