



One city for all people

The Metro Human Relations Commission's Response to the "Nashville and Its Peers: Policing and Public Safety" Report

June 29, 2026

Introduction and Purpose

The Metro Human Relations Commission (MHRC) has reviewed the Nashville Police + Public Safety Alliance's latest report titled "*Nashville and Its Peers: Policing and Public Safety*,"¹ published by Buntin Consulting in May 2026. The report seeks to assess the Metro Nashville Police Department (MNPd) in relation to nine other cities: Austin, Charlotte, Columbus, Denver, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Louisville, Memphis, and Raleigh; namely through an examination of (1) crime trends, (2) budget and staffing, (3) technology use, and (4) officer compensation.

The Metro Human Relations Commission welcomes continued public discussion regarding public safety in Nashville and recognizes the value of examining Nashville's practices alongside other jurisdictions. At the same time, we believe the report's analysis is fundamentally flawed in its framing, methodology and scope. In particular, the report does not account for the broader social, economic, historical, and community factors necessary to understand public safety outcomes or evaluate the relative effectiveness of different policy approaches.

Over the past several years, MHRC has convened and participated in numerous public forums examining the future of public safety, including the 2020 Community Safety Town Hall Series conducted in partnership with the Community Oversight Board and the Commission's 2021 Reimagining Public Safety Forum. These efforts intentionally sought perspectives from communities that are often absent from policy discussions despite being among those most affected by both violence and public safety interventions.

Across these conversations, residents consistently identified concerns that extended beyond traditional policing metrics. Participants discussed housing instability, mental health, economic opportunity, community trust, accountability, racial equity, youth

¹ Summary report and full version available at: <https://www.thenashvillealliance.org/nashville-and-its-peers-policing-and-public-safety>



One city for all people

opportunity, and the need to address the root causes of violence rather than focusing solely on its symptoms.

These conversations raise a fundamental question that is largely absent from the report: What do we mean by public safety, and who gets to define it?

The Commission's mission is to protect the welfare of all people in Nashville and Davidson County while ensuring that those who have historically been excluded from decision-making processes have a voice in public policy discussions. To this end, before evaluating any report on policing, its data, recommendations, or comparisons with peer cities, we must first ask a more fundamental question: What is the institution we are evaluating, and how did it come to be?

The MHRC believes that data presented without such historical context is not analysis; rather, it is a selective reading of the present that obscures the historical context that produced it. When a report uses crime statistics to benchmark one city against another, or cites technology adoption rates as evidence of institutional progress, it implicitly assumes that the systems generating those numbers are neutral². The history of American policing demonstrates otherwise. Understanding where policing came from, who built it, whose interests it served, and who has borne its costs is a prerequisite for honest policymaking. Without that understanding, we risk reproducing, through new technologies, the same patterns of racialized social control that have shaped American law enforcement since its origins.

Below we outline several of our major concerns, including how the report frames surveillance technology, several methodological concerns, and a broad concern regarding the genesis and source of the report.

² "To predict the future under status quo conditions is simply to project history forward... Bias in, bias out", writes Sandra Mayson in "Bias in, bias out." The Yale Law Journal (2019): 2218-2300.



One city for all people

Defining Public Safety

One of the report's central assumptions is that improvements in policing capacity are synonymous with improvements in public safety. While staffing levels, response times, investigative resources, and technology have some empirical evidence suggesting they contribute to public safety, they are not themselves measures of safety.

A resident who is stably housed^{3,4}, food secure^{5,6}, able to access mental health care^{7,8}, connected to educational⁹ and economic¹⁰ opportunity, and living in a neighborhood characterized by trust¹¹ and social cohesion¹² is often safer than one who merely resides in a jurisdiction with greater surveillance capacity¹³.

Public safety therefore encompasses far more than law enforcement activity. It is shaped by housing, health, economic stability, educational opportunity, transportation access, community trust, and the strength of local institutions.

Viewed through this broader lens, several of the report's recommendations warrant closer examination.

Surveillance Technology Framing

The report repeatedly characterizes Nashville as an “outlier” because of its limited use of certain law enforcement technologies. Specifically, it focuses on three tools that are not currently employed by MNPd:

³ Jacobs, Leah A, and Aaron Gottlieb. “THE EFFECT OF HOUSING CIRCUMSTANCES ON RECIDIVISM: Evidence From a Sample of People on Probation in San Francisco.” *Criminal Justice and Behavior* vol. 47,9 (2020): 1097-1115.

⁴ Ellsworth, Joshua T. “Housing and criminality: The effect of housing placement on arrests among chronically homeless adults.” *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness* 31.2 (2022): 130-141.

⁵ DiFiore, Gabrielle et al. “Associations Between Food Insecurity and Neighborhood Safety, Social Cohesion, Social Control, and Crime Among Mothers of Preschool-Aged Children.” *Journal of health care for the poor and underserved* vol. 33,3 (2022): 1258-1274.

⁶ Singleton, Chelsea R. “Exploring the interconnectedness of Crime and Nutrition: Current evidence and recommendations to Advance Nutrition Equity Research.” *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* 124.10 (2024): 1249-1254.

⁷ Heller, Sara B., et al. “Thinking, fast and slow? Some field experiments to reduce crime and dropout in Chicago.” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 132.1 (2017): 1-54.

⁸ Bondurant, Samuel R., Jason M. Lindo, and Isaac D. Swensen. “Substance abuse treatment centers and local crime.” *Journal of Urban Economics* 104 (2018): 124-133.

⁹ Swisher, Raymond R, and Christopher R Dennison. “Educational Pathways and Change in Crime Between Adolescence and Early Adulthood.” *The Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* vol. 53,6 (2016): 840-871.

¹⁰ Love, Hanna, Liu, Amy, and Bethany Krupicka. “The path to public safety requires economic opportunity: Trends and solutions in urban, suburban, and rural communities”. Brookings Institute.

¹¹ Maxwell, Christopher D., Joel H. Garner, and Wesley G. Skogan. “Collective efficacy and violence in Chicago neighborhoods: A reproduction.” *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 34.3 (2018): 245-265.

¹² Ayer, Sophie M., et al. “From broken windows to busy streets: A community empowerment perspective.” *Health Education & Behavior* 42.2 (2015): 137-147.



.....

One city for all people

1. Real-time video and data-integration platforms (such as Fusus), which, according to the report, every other “peer” city cited in the report uses,
2. Automated License Plate Readers (LPRs), which eight of nine “peer” cities use, and
3. Gunshot Detection Systems (GDS).

The report traces Nashville's contentious recent history on these issues: an LPR pilot program launched in 2023, which was not continued; a proposed Fusus contract rejected by the Metro Council in December 2024 by a narrow margin; and a proposal to route \$15 million through the Downtown Partnership to purchase a similar platform, LeoSight, also rejected by the Council in late 2025. As of early 2026, the construct of surveillance technology remains unresolved by Metro Council.

The report acknowledges legitimate concerns raised by civil liberties groups, advocates, lawyers, activists, and academics. These concerns include documented instances of LPR data being accessed by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)¹⁴, disproportionate deployment in communities of color¹⁵, and inadequate long-term safeguards¹⁶.

Nevertheless, the report argues that not adopting these technologies carries real costs, including slower recovery of stolen vehicles, lower case-clearance rates, fewer solved crimes, delayed evidence collection, reduced situational awareness for officers, increased risks to first responders and the public, and greater operational burdens on police departments.

The Metro Human Relations Commission does not dismiss the legitimate public safety concerns addressed in the Buntin report. We recognize that many of the neighborhoods experiencing the highest rates of gun violence in Nashville have also endured decades of economic disinvestment¹⁷ and structural inequality¹⁸. Their safety is not a secondary concern. But at the same time, the history of American policing requires us to ask an

¹³ Minocher, Xerxes, and Caelyn Randall. "Predictable policing: New technology, old bias, and future resistance in big data surveillance." *Convergence* 26.5-6 (2020): 1108-1124.

¹⁴ <https://www.404media.co/ice-taps-into-nationwide-ai-enabled-camera-network-data-shows/>
<https://www.aclu-tn.org/news/documents-reveal-ice-using-driver-location-data-local-police-deportations/>

¹⁵ <https://epic.org/issues/democracy-free-speech/privacy-and-racial-justice/>

¹⁶ Wang, Xukang et al. "Beyond surveillance: privacy, ethics, and regulations in face recognition technology." *Frontiers in Big Data* vol. 7 1337465. 3 Jul. 2024

¹⁷ Zare, Hossein, et al. "Understanding the Influence of Income Inequality and Violent Crime on Police Fatal Shootings in US Counties: 2015—2022." *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* (2026): 1-17.

¹⁸ Armstead, Theresa L et al. "Structural and social determinants of inequities in violence risk: A review of indicators." *Journal of community psychology* vol. 49,4 (2021): 878-906.



.....

One city for all people

important question: if data-driven tools such as LPRs, GDS, drones, and integrated surveillance platforms are built upon statistical foundations shaped by historically unequal enforcement practices, what assurances do we have that expanding those tools will not deepen the inequities they are intended to address?

The Commission's concerns are not theoretical. They are grounded in documented evidence, including instances of LPR data being accessed by ICE, disproportionate deployment in communities of color, and insufficient oversight mechanisms. These are not hypothetical risks, but rather post-modern manifestations of longstanding patterns that have shaped law enforcement practices for generations.

As such, the Commission believes the framing of Nashville as an “outlier” for not adopting surveillance technology deserves scrutiny. According to the report's own findings, Nashville experienced a **34% decline in homicides** during 2025, significantly exceeding the peer city average decline of approximately 21%. Violent crime decreased by roughly 14%, and property crime fell by approximately 12%, with both categories dropping below pre-pandemic levels for the first time. Importantly, these improvements occurred **without** the surveillance infrastructure that the report presents as essential.

As a result, the report's findings raise questions about its underlying assumption that Nashville's public safety outcomes are being constrained by the absence of these technologies. In fact, what Nashville **has** demonstrated is that meaningful reductions in crime can be achieved without requiring communities of color to bear the documented risks associated with expansive surveillance systems.

To use LPRs as a case study, the report introduces conflicting arguments about their efficacy, stating both that LPRs have “a broader evidence base” that “appear[s] to match up well with Nashville's current crime challenges”, while simultaneously acknowledging that “there is little evidence that LPRs reduce crime and even less is known about their impact on solve/clearance rate”. This conflict, to MHRC, does not suggest that Nashville is “at odds with an emerging national consensus”, as the report contends; rather, it demonstrates that a careful approach is warranted, justified, and requisite.

One need look no further than one of Nashville's “peer cities”, Austin, which entered a contract with Flock for LPRs, for a cautionary tale. Following pushback from residents who were concerned that LPR data could be shared with federal immigration agents and that



One city for all people

the tech was being used as a dragnet, the city ended its contract. **Even then**, in the absence of LPRs on city roads, Austin’s police department continues to use cameras used by neighboring agencies, a “major gap” that violates guardrails that their city council implemented¹⁹.

The Commission does not contend that technology can never contribute positively to public safety. Rather, we believe Nashville is exercising the type of deliberate, community-accountable judgment that effective governance demands. Austin serves as a cautionary tale that Nashville has thus far been careful to avoid.

The Commission is particularly concerned that the report presents an implicit choice between adopting additional surveillance technologies and accepting diminished public safety outcomes. This framing creates a false dichotomy.

The relevant question is not whether Nashville should invest in surveillance technology or do nothing. Rather, it is whether scarce public resources should be directed toward surveillance systems or toward alternative investments that address the conditions that contribute to violence in the first place.

Missing from the report is any meaningful comparison between surveillance technologies and other evidence-based public safety interventions such as violence interruption programs²⁰, youth employment initiatives²¹, affordable housing²², behavioral health services^{7,8}, substance use treatment²³, food security programs^{5,6}, and trauma-informed victim support²⁴.

By limiting its analysis primarily to policing interventions, the report narrows the range of solutions under consideration before the discussion even begins.

¹⁹ <https://www.kut.org/crime-justice/2026-02-12/austin-tx-apd-flock-cameras-license-plate-readers>

²⁰ Ransford, Charles, Monique Williams, and Gary Slutkin. "A Systematic Review on the Effectiveness of the Cure Violence Approach." *INQUIRY: The Journal of Health Care Organization, Provision, and Financing* 62 (2025): 00469580251366142.

²¹ Heller, Sara, and Harold Pollack. "The Effects of Summer Jobs on Youth Violence". United States Department of Justice Grant 2012-MU-FX-0002.

²² Austin, Anna E et al. "Affordable housing through the low-income housing tax credit program and intimate partner violence-related homicide." *Preventive medicine* vol. 155 (2022)

²³ Chermack, Stephen T et al. "Developing an Integrated Violence Prevention for Men and Women in Treatment for Substance Use Disorders." *Journal of interpersonal violence* vol. 32,4 (2017): 581-603

²⁴ Ross, Nancy, Catrina Brown, and Marjorie Johnstone. "Beyond medicalized approaches to violence and trauma: Empowering social work practice." *Journal of Social Work* 23.3 (2023): 567-585.



.....

One city for all people

Methodological Concerns

UCR Data Comparison

The report's central premise, that 'peer cities' can be compared to one another using crime statistics, is flawed on multiple levels, some of which the report itself acknowledges. For its crime data, the report relies on UCR Part 1 Crime Data, which local jurisdictions submit to the FBI. Despite the report noting that "the FBI cautions against using these numbers to compare crimes across jurisdictions", the report encourages this analysis by placing peer cities in charts and tables with one another. While Buntin notes in an appendix that "Most charts in the report present information on how crime trends are changing over time. Readers should focus on changes in trends over time. They should be more cautious about cross-city comparisons," it is unreasonable to present charts with multiple 'peer cities' and claim that they should not be compared²⁵. The structure of this report encourages this comparison, whether Buntin intended to do so or not.

The concern is not merely technical. If the data themselves are unsuitable for comparative rankings, then recommendations built upon comparative rankings should be approached with caution.

"Peer City" Selection

The report goes on to note that by presenting analyses on just a "small set of peer cities... [who] almost certainly have significant reporting differences", some of the peer comparison issues are mitigated. This calls into question why cities with "significant [crime reporting] differences" were chosen, but putting this point aside, even the selection criteria for peer cities is also frustratingly vague. While the report identifies that "geography, city and metro size, demographics, median income, crime levels, and government structure" were used, these factors were not applied equally. If they were, how could a city like Austin be chosen despite the fact that the report states that it "is a wealthier city than Nashville? Its demographics are also different, and it has close economic ties to larger cities such as Houston and Dallas-Fort Worth. Nevertheless, Austin is invariably included as a point of

²⁵ In fact, research has shown that "People may not make the most valuable or informative comparisons when they view a visualization. Instead, they may group, select, and compare elements based on low-level visual features like spatial proximity, color, and size". See: Bearfield, Cindy Xiong, et al. "What does the chart say? Grouping cues guide viewer comparisons and conclusions in bar charts." IEEE Transactions on Visualization and Computer Graphics 30.8 (2023): 5097-5110.



.....
One city for all people

reference, particularly by Nashville’s business community.” It is unclear how the business community’s perception of a city matters regarding public safety.

Guardrail Legislation

While the report champions Metro Council’s BL2025-690 at length, it fails to address state legislation passed in 2025 restricting the protections afforded by Metro’s bill. The "Tennessee Information Protection Act"²⁶ affords data companies (those who predominantly sell and operate technology such as LPRs or gunshot detection systems) the freedom to “Cooperate with law enforcement agencies concerning conduct or activity that the controller or processor reasonably and in good faith believes may violate federal, state, or local laws, rules, or regulations”.

Practically, this allows these companies to share information with law enforcement if they believe a law is violated in their footage. It is not difficult to imagine justifications that could thus override the well-intentioned protections outlined in BL2025-690. Presenting BL2025-690 as evidence that additional technology would not be weaponized or abused is at best naïve to state legislation that preempts local efforts at salvaging protections.

Governance, Representation, and Public Accountability

The Commission's most significant concern is not methodological but democratic.

The Nashville Police + Public Safety Alliance has every right to commission research and advocate for particular policy outcomes. However, reports that seek to influence public expenditures and public policy should be evaluated not only by what data they contain, but also by whose perspectives shaped them.

The report largely reflects the perspectives of business leaders, law enforcement stakeholders, and civic institutions. While these perspectives are important, they do not represent the full range of communities affected by public safety decisions.

Missing are many of the residents who experience both the highest levels of victimization and the greatest exposure to law enforcement intervention, including residents of historically marginalized neighborhoods, public housing residents, immigrant communities, youth, survivors of violence, individuals experiencing homelessness,

²⁶ <https://www.capitol.tn.gov/Bills/113/Bill/HB1181.pdf>



.....
One city for all people

violence interruption practitioners, and those with lived experience navigating the criminal legal system.

This omission matters because public safety decisions are ultimately decisions about public resources.

MHRC's role is not to determine which stakeholder group is correct. Rather, our role is to ensure that communities historically excluded from policymaking processes have a meaningful voice in shaping decisions that affect their lives. The Commission is uniquely positioned to convene those voices and to facilitate conversations that extend beyond traditional institutional stakeholders.

Conclusion and Roadmap

Public and community safety are both paramount issues for all Nashvillians to consider. Entities such as police, courts and sheriffs have historically dominated the narrative on what public safety means. Community safety, as defined by Nashville's own Community Safety Task Force, is "a shared responsibility that builds on the strengths, relationships and resilience of our communities so people of all ages can thrive in body, mind and spirit, with effective, accessible trauma support when harm occurs."²⁷ Relying solely on flawed statistics and police-driven narratives, as the report in question does, captures only a portion of the whole picture. We strongly encourage city leaders to listen not only to public safety agencies and their spokespeople, but also to those who have been impacted by violence and continue to feel its impact.

Nashville is not lacking advisory bodies focused on safety. What remains less clear is whether existing structures consistently incorporate the voices of residents and communities most affected by both violence and public safety interventions. The MHRC stands ready to contribute by convening and amplifying the voices diverse communities to these conversations.

The Commission's experience conducting the Community Safety Town Halls and Reimagining Public Safety Forum demonstrated that many residents who are directly impacted by violence, housing instability, mental health crises, language barriers, immigration concerns, and over-policing are often absent from formal policymaking

²⁷ <https://nashvillebanner.com/2026/06/12/nashville-severe-weather-chance-community-safety-task-force/>



.....

One city for all people

processes. While institutional stakeholders possess valuable expertise, lived experience is also a form of expertise that should inform public safety decision-making.

MHRC recommends expanding and strengthening existing public safety engagement structures to ensure meaningful participation by communities historically excluded from policymaking processes.

Reports that seek to influence public spending and public policy should be evaluated not only by the quality of their data but also by the breadth of perspectives informing their recommendations. The communities most affected by violence, poverty, housing instability, mental health crises, and law enforcement interventions must have an equal opportunity to shape the policies intended to address those challenges.

The report reflects a narrow conception of public safety shaped primarily by institutional stakeholders. While crime data presents a valuable data point in the landscape of community safety, it is just one data point among many and should be treated as such. Nashville already possesses valuable expertise regarding policing and public safety operations, as exhibited by the 29-member [Community Safety Task Force](#). What is often missing are the perspectives of residents whose lived experiences reveal the root causes of violence and the conditions necessary for lasting community safety.

Determining what creates safety in Nashville requires engagement with a broader range of residents and stakeholders than are represented in either traditional public safety discussions or the report under review.

To that end, MHRC intends to continue having community conversations designed to elevate perspectives that are often underrepresented in public policy discussions. Building upon the Commission's prior Community Safety Town Halls and Reimagining Public Safety Forum, these efforts will seek input from residents, youth, immigrant and refugee communities, public housing residents, victims and survivors of violence, violence interruption practitioners, public health professionals, behavioral health providers, faith leaders, individuals with lived experience in the criminal legal system, and other stakeholders whose experiences are essential to understanding community safety.

The Commission anticipates publishing a future report that examines public safety through a broader community and equity lens, incorporating both traditional public safety



.....

One city for all people

measures and indicators related to housing stability, economic opportunity, food security, mental health, educational attainment, community trust, and neighborhood well-being.

We invite community members, public agencies, researchers, advocates, service providers, neighborhood leaders, and other interested stakeholders to participate in this process. Individuals and organizations interested in contributing to future discussions or receiving updates regarding this work are encouraged to contact MHRC staff.

The Commission believes Nashville's strongest public safety solutions will emerge not from any single institution or perspective, but from a collaborative process that reflects the experiences, expertise, and aspirations of the diverse communities that call Nashville home.