

2026

DC PUBLIC SAFETY POLICY AGENDA

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Executive Summary

True safety for everyone in DC is possible. Advocates, community members, and researchers have spent years making clear what it requires.

This Agenda begins with the premise that public safety is more than the absence of crime, and that people are truly safe only when their needs are met, structural inequities do not determine who lives free and healthy, and communities have real power over the systems that shape their lives. Developed by DC Justice Lab and informed by nearly 30 organizations working in DC, this document puts forward 70 recommendations across four priority areas.

Invest in Safe and Thriving Communities

Surviving violence is often the continuation or the beginning of a long encounter with systems that were designed to help but frequently fall short. The first priority area addresses what survivors actually need in the immediate aftermath of harm, and in the months and years that follow. It calls for direct, flexible cash assistance delivered through trusted community organizations; local control of DC's Crime Victims Compensation Program, which is currently run by a federal court with limited DC accountability; and increased, sustained funding across the District's victim services, justice grants, and access to justice portfolios.

Behavioral health, harm reduction, and economic stability are woven throughout this chapter as public safety priorities. DC leads the nation in overdose deaths per capita while offering insufficient safeguards to address these preventable deaths. TANF cuts set to take effect in October 2026 will reduce benefits for more than 16,000 families, disproportionately Black, women-led households. A reparations task force the DC Council unanimously voted to create and fund sits unfunded. Ward-level behavioral health clinics, 24/7 harm reduction centers, medical debt reform, and financial empowerment for residents navigating economic instability and reentry are among the recommendations this section advances.

Protect and Invest in DC's Young People

When the Youth Power and Safety Collective convened young people and asked what safety looks like to them, they did not define safety as juvenile curfews or police in schools. They asked for mental health support, safe spaces, year-round employment, and violence interruption programs. DC has too often responded to young people's presence in public life as a problem to be managed.

This chapter is built around what young people have said they need. It calls for reviving the Youth Advisory Council with real governing authority; removing police from schools and replacing them with behavioral health professionals and restorative justice practitioners; decriminalizing truancy; and protecting young people from local and federal law enforcement contact. For young people already in the justice system, it presses for an end to detention for technical violations, automatic and immediate juvenile record sealing, and continuous education access wherever a young person is in the system. Full implementation of the Youth Rehabilitation Act Strategic Plan would address the needs of young adults entrenched in the adult legal system.

Advance Community Safety

DC has produced plans to reduce gun violence. It has created commissions and entire offices. None have been fully implemented. This chapter presses for a funded, data-driven Districtwide violence reduction strategy that brings community violence intervention organizations, behavioral health providers, hospital-based violence intervention programs, and victim services into a coordinated ecosystem with stable multi-year funding and independent leadership.

On policing, the chapter urges limits on and protections when police contact occurs through mandatory citation and release, expanded pre-arrest diversion, non-police traffic enforcement alternatives, a ban on jump-out searches, and a staffing realignment supported by the DC Auditor's findings. On accountability, it calls for full funding and defense of the Comprehensive Policing and Justice Reform Amendment Act and for ending qualified immunity. On federal overreach, it calls on the next Mayor to rescind the order on cooperation with federal agencies, strengthen the Sanctuary Values Act, and build documentation processes that make accountability possible.

Reduce Incarceration, Improve Conditions, and Support Reentry

DC incarcerates too many people, for too long, in conditions that harm rather than rehabilitate, and then fails them when they come home. Despite being less than 45 percent of DC's population, Black residents make up roughly 90 percent of people in DC's correctional system. That is the result of policy choices, and it can be changed by policy.

The fourth priority area recommends repealing policies that have grown the jail population without improving public safety. It presses the District to address the dangerous conditions across all adult and youth detention facilities, including prohibiting solitary confinement; to improve care for pregnant women and new mothers in DOC and DYRS custody; and to improve support for DC residents in federal custody.

The longer-term work is a plan to return local control of the justice system to DC, while resisting efforts to expand federal control.

More than 2,000 DC residents return from incarceration each year to services that are too small, too short, and too fragmented to give them a real path forward. This chapter presses DC to implement and expand record relief, reform community supervision so it functions as support instead of a trap, protect returning citizens from discrimination, and fund reentry services at the scale and duration that produce positive outcomes. People with conviction histories need human rights protections in employment and housing.

Few of these recommendations are new. Community members have been pushing for them. DC is at the point of action, and the question before its elected leaders is whether they will meet it.

Acknowledgments

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Fair Budget Coalition
Free Minds Book Club
Institute for the Black World
More than Our Crimes
National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens
Neighbors for Justice
Open City Advocates
Peace for DC
Reframe Health and Justice
School Justice Project
The Second Look Project
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