



**INVEST IN
PUBLIC
HEALTH
SOLUTIONS**

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humanimpact.org/stopcopicities

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction and background	<u>2</u>
The expansion of policing harms health	<u>5</u>
▪ Evidence-based public health solution: Invest in health instead of punishment	<u>10</u>
▪ Government actions to invest in health instead of punishment	<u>14</u>
Climate destruction created by police training facilities harms health	<u>15</u>
▪ Evidence-based public health solution: Advocate for green spaces and climate justice	<u>18</u>
▪ Government actions to advocate for green spaces and climate and environmental justice	<u>19</u>
Undermining Indigenous sovereignty harms health	<u>20</u>
▪ Evidence-based public health solution: Land back for Indigenous reparations	<u>23</u>
▪ Government actions to give Land back for Indigenous reparations	<u>25</u>
State repression of resistance to police training facilities harms health	<u>26</u>
▪ Evidence-based public health solution: Protect community power and civil rights	<u>29</u>
▪ Government actions to protect community power and civil rights	<u>31</u>
Conclusion	<u>32</u>
References	<u>33</u>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The construction of police training facilities, or “Cop Cities,” is on the rise in the US, with 69 projects currently planned across 47 states. This report examines the public health impacts of these facilities, and reveals the broader and intersecting harms that militarization and policing pose to the health of all people and our planet. We highlight the Atlanta Public Safety Training Center, a controversial 85-acre, \$109.65 million police training construction project in Atlanta, Georgia, known to community organizers as “Cop City,” to illustrate **four key pathways by which the construction of police training facilities harms health:**

- 1. The expansion of policing**
- 2. The destruction of the climate**
- 3. Undermining Indigenous sovereignty**
- 4. State repression of resistance**

Each section describes the associated public health harms, followed by **evidence-based public health solutions to promote health:**

- 1. Invest in health instead of punishment**
- 2. Advocate for green spaces and climate justice**
- 3. Land back for Indigenous reparations**
- 4. Protect community power and civil rights**



We also recommend critical actions for each pathway that federal, state, Tribal, and local governments can take to prevent ongoing and future harms to public health, improve accountability, and support community safety for all.

While this brief focuses on Atlanta’s Cop City and the current social justice movement there, we hope this research will support continued resistance to the construction of police training facilities across the US.



INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In April 2021, former Atlanta mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms announced plans to construct the Atlanta Public Safety Training Center, referred to by those organizing against it as “Cop City.” The 85-acre militarized police training facility is slated for construction within 350-acres of the Indigenous-named Weelaunee Forest (South River Forest), a natural reserve and Atlanta’s largest greenspace, which is owned by the City of Atlanta and leased to the Atlanta Police Foundation. The proposed project will funnel \$109.65 million public and private dollars toward the creation of a mock city for police to train in modern urban warfare. If constructed, Atlanta’s Cop City will be one of the largest militarized police training facilities in the US, with impacts extending far beyond the city.

Since the earliest days of the project, community resistance to the construction of Cop City has been strong. Thousands have marched and rallied in public spaces, demonstrated in front of contractors’ houses, and waited hours to provide public comment at City Council meetings to voice their opposition, with the resounding demand to Stop Cop City. City and state officials, including law enforcement, have responded with marked violence and repression, including killing a protester, raiding a community center, charging activists with domestic terrorism, and stalling a ballot referendum. The City of Atlanta appears determined to steamroll the project through, despite continued public opposition. Per the Atlanta Police Foundation, construction is underway and expected to finish in late 2024.¹

The construction of large-scale police training facilities is on the rise across the US (see Figure 1).² As of February 17, 2024, 69 police training facility projects were documented across the US, with only three states lacking plans for such construction. Of these 69 projects, 55 had confirmed costs ranging from \$999,000 to a staggering \$415 million.² The proliferation of police training facilities began as a response to the racial and social justice uprisings of 2020, aiming to increasingly militarize the police, suppress people's movements, and quell political dissent.³

Evidence suggests that racism and class disparities are driving this trend, with high-income White residents demanding increased carceral funding in municipal budgets because they feel threatened by the presence of low-income Black residents in their communities.⁴ Municipalities like Chicago, IL, have already built police training facilities despite community protest.⁵ Other municipalities, including Atlanta, GA, Fitchburg, WI, San Pablo, CA, Baltimore, MD, and Nashville, TN, are spending tens to hundreds of millions of dollars to build new police training facilities rather than investing in the community-based alternatives that have been shown to improve public health, community safety, and climate resilience.⁶

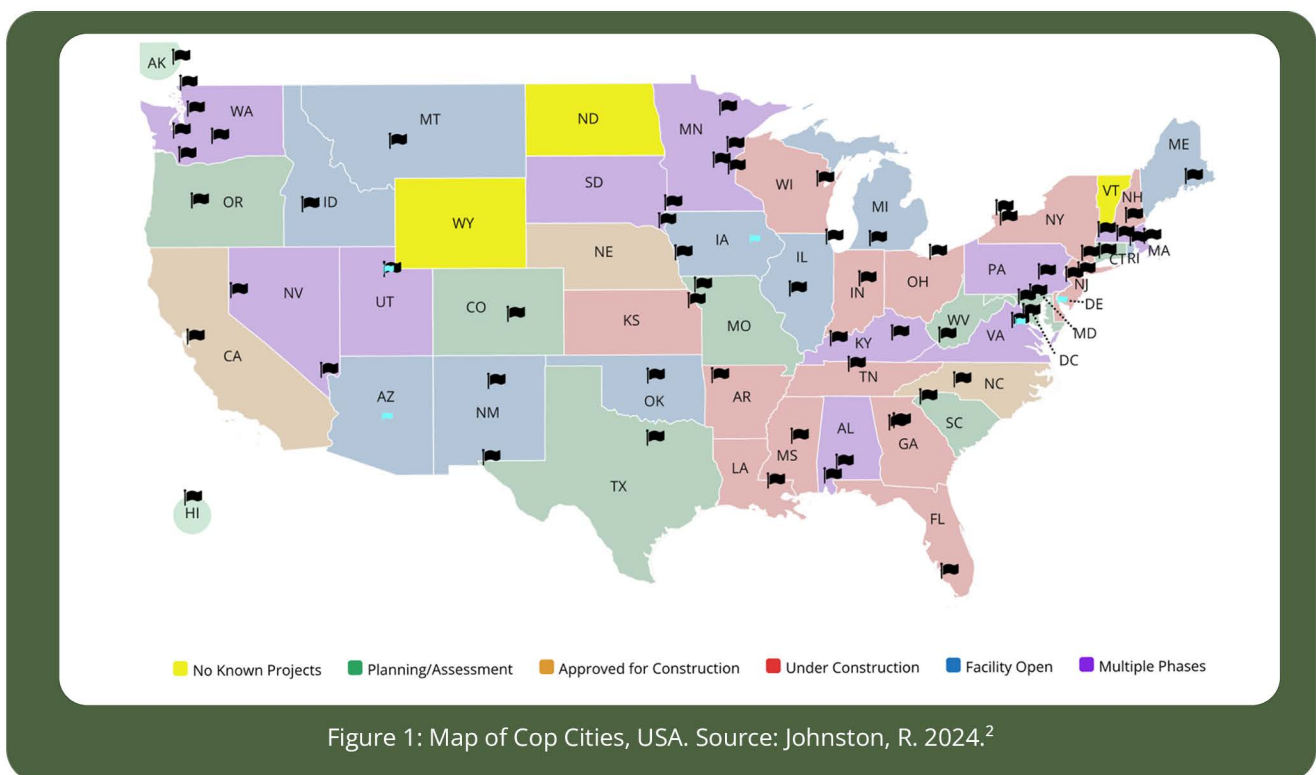
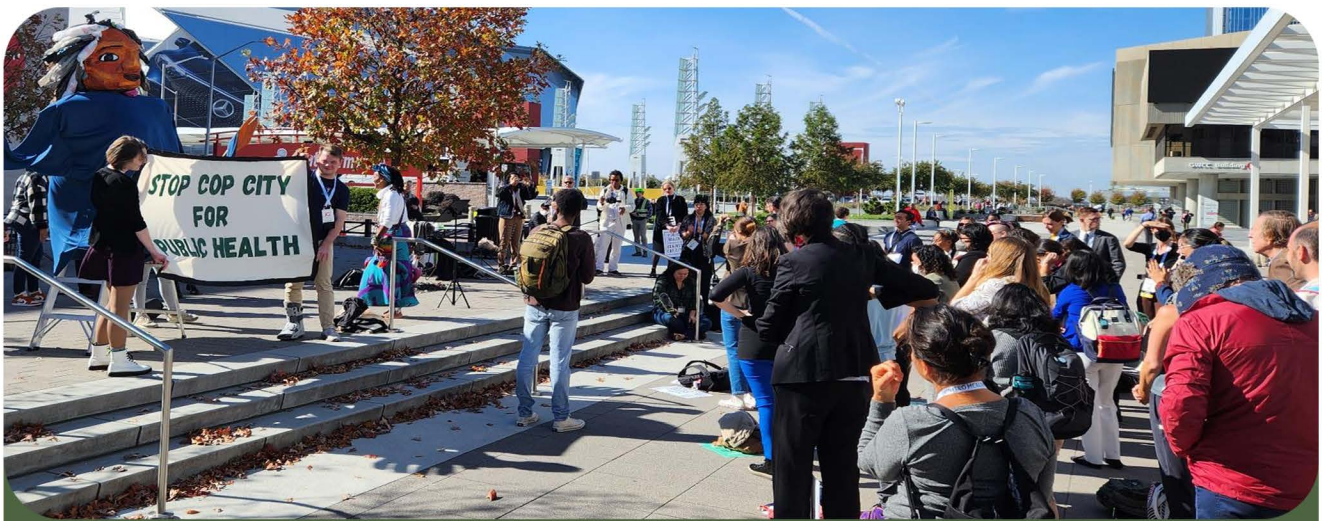


Figure 1: Map of Cop Cities, USA. Source: Johnston, R. 2024.²

This report examines the public health impacts of the construction of police training facilities. We feature Atlanta's controversial Cop City project as an example to illustrate the multiple pathways by which the construction of police training facilities harms health, via:

- 1. The expansion of policing**
- 2. The destruction of the climate**
- 3. Undermining Indigenous sovereignty**
- 4. State repression of resistance**

Though Atlanta is centered throughout because of the current social justice movement building there, our hope is that the research in this report can support resistance to the construction of police training facilities across the US. Each section on the health harms of such facilities is followed by an evidence-based public health solution to address the harm alongside action steps that federal, state, Tribal, and local governments can take to promote health instead of punishment, improve accountability, and build community safety for all.



Public health professionals organize to Stop Cop City at a rally HIP held at the American Public Health Association conference in Atlanta in 2023. Photo by Human Impact Partners



THE EXPANSION OF POLICING HARMS HEALTH

Public health research demonstrates that policing harms the health, educational development, economic well-being, civic, and social engagement of communities.

Extensive literature already demonstrates that policing³ disproportionately harms Black people, Indigenous people, people of color (BIPOC), and other marginalized communities.⁷ The proliferation of police training facilities presents a significant investment in the expansion of policing, and thus increased violence and harm to these communities. The construction of these facilities threatens to exacerbate existing racial inequities in rates of incarceration⁸ and policing,⁹ further exposing residents to health harms from the criminal legal system. For example, the expansion of policing caused by Atlanta's proposed Cop City will disproportionately impact the community surrounding the facility in DeKalb County, where 54% of the population identifies as Black.¹⁰

Public health research demonstrates that policing harms the health, educational development, economic well-being, civic, and social engagement of communities.¹¹ Additionally, policing contributes to criminalization and creates barriers to supportive social services.¹² The health harms of policing practices, such as police stops and searches,¹³ incarceration,¹⁴ and community surveillance¹⁵ are well-documented in public health literature. For example, one study of young men who were stopped by the NYPD found that those who experienced more frequent police stops reported having higher levels of trauma and anxiety than those who were stopped less frequently.¹⁶

Due to both the structural factors that lead to incarceration and the direct health harms of confinement, incarcerated people have higher rates of acute and chronic health conditions compared to the general US population, including higher rates of infectious diseases, mental health diagnoses, substance use disorders, traumatic brain injuries, hypertension, heart-related problems, diabetes, asthma, stroke, and overall lower life expectancy.¹⁷ Beyond the walls of carceral facilities, survey data show that people under community supervision through probation and parole have mortality rates two to three times higher than the general population.¹⁵ One study found that people under community supervision are more likely to report fair or poor health, chronic conditions, COPD, hepatitis B or C, or kidney disease.¹⁸

These harms disproportionately impact Black Americans, as carceral systems have effectively functioned as a centuries-enduring mechanism of racialized social control.¹⁹ One in five Black men are likely to be incarcerated at some point in their lifetime,²⁰ due to a long history of racial subjugation, punitive police tactics like “stop and frisk” that unfairly target people of color,²¹ and sentencing practices that result in harsher punishments for BIPOC people. Policing and criminalization also perpetuate a long legacy of settler-colonial violence and disenfranchisement of Indigenous peoples.²² These factors create the conditions in which Indigenous people are more likely to be killed by police compared to any other ethnic group.²³



Moreover, increased policing poses a disproportionate threat to the health of unhoused community members and disabled community members, including those with mental health needs. Police disproportionately target and criminalize people who experience houselessness and people with serious mental illness, exacerbating physical and mental health concerns.²⁴ The risk of being killed by law enforcement is 16 times higher for people with untreated serious mental illness than those without mental illness.^{25,26}

Beyond acute and direct harm, policing creates long-term and indirect harm that spreads throughout communities.²⁷ Policing negatively impacts health outcomes including anxiety, PTSD, suicidal ideation, depression, and psychotic episodes in whole communities, even beyond those who directly encounter the carceral system.¹¹ Policing also disproportionately harms BIPOC children's development psychologically, physically, and emotionally, whether they are survivors of or witnesses to policing. Young people's observations and encounters with police interrupts a healthy development trajectory by causing an increase in stress, depression, anxiety, and vicarious trauma.²⁸

The impacts of investments in expansive and repressive policing extend beyond state and even US borders. According to Atlanta's proposal, 43% of the training at Cop City would be for police officers outside of Georgia,²⁹ possibly including foreign military personnel like the genocidal Israeli Defense Forces.³⁰ Police exchange programs with Israel have become increasingly standard; thousands of US police officers travel to Israel annually or bi-annually for training under the guise of learning "counter-terrorism" tactics.³¹ US-Israeli police exchange programs in Atlanta³² and New York,³³ among other places, regularly share information, tactics, and technology to engage in population control, violence, and repression. The Atlanta Police Foundation, which financially supports Cop City, also financially supports the Georgia International Law Enforcement Exchange (GILEE) program run by Georgia State University, which facilitates an international exchange with the genocidal Israeli Defense Forces, among other military forces.³² Such overlaps directly connect the investments in US policing to global racialized oppression and violence against BIPOC communities in the US, Palestine, and other oppressed communities.³⁴

Despite the overwhelming evidence that policing harms health, expenditures for policing and carceral systems in the US have grown tremendously, from \$36 billion in 1982 to \$265 billion in 2012.

Despite the overwhelming evidence that policing harms health, expenditures for policing and carceral systems in the US have grown tremendously, from \$36 billion in 1982 to \$265 billion in 2012 (see Figure 2).³⁸ A study of municipal budgets from the 50 largest municipalities in the US found that disproportionate investment in policing and prisons comes at the expense of resourcing the health and social supports people need for positive physical and mental health outcomes.⁴ Other studies demonstrate that investments in policing and carceral systems bolster a criminal-legal system that disproportionately harms structurally marginalized people and communities over the lifecourse.^{39,40} Most local governments spend more on policing and incarceration than on investments into residents' wellbeing, such as affordable housing, health care, public transportation, and other community services like libraries and parks.³⁸

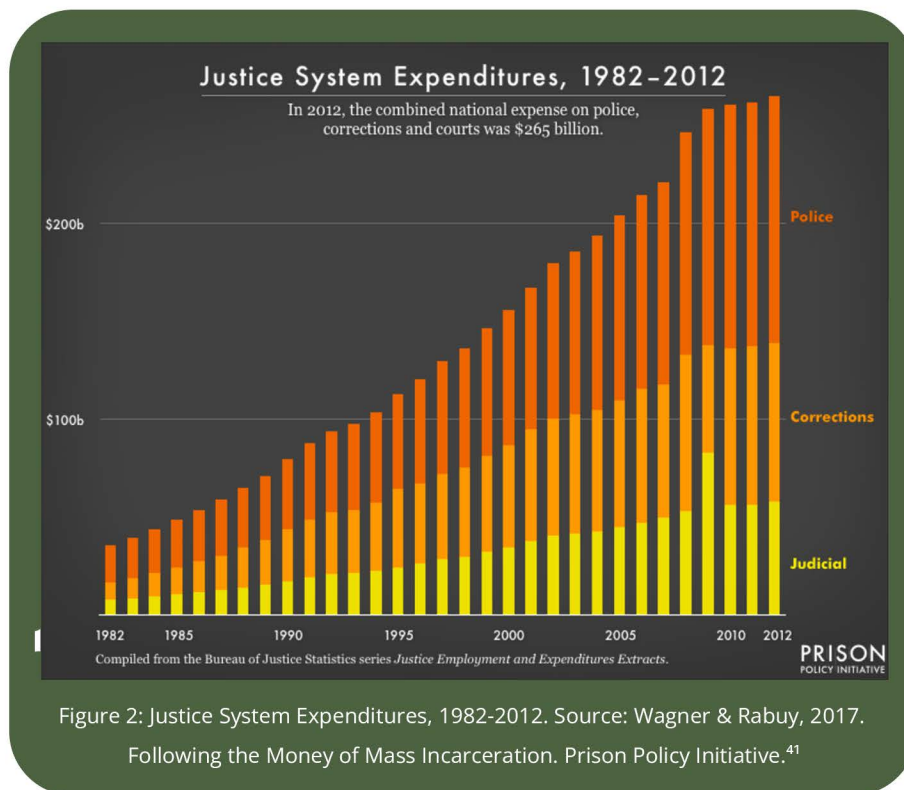


Figure 2: Justice System Expenditures, 1982-2012. Source: Wagner & Rabuy, 2017. Following the Money of Mass Incarceration. Prison Policy Initiative.⁴¹

Entangled with mounting federal investments in policing are the private investments from corporations and police foundations. Police foundations raise private funds from individual and corporate donors for police departments to use as they wish, typically to purchase weapons, surveillance technology, and other equipment. This financial maneuvering completely bypasses the public accountability and oversight required of municipal budgets. An investigation conducted by Color of Change in 2021 reports, “In particular, these foundations directly fund the ongoing militarization of policing and support the hyper-surveillance of Black, Brown, and Indigenous neighborhoods.”⁴² For example, the Atlanta Police Foundation has pledged \$60 million to fund the construction of Atlanta’s Cop City, with the additional \$30 million being pulled from the city’s taxpayers.⁴²



EVIDENCE-BASED PUBLIC HEALTH SOLUTION: INVEST IN HEALTH INSTEAD OF PUNISHMENT

Public health has begun mobilizing around policing in recent years. For example, in 2018, the American Public Health Association passed a policy statement declaring police violence a public health issue.⁷ Yet much work remains for the field to develop an analysis and implement strategies to support healthy alternatives for community safety. This section outlines evidence-based public health interventions for investing in health instead of punishment.

1. Invest in accountability: transformative and restorative justice

While carceral systems have been proven to be directly harmful to public health, two holistic alternatives — rooted in reducing harm and preventing violence — have shown promising results for improved health outcomes and collective accountability: restorative and transformative justice. Restorative justice addresses and amends interpersonal harm non-punitively through the collective efforts of those affected.⁴³ Structurally marginalized communities — including BIPOC, queer and trans, low-income, undocumented, disabled and sex worker communities — built upon the restorative justice practice to develop transformative justice. Transformative justice focuses on both repairing the harm between individuals involved in a given conflict, and transforming the systems and structures that created the conditions for harm to occur in the first place.⁴⁴

Recidivism and crime rates are inadequate and problematic measures of successful reentry

Much of the existing research in public health and other fields measures the success of reentry into society after incarceration by recidivism/re-incarceration rates and crime rates. Given the use of such measures throughout public health research, this report does include studies that examine those outcomes. However, it's important to note that both of these are inadequate measures of success.

Firstly, recidivism and crime rates reflect arrest and incarceration data, which most accurately measure distributions of policing, not actual safety or harm. Crime is both a legally defined set of laws and a social catch-all idea; neither meaningfully reflects true rates of intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, or structural harm. Secondly, much of the data that we have about recidivism and crime comes from the police, making the data biased and incomplete at best, and falsified at worst.^{45,46} Thirdly, there are also myriad other understudied factors that contribute to someone's successful reentry, including measures of health outcomes, social support, economic security, stable employment and housing, and more.

Focusing solely on recidivism reduces a person's life to their interactions with the criminal legal system, disregarding all of the other structural and political barriers that might prevent a person from thriving after incarceration — including housing, employment, transportation, food, and healthcare.^{47,48}

A growing body of research finds that restorative and transformative justice are effective practices to foster accountability and community safety. Evidence suggests that when using alternative methods to address harm and accountability, recidivism rates decreased and high satisfaction was reported both from persons who were harmed, and those who caused harm.^{49,52} A restorative justice approach, which emerged from Indigenous practices of accountability for harm, has the capacity to respond to harm at multiple levels, transform relationships, and prevent future harms.⁵³ Findings from restorative justice programs demonstrate that when compared with traditional punitive approaches, those involved have a greater sense of satisfaction from the process, a greater sense of fairness, and an ability to reduce engagement with the criminal legal system.⁵² Moreover, evidence suggests that investing in restorative justice processes leads to improved mental health for individuals involved in instances of harm, particularly when used as an alternative to the carceral system.^{50,52,54}

All federal, state, and municipal governments should invest in further research on non-carceral forms of responding to harm and violence. Governments should learn from transformative justice practitioners, restorative justice-focused organizations, and other mutual aid, harm reduction, and violence interruption community programs. Learnings from those practitioners and organizations can assist in the development of a plan for investing in programs that advance these strategies to end reliance on incarceration. Governments will need to vision and plan a transition to a just public health infrastructure that is trusted by impacted communities, community-based, scientifically rigorous, free, fully-accessible, and would replace the fractured private corporate criminal legal system that reinforces trauma, bias, and systemic oppression. See below for a list of resources on alternative accountability practices that are grounded in transformative and restorative justice:

- [*How Health Departments Can Address Police Violence as a Public Health Issue*](#)
- [*One Million Experiments*](#)
- [*Interrupting Criminalization*](#)

2. Invest in prevention: health-affirming services and programs that meet human needs

Unlike carceral systems, social services and programs that address the social determinants of health have been shown to support public health, wellbeing, and community safety. Greater investments in these systems can be understood as preventative care at the community-level. A vast body of research documents that investments in resources such as affordable housing, re-entry services, employment opportunities, reliable transportation, and non-carceral alternatives for accountability can improve health outcomes, reduce recidivism rates, and prevent harm.⁵⁵ Per a 2020 study by the American Public Health Association,¹⁷ state governments that advanced public health priorities and public investments which bolstered a social safety net (i.e., Medicaid, public housing, pre-K-12 education) had lower prison incarceration rates and better health outcomes. Alongside investment in the social determinants of health for the general population, community- and evidence-based approaches to re-entry programs that provide direct assistance to impacted individuals are needed to support recently released people in obtaining secure housing, medical care, mental health care, and community support.^{56–58}

Investments in police training facilities divert resources away from these critical health-affirming social supports.⁴ As one study found, carceral expenditures decreased life expectancy by 2.20 years in urban counties and 0.46 years in rural counties.* By contrast, investments in community infrastructure increased urban life expectancy by 1.05 years, while investments in social services increased rural life expectancy by 0.36 years.⁵⁹ The evidence is clear: unlike investments in carceral systems, investments in community-based support services are life-affirming. It is essential to shift public resources away from a growing policing footprint and towards the equitable distribution of the social determinants of health.

* These changes in life expectancy are seen with a one standard deviation increase in investment.



GOVERNMENT ACTIONS TO INVEST IN HEALTH INSTEAD OF PUNISHMENT

1. Invest in community-based programs that address violence and harm

without policing and criminalizing communities, including non-police violence prevention and intervention, restorative justice, and transformative justice — particularly in the communities currently most impacted by police violence. In the development and scaling of newer modalities for addressing and preventing harm, careful consideration should be given to constructing protections for privacy, dignity, and legal rights.

2. Devote resources to further study the most effective police alternatives and best practices for implementing them.

Research the impact, successes, and challenges of community-based alternatives that promote community safety and accountability, such as non-police violence interruption community programs, first responder programs, restorative justice-focused organizations, transformative justice programs, and harm reduction and mutual aid practices.

3. Fund programs that meet health-affirming human needs and promote healthy communities

— such as access to good jobs, quality education, affordable healthcare, and affordable housing — by using resources currently earmarked for building police training facilities.

4. Promote and adequately fund reentry programs

that assist individuals directly impacted by policing and incarceration with community-based health and social supports. Most importantly, needs that are identified by those most impacted by the violence of policing and carceral systems should drive the goals and direction of re-entry and other community-based programs.

5. Reverse the militarization of the police

by ending international police exchange programs and eliminating the use and acquisition of military equipment; invest in community-based alternatives instead.

CLIMATE DESTRUCTION CREATED BY POLICE TRAINING FACILITIES HARMS HEALTH

One study of Atlanta's Cop City found that temperatures could increase by 10 degrees with the destruction of the forest.

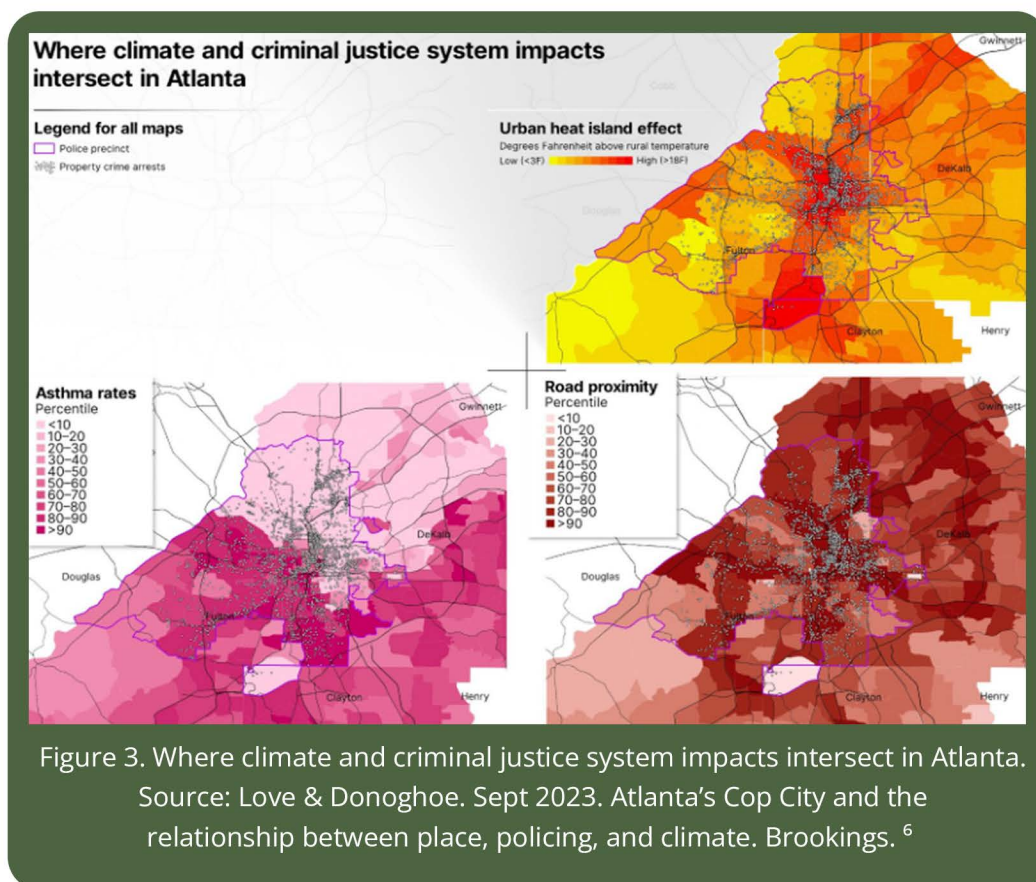
Further construction of Atlanta's Cop City would result in the partial destruction of the Weelaunee Forest, threatening the environmental health of the residents of Atlanta.⁶ The forest regulates temperatures, offers climate resiliency,** and protects the predominantly Black neighborhoods in the area from excessive heat stress.⁶ By contrast, deforestation drives increases in air and water pollution through decreased carbon sequestering and worsened stormwater management, respectively, and will amplify the "heat island effect," where highly concentrated urban structures (buildings, roads, and other infrastructure) and limited greenery cause increased temperatures.^{61,62} One study of Atlanta's Cop City found that temperatures could increase by 10 degrees with the destruction of the forest.⁶³

Construction of Atlanta's Cop City is also illegally polluting the South River — already the 4th most endangered river in the US as of 2021 — which the South River Watershed Alliance sued the City of Atlanta over in 2023.^{64,65} For these reasons and more, the Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments (ANHE) has called for an immediate cessation of funding support to Cop City, identifying the project as a "public and planetary health crisis."⁶⁶ In a May 2024 public letter, ANHE states:

"Development of a militarized police facility will lead to generations of compounding exposure to harmful pollutants, excessive noise, and heat while diminishing community protection from the worsening effects of climate change. As public health nurses, we urge the City Council to divest the corporate-funded Atlanta Police Foundation and reallocate city funding towards the improvement of social determinants of health."⁶⁶

**According to the Union of Concerned Scientists, "Climate resilience is about successfully coping with and managing the impacts of climate change while preventing those impacts from growing worse. A climate resilient society would be low-carbon and equipped to deal with the realities of a warmer world."⁶⁰

Climate and carceral harms already intersect in Atlanta, compounding the risks Cop City poses to public health. Data show that the same neighborhoods that are disproportionately exposed to climate injustices (as measured by vulnerability to extreme heat with urban heat island effects, asthma rates, and road proximity) also experience higher rates of policing (as measured by higher rates of arrests for nonviolent property crimes; See Figure 3).⁶ The construction of Cop City will exacerbate the harms to the same communities who are already experiencing these intersecting crises.



Carceral system investments in police training facilities go hand in hand with climate injustice. As one analysis points out, the same oil and gas companies that are polluting Black and Brown communities are simultaneously financially backing police foundations, who are funding the construction of police training facilities.⁶⁷ Research is clear that policing, incarceration, and climate change disproportionately harm low-income and BIPOC communities.^{6,68,69}

Research found the US Department of Defense is the largest institutional consumer of fossil fuels in the world, and a key contributor to climate change — the greatest public health threat facing humanity, and a multiplier of existing health inequities.

The growth of police training facilities is fairly recent, but research on the harms of carceral system construction and militarization can inform understandings of the climate destruction created by police training facilities. Prisons and prison construction have a direct polluting effect: according to data from 1997 to 2016, there is a strong association between increases in incarceration and increases in industrial emissions, as the amount of fossil fuels burned to support prison development increases in tandem with demand for new construction.⁷⁰ Research found the US Department of Defense is the largest institutional consumer of fossil fuels in the world, and a key contributor to climate change — the greatest public health threat facing humanity, and a multiplier of existing health inequities.⁷¹ One in five deaths worldwide were found to be attributable to fine particle pollution from fossil fuels in 2018.^{72,73} Pollution is commonly understood as the largest environmental determinant of health, contributing to the development of conditions such as cancer, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, and immune system disorders — and fossil fuel combustion is the main source of air pollution globally.^{74,75} Beyond fossil fuel combustion, hazardous waste and toxins produced inside prisons impact nearby waterways, air, land, and communities.⁷⁶

EVIDENCE-BASED PUBLIC HEALTH SOLUTION: ADVOCATE FOR GREEN SPACES AND CLIMATE JUSTICE

While investments in police training facilities harm physical and environmental health, developing green spaces benefits health. Preservation of forests and natural spaces supports positive health outcomes, including improved mental health; reduction of certain health concerns including hypertension, cardiac and pulmonary issues, inflammation, and oxidative stress; strengthened community relationships; and mitigated effects of climate change, including reducing short-lived pollutants, improving air quality, and reducing the urban heat island effect.^{61,77–80} Research has also documented the association between increased life expectancy and access to green space, tree canopy, and parks.^{81–84}

Additionally, a systematic review of the relationship between crime frequency and urban green spaces — classified as trees, parks, and natural areas — found that the presence of green spaces has a mitigating effect on crime.⁸⁵ This can be attributed to green spaces' ability to foster community interactions, physical activity, stress reduction, and heat reduction.⁸⁵

Racism and segregation have led to a disparity in access to urban green spaces. Green spaces are larger and more accessible in higher-income, predominantly White neighborhoods, while lower-income, and predominantly Latinx and Black neighborhoods are less likely to have green space access.⁸⁶ Focusing green space investments in neighborhoods that are disproportionately impacted by climate change, policing, and incarceration will advance health, environmental, and climate justice.





GOVERNMENT ACTIONS TO ADVOCATE FOR GREEN SPACES AND CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

1. Invest in reforestation and restoration of the ecological habitat, including with the unused and remaining funds of eliminating police training facilities.

2. Invest in green spaces like forests, trees, parks, and natural areas, especially in communities of color and low-income communities that too often do not have access to these spaces.

3. Reverse the policies and practices that create inequities in access to parks and green space including racial segregation, redlining, and biased city planning.

UNDERMINING INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY HARMS HEALTH

Indigenous sovereignty, which refers to the inherent rights of Indigenous people to govern themselves and manage their lands, resources, and cultural heritage,⁸⁷ has been severely undermined during the push for construction of Atlanta's Cop City. Local Indigenous leaders have called for the city to cease the policing of Indigenous and Black people on Mvskoke (also called Muskogee) homelands. In March 2023, the ceremonial leaders of the Mvskoke nation, whose forebears were forcibly removed from the Weelaunee Forest and surrounding areas through the Indian Removal Act of 1830, delivered a [letter of eviction](#) to Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens during a Regional Commission meeting, stating:

"The contemporary Mvskoke people are making the journey back to their homelands and hereby give notice to Mayor Andre Dickens, the Atlanta City Council, the Atlanta Police Department, the Atlanta Police Foundation, the DeKalb County Sheriff's office, and so-called 'Cop City' that you must immediately vacate Mvskoke homelands and cease violence and policing of Indigenous and Black people in Mvskoke lands...

*...Since the 1832 Trail of Tears, where nearly half of our people were brutally murdered by the predecessors of the very same entities seeking to establish a massive "cop city," the colonial presence of the state and local governments of Georgia and police have unjustly denied Mvskoke people access to our homelands. As ceremonial people, we have come home to gather medicines, have ceremony, and be welcomed by our ancestors."*⁸⁸

Mvskoke nation leaders were escorted out of the building after they delivered the statement. Mayor Dickens abruptly left the meeting and refused to speak with the Mvskoke leaders, and a response to the letter has yet to be published.⁸⁹

Due to the long history of racism and colonization in the US, the incarceration rates of Indigenous people are around double the national average in state and federal prisons and local jails.

An acute example of the violence that police training facilities pose to Indigenous people is the tragic police murder at Atlanta’s Cop City of 26-year-old Indigenous non-binary environmental activist Manuel Paez Terán, known as Tortuguita. On January 18, 2024, Tortuguita sustained at least 14 gunshot wounds from Georgia State Patrol Troopers, while their hands were raised and seated in a cross-legged position.⁹⁰ This murder is part of a larger story about the way policing continues to act as a violent tool of colonization and White supremacy in the US, terrorizing Indigenous life and undermining Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination through disproportionate rates of criminalization, incarceration, and violence.⁹¹



Manuel “Tortuguita” Esteban Paez Terán

Due to the long history of racism and colonization in the US, the incarceration rates of Indigenous people are around double the national average in state and federal prisons and local jails.⁹² The number of jails on Indigenous reservations increased by almost 24% from just 2018 to 2020 — and the number of people incarcerated within them grew by 60% in tandem.⁹³ Moreover, Indigenous people are 2.2 times more likely than White people and 1.2 times more likely than Black people to be killed by the police.²³ Intersectional oppression deepens the inequity. Research that looked at disaggregated deaths by police data in the Ninth Federal Reserve District (Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, and parts of Wisconsin and Michigan) found that Indigenous women are 38 times more likely to be killed by police compared to White women, and Native men are 14 times as likely compared to White men.²³

Building police training facilities on Indigenous ancestral lands further undermines Indigenous sovereignty by destroying natural environments, contributing to climate destruction, and polluting the land, air, and water. A study that quantified the history of Indigenous dispossession and forced migration in the US found that present-day Tribal lands “are on average more exposed to climate change risks and hazards, including more extreme heat and less precipitation” and “nearly half of tribes experienced heightened wildfire hazard exposure.”⁹⁴ Additionally, federal and state laws often incentivize extractive and polluting business activities on Tribal lands.⁹⁵ A study published in *Environmental Health Perspective* noted that “tribal jurisdictions are attractive to corporations seeking a lesser degree of environmental regulation, oversight, and enforcement than are imposed by state governments.”⁹⁵

Research shows that the historical and ongoing undermining of Indigenous sovereignty harms the health of Indigenous people and exacerbates Indigenous historical trauma. Indigenous historical trauma originates from the violent process of colonization and genocide that has resulted in population decline, the subjugation of Indigenous people,⁹⁶ and shared vulnerabilities that undermine current health status.^{97,98} A systematic literature review of the impacts of historical trauma on Indigenous young people found increases in anxiety, mental health issues, poor physical health, depression symptoms, and suicide risk. Experiences of highly traumatic colonial interventions like boarding schools were found to harm Indigenous parenting and create familial dysfunction because families were forcibly separated from each other, their language, and culture.⁹⁹

Protective factors against such historical trauma include participation in cultural and community activities, sporting activities, and strong social connections. For example, a main contributor to resilience and protection against suicide, violence, unemployment, and substance abuse among Indigenous youth was strong connection to family and culture.⁹⁹ The disruption in culture-based protective factors, community systems, and parenting knowledge has led to increased psychological risk, inadequate parenting, and health inequities among Indigenous communities.¹⁰⁰

EVIDENCE-BASED PUBLIC HEALTH SOLUTION: LAND BACK FOR INDIGENOUS REPARATIONS

Realizing Indigenous sovereignty requires repairing the historical and ongoing harms of colonialism and white supremacy, including policing and incarceration.^{101,102} One critical movement toward Indigenous sovereignty is Land Back, an Indigenous-led strategy where Indigenous people reclaim a symbiotic and just relationship with Mother Earth and stewardship of Land, rooted in the truth that protecting the land is imperative to protecting health.¹⁰³ Land Back has been associated with improved economic conditions, improved social services, and improved community infrastructure when Indigenous communities have the power to invest in their communities.¹⁰⁴ Exercising Indigenous sovereignty has resulted in economic growth and improved well-being for Indigenous peoples. Increased self-governance over Indigenous lands and increased resources, for example, have created new economic and employment opportunities.¹⁰⁵ The health and culture of Indigenous people are tied to the Land and research shows that Land Back efforts may improve and preserve such positive outcomes.⁸⁹

Land Back strategies may be done alongside efforts of healing, justice, and reparations for Black communities, which also face historical trauma and ongoing harms from the legacies of colonialism, white supremacy, and slavery. Land Back movement leader NDN Collective asserts a future where Black reparations and Indigenous Land Back co-exist and BIPOC collective liberation is at the core.¹⁰³ Reparations for both Indigenous and Black people have a long history in the US and other nations.¹⁰⁶ The United Nations (UN) outlines five conditions that must be met for full reparations:

1. Cessation and guaranteeing the act does not occur again
2. Restitution and repatriation, meaning reversing the impact of the negative event
3. Compensation
4. Satisfaction, such as apology or commemoration
5. Rehabilitation, including legal, medical, psychological, and other care¹⁰⁷

All efforts in decarceration, environmental conservation, climate change mitigation, and health equity fall short when the knowledge, perspectives, and rights of Indigenous communities are excluded.

Evidence-based strategies to address the harm of colonization require grounding in Indigenous sovereignty and Indigenous forms of knowledge. For example, there is a significant association between traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) — the Indigenous knowledge system that emphasizes the relationships between beings and the environment — and forest conservation, which can effectively buffer climate change.¹⁰⁸ Even with the ever-growing impacts of climate change and mounting evidence that it is disproportionately harming Indigenous populations, government agencies generally continue to ignore both the experiences and inherent rights of Indigenous people in designing climate solutions.¹⁰⁹ All efforts in decarceration, environmental conservation, climate change mitigation, and health equity fall short when the knowledge, perspectives, and rights of Indigenous communities are excluded.



GOVERNMENT ACTIONS TO GIVE LAND BACK FOR INDIGENOUS REPARATIONS

1. Stop the construction and planning of current and future public carceral facilities on Indigenous ancestral lands.

2. Allocate the unused and remaining funds from eliminating police training facilities towards Black and Indigenous reparations efforts

that assist in repairing environmental and climate injustices, carceral harms, and police violence. All government bodies should consult and fully cooperate with impacted communities in issues regarding Indigenous peoples' sovereign rights to land, traditional medicines, cultural health practices, and access to health and social services.

3. Transfer public land ownership and decision-making power over the land to its original inhabitants, including through repatriation efforts, Indigenous-led community land trusts, land consolidation efforts for Tribal Nations land trusts, and re-acquisition efforts of Tribal land.

4. Prioritize, protect, and promote the self-determination, self-governance, and sovereignty of Indigenous people, particularly in decisions impacting their ancestral land.



STATE REPRESSION OF RESISTANCE TO POLICE TRAINING FACILITIES HARMS HEALTH

Police response to community members opposing Cop City has unfolded with overwhelming and disproportionate force, intended to silence opposition via violence, intimidation, and fear.

The violent and repressive response to protestors in Atlanta has proven that Cop City is also a threat to democracy. Police response to community members opposing Cop City has unfolded with overwhelming and disproportionate force, intended to silence opposition via violence, intimidation, and fear. Police have stalked protestors, raided community medic hubs that were used during direct actions, and responded with excessive presence to small groups of people handing out flyers or posting a banner, in addition to murdering Manuel Paez Terán.¹¹⁰ Both the mechanisms of state repression — including physical force and violence — and the repression of democracy itself have been shown to harm health.

Within the legal system, Georgia Attorney General Chris Carr indicted 61 Stop Cop City activists with RICO (Racketeering Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act) charges in September 2023, alleging the defendants were “militant anarchists” and tying their involvement in the Stop Cop City movement to the widespread 2020 racial justice protests.¹¹¹ RICO charges carry a heavy sentencing potential of 5 to 20 years in prison and/or a fine of up to \$25,000 or three times the amount gained by racketeering.¹¹² Additionally, prosecutors have brought 42 charges of domestic terrorism against protestors in indictments that Human Rights Watch has called “riddled with irregularities.”¹¹³ Three other protestors were charged with “felony intimidation of an officer of the state” for placing flyers, which included the name of a police officer who lived in the neighborhood, in mailboxes of an Atlanta suburb.¹¹⁴

On top of levying these outsized charges, the Georgia state legislature recently passed a bill mandating cash bail for offenses like domestic terrorism, racketeering, criminal trespasses, and unlawful assembly.¹¹⁵ In practice, this requires resources from organizing funds to be directed towards the additive cost of bail, and drastically limits organizers' ability to provide mutual aid to their fellow demonstrators.¹¹⁶

Despite state violence and repression, community members continued to engage democratic measures to halt the construction of Cop City. After two years of protest, in September 2023, Atlanta's Vote to Stop Cop City Coalition submitted more than 116,000 signatures to put a referendum about the project on the ballot for local voters.¹¹⁷ City officials responded with bureaucratic barriers, legal delays, and refusal to validate the signatures and move the petition forward, claiming an ongoing legal fight over the signature-gathering process prevented them from doing so.¹¹⁸ When the Atlanta City Council finally passed legislation codifying the referendum process, they made a last-minute change to reintroduce signature matching, which national voting groups have named as a burdensome and discriminatory process.¹¹⁹ Currently, community organizers are waiting for a federal appeals court to make a decision about the legality of the petition gathering process, while external deadlines for adding a referendum to election ballots pass by.¹¹⁹

Across the US and across history, anti-democratic tactics such as these have been used by governments to exert economic, social, and political power over community power, particularly against Black and Brown people demonstrating for their lives and freedom. During the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, a violent police response led to the growth of prisons and policing in the 70s.¹²⁰ During the 2020 uprisings for Black liberation, police unleashed tear gas, pepper spray, batons, tasers, rubber bullets and more on protesters, arresting more than 10,000 people¹²¹ and injuring many.¹²² During the 2024 student encampment movement for Palestinian liberation, more than 2,900 US students were arrested or detained via similar militarized police tactics.¹²³

The health harms of such militarized anti-democratic tactics are clear. The use of dispersal tactics like pepper spray, tear gas, flash bangs, and rubber bullets can cause serious risk of physical harm, including hearing loss, blindness, respiratory failure, loss of limbs, bleeding, and fractures.^{124,125} Evidence also indicates that police force during protests are associated with negative mental health outcomes including PTSD and severe depressive symptoms.¹²⁶

Beyond the harms of physical force, the repression of democracy more broadly has also been shown to have negative health impacts. For example, experiencing police violence at all, including in the context of state repression of protests, reduces people's likelihood of voting. One study found that police murder of civilians reduced Black voter turnout by 5.9% in a one-mile radius from the killing.¹²⁷ This creates underrepresentation of Black communities in decisions that impact their health. The link between voting and health is clear: research shows that states with more barriers to voting and lower rates of voter participation have worse public health outcomes.¹²⁸ Additionally, all levels of criminal legal system contact attenuate a person's sense of full and equal citizenship and trust in institutions' responsiveness to citizens' concerns.¹²⁹ The deprivation of civil rights has been a dominant factor barring Black people from access to health in the US; on the flipside, protecting civil rights has been associated with improvements in health as it pertains to health care, education, and employment.¹³⁰



"Cop City", February 4, 2023, Creator: Chad Davis

EVIDENCE-BASED PUBLIC HEALTH SOLUTION: PROTECT COMMUNITY POWER AND CIVIL RIGHTS

Across the nation, communities are resisting police training facilities. Beyond Atlanta, examples include:

- *No Cop Academy* in Chicago, which fought to stop a \$95 million Cop Academy similar to Atlanta's Cop City.
- *Stop Cop City Bay Area* in San Pablo, California, which is fighting the construction of a 42,000 square foot police headquarters and regional training facility with a price tag equal to 65% of the city's prior year budget.^{6,131}
- *No Cop City* in Fitchburg, Wisconsin, which is fighting the construction of a \$39.5 million police training facility within a town of only 50,000 people.
- *No Cop City* in Baltimore, Maryland, which is fighting to stop a \$330 million police and fire department training facility on West Baltimore's Coppin State University campus.

Resistance to state violence is not limited to Cop Cities: these efforts are part of larger abolitionist movements against policing and carceral system investments writ large. While abolition entered the mainstream following George Floyd's murder by police in 2020,^{120,132} abolitionist resistance to the prison industrial complex is not new. Contemporary organizing and resistance efforts are built on the foundation laid by centuries of activism and visioning dating back to at least the 19th Century, when Black abolitionists fought for a world without slavery.¹³²

The protection of the right to protest without facing state-sanctioned violence is essential to upholding democracy and public health.

The protection of the right to protest without facing state-sanctioned violence is essential to upholding democracy and public health. Protecting democracy is key to building community power, which enables communities to influence decision-making, set agendas, and shift public discourse — thereby increasing their agency over the decisions that impact their lives.¹³³ This is vitally important for underserved, underrepresented, and structurally marginalized communities who have been excluded from decision making over the policies that shape their lives.¹³⁴ One study that examined county-level health outcomes in 115 countries found that more democratic countries had significant increases in life expectancy.¹³⁵ Another recent research study demonstrated that greater levels of community power were linked to prevention of disease, reductions in severity of disease, and improved mental health. Consequently, the authors conclude, “optimizing local democracy is an effective population health intervention.”¹³⁶



GOVERNMENT ACTIONS TO PROTECT COMMUNITY POWER AND CIVIL RIGHTS

1. Promote policies that ensure an inclusive, transparent, and accountable democracy for all.

2. Protect the right to protest without state-sanctioned violence and promote opportunities for communities to organize and exercise community power, particularly those that are systemically and persistently marginalized.

CONCLUSION

Activists in Atlanta are still organizing and building community power to stop Cop City, even as construction is underway. The strategies and tactics used by organizers in Atlanta, as well as by city and state officials to repress resistance, will be instructive as the construction of police training facilities proliferates across the US. The construction of Cop Cities across the US is just one part of the harmful web of a misguided punishment-based approach to community safety and a way to further entrench state-sanctioned violence, especially against those who are historically and structurally marginalized. This report highlights some of the pathways through which the construction of police training facilities can harm health — including through the expansion of policing, the destruction of the environment, the undermining of Indigenous sovereignty, and anti-democratic state repression of resistance to such facilities.

The report pulls together an extensive body of public health research that supports halting the construction of police training facilities and instead investing in the things that communities need to be safe and healthy: community-based systems of accountability, affordable housing, reliable transportation, good jobs, quality education, accessible healthcare, climate justice, and reparations. We hope that this research will provide support to organizers across the US as the movement to Stop Cop Cities continues. We urge federal, state, Tribal, and local governments to listen to the communities they represent and take action to promote health instead of punishment.



A protest sign from a Stop Cop City rally HIP held at the American Public Health Association conference in Atlanta in 2023. Photo by Human Impact Partners.

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