

*TASK FORCE QUESTIONNAIRE TO
REIMAGINE POLICING IN DENVER*

Exploratory Analysis and Report

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Table of Contents

Overview	1
Problematic Policing Practices	2
“What Should Denver’s Public Safety Model Look Like?”	5
Impact Quotes	8
Task Force Questionnaire to Reimagine Policing in Denver	14

Overview

This report presents the findings of the *Task Force Questionnaire (TFQ) to Reimagine Policing in Denver*, a survey implemented on behalf of the community-led task force to reimagine policing and public safety in the city of Denver. The goal of the *TFQ* survey was to identify community concerns and priorities to aid in refining the task force agenda. Overall, respondents identified systemic racial discrimination, the criminalization and overpolicing of other marginalized groups (e.g., homeless, mentally ill), police use of force, and increased militarization as the most critical issues in the current Denver policing model. Respondent suggestions for improving the public safety model included: responding to homelessness, mental health crises, and addiction with specialized services rather than police; prioritizing collaboration with the community; demilitarizing and restricting firearms to smaller, specialized police response teams rather than general issue; and improving police training, particularly in de-escalation and non-violent strategies. Data in this report were collected from a total of 334 community members between June 30, 2020 and July 31, 2020.

The Survey

The *TFQ* is an exploratory survey containing several open-ended questions that allow community members to express a wide range of opinions on current practices, ideas for the future, and suggestions for collaborative organizations. The full survey is reproduced on page 14. This report summarizes the responses to the following two items:

1. List current policing practices that are problematic to you
2. What should Denver's public safety model look like?

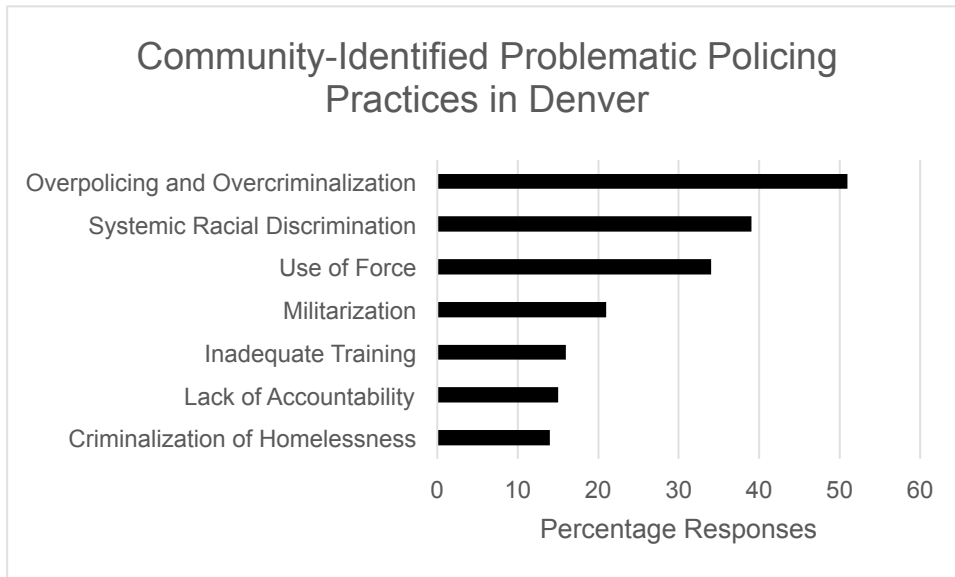
Responses were screened for duplicates, analyzed for recurrent themes, and then coded using appropriate keywords. Responses ranged in length from a single word to nearly 500, with most responses containing more than one answer to each question. Responses were not "double counted" if they repeated the same keyword or if they contained more than one keyword for any given category. Keywords were searched inclusively using the grammatical root (e.g., "militar" for military, militarized, militarization) and alternate forms (e.g., gun, firearm) when applicable. Groups of keywords were as comprehensive as possible, but the use of open-ended questions prevented a more rigorous analytic approach and it is likely that some responses went uncoded in each category. Consequently, the figures below are both approximate and almost certainly underestimated.

The estimates on the following pages are accompanied by particularly illustrative respondent quotes; these are italicized but are otherwise reproduced verbatim. Many responses were emotionally charged and some of these, though passionate and strongly suggestive of intent, defied accurate coding categorization without unaccountably imputing motivation. These responses are not included in the counts below and are instead presented as part of a longer list of impact quotes on page 8.

Problematic Policing Practices

Respondents identified a wide range of concerns with Denver’s current policing model. The chart below presents the most commonly identified issues. The top category is deliberately broad to include the 51% of responses identifying some form of **overpolicing** and/or **overcriminalization** of marginalized or vulnerable groups.

“Disproportionate policing of black and brown people of color. Disproportionate time spent by police on less serious, misdemeanor crimes.”



Approximately 39% of responses identified **systemic racial discrimination**, or the institutionalized processes that effectively criminalize specific demographic groups, as a critical problem in Denver. These responses were classified by references to at least one of the following: African American, Black, brown, color/people of color, race/racial/racism/racist, POC, BIPOC.

“I do not know the terms but violence against people of color needs to stop.”

“I have African-American friends who have been pulled over for being Black. This seems to be a huge problem.”

“Stopping young Black men for “suspicious” behavior is problematic”

“Racial profiling--I would have been Elijah McClain and i would be dead if my skin were black. We need to understand racial bias and get training, etc.”

Approximately 34% of respondents cited **police use of force** as a pressing concern, particularly in the context of peaceful protests (12%). Responses in this category include references to police brutality and escalation of nonviolent situations.

“Too many guns! Too much violence. They prepare for violent interactions and that’s what they’re trained to do and what they give us. Racial profiling must stop.”

“Racial profiling and excessive force on certain detainees is the biggest problem”

“Dial back application of force by a thousand. If police are so afraid so often that they have to shoot this much, they aren’t good candidates. No bad eggs. Police are not executioners—even guilty people should not be murdered.”

“Do not infringe on rights to public protest. Stop using tear gas and pepper spray on protesters.”

The increasing **militarization** of law enforcement - including the use of militarized weaponry - was another concern for 21% of respondents.

“I am uncomfortable with the military gear (armored trucks, SWAT gear, etc.) that was deployed during June demonstrations. Doesn't this encourage military-style responses to situations in which perhaps other responses would be better?”

“The militarization is abhorrent. The prevailing attitude in training and otherwise that the police force is at war with citizens”.

“I personally have not had issues with my local police. That said, I don’t want to see police in riot gear at peaceful marches or protest. I don’t want to see military grade equipment at peaceful marches and protest.”

“Police should not be outfitted like soldiers—they are civilians too.”

Approximately 16% reported concerns related to **inadequate police training**, particularly with regard to de-escalation (10%) and racial bias (5%).

“They should have years of training like in Norway, not a mere 1000 hours—that’s 6 months at 40 hours a week. During training, eliminate the abusive, alienating practice of convincing cops everyone is against them and protecting each other is more important than community well being.”

“Denver police should be required to go through racial bias training in addition to building skills in problem-solving, conflict mediation, and de-escalation tactics.”

“I don’t have a problem with the police, I have a problem with administration and the lack of support and training they give their officers.”

Approximately 15% of responses identified issues of **accountability**, **immunity** or **transparency** in law enforcement.

“Insufficient culture of fellow officer accountability for legal and ethical behavior.”

“Denver police are lacking accountability and transparency. To build trust, there must be consequences and the public must have information. Accountability systems should be directed by the communities that police departments are supposed to protect and serve.”

“Police should be held accountable by outside agencies, police should not police themselves. Police should not be punished or “outed” for whistle blowing on fellow problematic officers. Police should act on genuine threats to the community, not arbitrary application of outdated laws or assumptions of guilt.”

Respondents also reported concerns regarding the **criminalization of homelessness** (14%) and **addiction** (5%).

“Over policing and under serving our homeless population.”

“violent sweeping of the homeless camps (where else are they supposed to go?)”

“Why are the police not working hand and hand with the homeless. They should be talking to them everyday in a constructive manner!”

“Police outfitted with guns, etc responding to mental health, addiction and homelessness crises.”

Respondents repeatedly cited the growing burden on police to take on additional roles (e.g., social worker, mediation) in their activities. An exact count of these respondents was precluded by the sheer variety in language and phrasing around this particular issue. However, at least 24% of respondents believe that police involvement is inappropriate for wellness checks or crises involving mental health, homelessness, or substance abuse.

“Stop asking police to be health care, mental health, family counselors, etc. they aren’t trained for it and it shows.”

“Police Officers are asked to do too much and wear too many hats. They cannot be adequately trained in 100 different areas.”

“Use of police where social workers and trained counselors would be of better use.”

Approximately 5% of respondents reported **no issues** with the current policing model.

“None! They are doing a fine job when allowed to enforce the law.”

“What Should Denver’s Public Safety Model Look Like?”

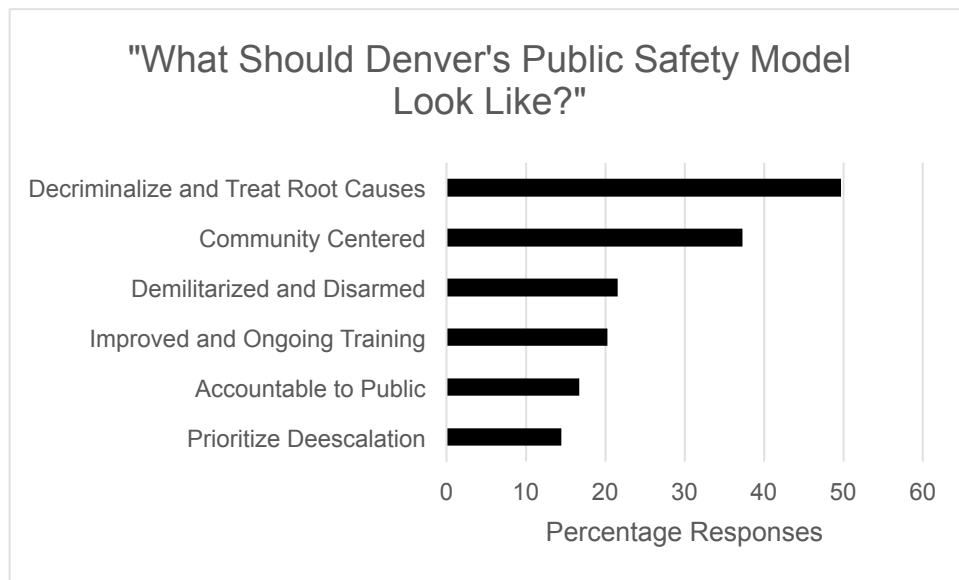
Many responses to this question were conceptual:

“Actual public safety”

“Empathy over brutality”

The more concrete suggestions organized into overlapping themes, presented in the chart below, that are succinctly summarized by this response:

“Smaller police force with fewer weapons and more training on racial bias and de-escalation. Specialized groups that respond to mental health crises, overdoses and homeless issues.”



Almost half of responses (49.7%) described a public safety model that **minimizes unnecessary police involvement and escalation for cases involving homelessness, mental health crises, addiction, and similar nonviolent disruptions**. Instead, respondents appear to support a model that treats the root causes of crime and other social ills through enhanced community resources, preventative programs, and specialized first responders.

“Smaller police force with fewer weapons and more training on racial bias and de-escalation. Specialized groups that respond to mental health crises, overdoses and homeless issues.”

“Address the root cause of crimes at a community level. Invest in community programs and services that respond to crises other than the police (mental health care professionals, nurses, family counselors, child advocates, drug rehab professionals, etc. invest in economic development, education, and health care in desperate communities.”

“A system that creates advocates for our "problematic" citizens. Better mental health services and drug rehab that is free to help people. A real way to help our displaced and homeless citizens.”

The need for specialized response reached consensus among even those respondents who passionately defended the current policing model in the previous question (“driving all the good cops out of state”).

“Take the social work out of policing and let them do their jobs.”

“Have the police handle serious crimes and support the deployment of mental health workers and other community resources for many less-serious crimes.”

Approximately 40% of responses referenced the need for **community involvement** and collaboration in any public safety model.

“Community officer social workers to handle most calls without weapons and aggression. Other community minded liaisons to take down info and make reposts of non-violent crimes to work through the system toward an actual end of betterment of individuals and community.”

“Community based, nonviolent approaches founded in de-escalation, mutual aid, and providing resources”

“Communities should be policed by people who live in the community.”

Approximately 21% of responses advocated for a **disarmed, demilitarized** police force.

“A paradigm shift must occur where police no longer engage in a “ us vs them ” scenario. Warriors need not apply. Only Protectors needed.”

“We should look into truly non-lethal means of protection for our police force, and the use of lethal force should only be available when ultimately determined necessary.”

“Traffic enforcement should not be conducted by armed officers.”

Approximately 20% of responses supported **increased and ongoing training**, particularly in **de-escalation strategies** (15%).

“Safety on a level of equality which involves a huge amount of training and self reflection. Officers need to have an adequate education and money should be spend for ongoing training and supervision and not for weapons!”

“The police should be the last resort and be experts on de-escalation.”

“Training will be an important and required function for all police members. New hires will be thoroughly vetted, tested on conscious and unconscious biases and other measures and will be retested and trained on these throughout their careers.”

Approximately 17% supported a police force with improved **accountability** and **transparency**.

“Elected citizen oversight committee with power to remove police officers from active duty as well as assign special prosecutors in cases needing additional oversight.”

“There should be data tracking for police activities and interactions with the public which is open and available to all. The process to remove officers that do not meet these high standards will be reasonable and timely, so that the public is assured of the force's accountability.”

“Limit the power of police unions that protect the blue wall, no matter the indiscretion or how egregious the act”

“full transparency about police actions that is easily accessible to the community (shootings, detainments, arrests, stops, searches, everything they do on the job)... make sure cops who have unjustly harmed community members are immediately investigated, charged, fired, and cannot reapply at other police departments, and ensure police unions do not have the power to cover up crimes committed by fellow officers or hold more power than community members.”

Recommendations

The exploratory *TFQ* survey represents an excellent first step in identifying areas of interest for the task force. Next steps should ideally include developing a follow-up survey using the themes summarized in this report. The follow-up survey should be administered both to willing respondents of the current *TFQ* as well as to additional members of the general public to most effectively identify the concerns, needs, and priorities of Denver citizens.

Impact Quotes

The following quotes are reproduced verbatim from responses to the *TFQ*. Quotation marks have been added to distinguish responses, but no other formatting changes have been made.

Problematic Policing Practices

“Their fear kills us”

“Everything”

“I think we’re at a point where we need to reevaluate everything.”

“Every practice that involves the Police interacting with the public except in the case of a mass shooter.”

“Systemic racial profiling, targeting people of color, violence against protestors, militarized police force, feeling that they are not accountable for their actions”

“No accountability, minimal oversight. The ever-present systemic racism. Militarization.”

“Undue focus on BIPOC people and the poor outcomes from those encounters. Police harassment and bullying. Militarization (equipment, recruitment, training and response). Using police for mental health crisis response. High rate of police who are themselves in crisis (high rates of divorce, substance abuse and suicide) trying to respond to crises among the citizenry. Training for self-protection rather than public safety (eg. shooting center mass). Everybody carrying guns, clubs and handcuffs as their primary tools. Police unions and qualified immunity. Training for teamwork over public protection. Lying and fabricating evidence to cover mistakes. Officers in the schools, particularly with guns.”

Systemic racial discrimination (any POC) (39%)

“I do not know the terms but violence against people of color needs to stop.”

“systemic racism (under the proper definition of the racism existing in policies, not necessarily within the officers), excessive force and escalation esp with regard to racism, all officers carrying firearms, officers responding to calls where no policing is necessary, such as homeless situations that are not violent or involve illegal drugs, etc.”

“overpolicing Black and Brown neighborhoods and people”

“Disproportionate policing of black and brown people of color. Disproportionate time spent by police on less serious, misdemeanor crimes.”

“I have African-American friends who have been pulled over for being Black. This seems to be a huge problem.”

“Stopping young Black men for "suspicious" behavior is problematic”

“Racial profiling--I would have been Elijah McClain and i would be dead if my skin were black. We need to understand racial bias and get training, etc.”

Criminalization of homelessness (14%)

“Harassing homeless citizens and stealing their property. Seeing this happen in the middle of winter is even more insidious.”

“Over policing and under serving our homeless population.”

“violent sweeping of the homeless camps (where else are they supposed to go?)”

“Why are the police not working hand and hand with the homeless. They should be talking to them everyday in a constructive manner!”

Criminalization of addiction (5%)

“Police outfitted with guns, etc responding to mental health, addiction and homelessness crises.”

“Racial biases, excessive force, excessive response to protests, and criminalization of homelessness, addiction and mental illness.”

Inappropriate use of force/brutality (34%)

“Too many guns! Too much violence. They prepare for violent interactions and that’s what they’re trained to do and what they give us. Racial profiling must stop.”

“Racial profiling and excessive force on certain detainees is the biggest problem”

“Dial back application of force by a thousand. If police are so afraid so often that they have to shoot this much, they aren’t good candidates. No bad eggs. Police are not executioners—even guilty people should not be murdered.”

At peaceful protests (12%)

“Disproportionately targeting BIPOC. Aggressive responses to things that don't require aggressive behavior, i.e. tear gassing and shooting rubber bullets at peaceful protestors.”

“That police show up with riot gear to peaceful protests, and have used force after being called names, like insecure high school bullies with power.”

“Every single thing about protest enforcement. They have too much gear, they use it too enthusiastically, they show up in numbers much too large and escalate tension on purpose, they intentionally escalate by lining up in random places knowing protestors will confront them, they have no restraint when deploying chemical weapons, they are eager to pose with and swing batons. Nothing about protest enforcement is even remotely acceptable.”

“Do not infringe on rights to public protest. Stop using tear gas and pepper spray on protestors.”

Increased militarization and use of militarized weaponry (21%)

“Training practices that reinforce violent behavior, and the ideology of police as an insurgent army. Using any terms such as “war on drugs” or “war on terror” or any such neo-con vocabulary is inherently problematic.”

“Police should not be outfitted like soldiers—they are civilians too.”

“I am uncomfortable with the military gear (armored trucks, SWAT gear, etc.) that was deployed during June demonstrations. Doesn't this encourage military-style responses to situations in which perhaps other responses would be better?”

“The militarization is abhorrent. The prevailing attitude in training and otherwise that the police force is at war with citizens.”

“I personally have not had issues with my local police. That said, I don't want to see police in riot gear at peaceful marches or protest. I don't want to see military grade equipment at peaceful marches and protest.”

Inadequate training (any) (16%) - including racial bias (5%)

“They should have years of training like in Norway, not a mere 1000 hours—that's 6 months at 40 hours a week. During training, eliminate the abusive, alienating practice of convincing cops everyone is against them and protecting each other is more important than community well being.”

“Denver police should be required to go through racial bias training in addition to building skills in problem-solving, conflict mediation, and de-escalation tactics.”

“I don't have a problem with the police, I have a problem with administration and the lack of support and training they give their officers.”

“police training is way too short (should be a two-year program with A LOT of implicit bias, history of race in America, and empathy training)”

“street officers lacking training in domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking; lack of training around strangulation in gender violence”

De-escalation (10%)

“Lack of training (especially rigorous training around de-escalation and seeing people as non-threatening)”

“lack of training to de-escalate social problems”

“lack of adequate and relevant training; training to use a lethal weapon against people but not to first de-escalate”

Accountability and transparency (15%)

“The violence and aggression with little to no accountability. The entitled attitude of some to do whatever they want because they have a gun and a badge.”

“Insufficient culture of fellow officer accountability for legal and ethical behavior.”

“No repercussions for public acts of harassment towards BIPOC in our communities”

“Denver police are lacking accountability and transparency. To build trust, there must be consequences and the public must have information. Accountability systems should be directed by the communities that police departments are supposed to protect and serve.”

“Police should be held accountable by outside agencies, police should not police themselves. Police should not be punished or “outed” for whistle blowing on fellow problematic officers. Police should act on genuine threats to the community, not arbitrary application of outdated laws or assumptions of guilt.”

Too Many Roles

“Stop asking police to be health care, mental health, family counselors, etc. they aren’t trained for it and it shows.”

“Police Officers are asked to do too much and wear too many hats. They cannot be adequately trained in 100 different areas.”

“The fact that the police are expected to solve every problem in society”

“Police militarization. Expecting armed officers to solve problems that they are not tooled for or prepared to handle. Lack of accountability.”

“Use of police where social workers and trained counselors would be of better use.”

“Lack of training, police are given too broad a list of responsibilities and expectations, views of police as “authority/“militant” rather than “public servant/helpers,” focus on drug crimes.”

“Police responding to mental health/drug issues are not adequately trained nor have the support/equipment to do so. This situations often result in poor outcomes.”

What should the public safety model look like?

“Actual public safety”

“Smart and communicative”

“Empathy over brutality”

“It should be fair, honest, and accountable to us the people that they serve.”

“Smaller police force with fewer weapons and more training on racial bias and de-escalation. Specialized groups that respond to mental health crises, overdoses and homeless issues.”

“Community Resources specific to communities “

“Have the police handle serious crimes and support the deployment of mental health workers and other community resources for many less-serious crimes.”

“Better coordination among police, mental health professionals, drug addiction counselors, and social services to provide the appropriate response to various situations such as dealing with mentally ill people.”

“A system that creates advocates for our "problematic" citizens. Better mental health services and drug rehab that is free to help people. A real way to help our displaced and homeless citizens. EDUCATION!! A SYSTEM THAT WORKS FOR EVERYONE.”

“Address the root cause of crimes at a community level. Invest in community programs and services that respond to crises other than the police (mental health care professionals, nurses, family counselors, child advocates, drug rehab professionals, etc. invest in economic development, education, and health care in desperate communities.”

“Mental health supports and assistance for the homeless should not be done by police. Traffic enforcement should not be conducted by armed officers. Community involvement is key and poor and minority neighborhoods should be treated with the same respect and cooperation that white neighborhoods are.”

“Community based, nonviolent approaches founded in de-escalation, mutual aid, and providing resources”

“Community effort, not just one entity. The police should be the last resort and be experts on de-escalation.”

“Safety on a level of equality which involves a huge amount of training and self reflection. Officers need to have an adequate education and money should be spend for ongoing training and supervision and not for weapons!”

“Elected citizen oversight committee with power to remove police officers from active duty as well as assign special prosecutors in cases needing additional oversight.”

“Communities should be policed by people who live in the community. If you are not a Denver resident, you should not be a Denver cop. Also racial demographics should match those of the county. Currently the police force is too white to adequately police the diverse community of Denver.”

“Community officer social workers to handle most calls without weapons and aggression. Other community minded liaisons to take down info and make reposts of non-violent crimes to work through the system toward an actual end of betterment of individuals and community.”

“Police should be used to help the public in a more narrow and clearly defined way to reduce crime and increase the safety of the entire public. Other community programs and groups should take care of non-threatening/violent issues concerning mental illness, illegal drug and alcohol abuse, some domestic disturbance and public disturbances so that the police force can focus more specifically on dangerous crime. The police culture will need a complete overhaul to one that the public can support and see as a valuable part of the community, not a threat. We should look into truly non-lethal means of protection for our police force, and the use of lethal force should only be available when ultimately determined necessary. There should be data tracking for police activities and interactions with the public which is open and available to all. The process to remove officers that do not meet these high standards will be reasonable and timely, so that the public is assured of the force's accountability. Training will be an important and required function for all police members. New hires will be thoroughly vetted, tested on conscious and unconscious biases and other measures and will be retested and trained on these throughout their careers.”

“full transparency about police actions that is easily accessible to the community (shootings, detainments, arrests, stops, searches, everything they do on the job), much more involvement of various social workers and other groups who are highly trained in de-escalation tactics, demilitarization (police can no longer have full riot gear, use of lethal weapons should be kept to an absolute minimum), ensure that police no longer have immunity, make it easy for families who have been wronged by police to seek justice (through payment, access to legal and supportive resources), make sure cops who have unjustly harmed community members are immediately investigated, charged, fired, and cannot reapply at other police departments, and ensure police unions do not have the power to cover up crimes committed by fellow officers or hold more power than community members.”

“Limit the tasks that police are asked to perform. Engage specialists in mental health, homelessness, and addiction when the situation does not create risk of harm to anyone. Send them on a 911 call before you send the police who use violence as a default response.

Respected, well known members of the community must be able to compel accountability and transparency with clearly defined power and authority through oversight boards. Rather than recommendations to be considered, the board must have a vote that can determine the outcome or direction of a case.

A paradigm shift must occur where police no longer engage in a “us vs them” scenario. Warriors need not apply. Only Protectors needed.

Police have been told that their primary responsibility is to return to home safely. Their primary responsibility is to protect the public. With the return home safely mantra, police are told better to be tried by 12 rather than carried by 6. In effect, better to shoot first and leave the outcome to a jury. Philosophy of policing must be examined and challenged.

Limit the power of police unions that protect the blue wall, no matter the indiscretion or how egregious the act”

Task Force Questionnaire to Reimagine Policing in Denver

There is an effort to develop a community-led task force to reimagine policing and public safety in Denver. The goal at this time is to obtain input from the YOU, our community, about the work and composition of the task force. Please complete the questions below to share your ideas, your recommendations for who should be on the task force, your interest in joining this effort, and any other suggestions.

Thank you for your participation in this critical mission to transform Public Safety in Denver.

1. What is your email address*
2. List current policing practices that are problematic to you.
3. What should Denver's public safety model look like?
4. What ideas or suggestions would you like the task force to consider?
5. What organizations or entities do you believe should have representation on the task force?
6. Are you interested in working with the community to reimagine policing in Denver?
7. What is your name*
8. What is your phone number*
9. Anything else you would like to add?

Tonight's hosts: The Denver Citizen's Oversight Board, the Greater Metro Denver Ministerial Alliance, the Interfaith Alliance of Colorado, and the Conflict Center, THANK YOU for joining the conversation and for sharing your thoughts. Let's do this!

**Responses were redacted prior to analysis*