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Organizational Affiliation, if any Young People for Progress

What district in Montgomery County do you live in? If you do not know, please see the [County District Map](#) * District 4

Question/Comment for the Policing Advisory Commission *

Policing Advisory Commission Public Hearing – Drug Enforcement in Montgomery County

Testimony

My name is David Atkinson and I live in Silver Spring, Maryland. I am testifying regarding police drug enforcement in Montgomery County, MD.

I am a part of Young People for Progress. YPP is a community organizing and social justice organization of young people, aged under 35, currently in Montgomery County, MD that strives to create power among youth and young adults through engaging in issue campaigns and voter education campaigns.

Due to the stigma and retaliation attached to being arrested for any drug charge, or police interaction, we have created a survey process called the Police Incident Documentation Project, where people can report police interaction anonymously. Within this project, we have been able to compile our member’s experiences with police interaction. Here are some of those stories that we need to uplift to understand the impact that these interactions have created in our community.

YPP has a reported incident of a member who has been repeatedly approached and followed by police in this county and asked if they knew about certain boys in her area selling drugs. They repeatedly informed a police officer that they didn’t know of anyone selling drugs. They felt threatened when approached by police. Police mentioned they were just trying to keep the streets safe, but they felt unsafe when the police were around.

Another member was chased by police in Takoma Park when they were just hanging out with friends who were eating and smoking. They noted the two caught by police were not smoking anything illegal. They said that MOCO police don’t know how to handle situations. They just jump to conclusions. This led them to no longer want to be a police officer.

These incidents, along with lack of accountability for murders in Montgomery County, as we have seen with the murder of Kwamena Ocran, and while this was at the hands of Gaithersburg City Police, we are aware that most officers there receive training from MCPD and collaborate

consistently there has been no accountability. This makes YPP skeptical of MCPD when it comes to enforcing drug laws. Marijuana possession should not be a reason for a potentially deadly encounter with law enforcement and potential imprisonment.

The handling of Finan Berhe, for example, did not give me confidence in officers' ability to hold other officers accountable. To see Sgt David Cohen go undisciplined when he murdered someone he seemed so intent on shooting makes me think there is not much of a system of accountability among officers. Montgomery County Police's 2020 use of force report already showed disproportionately high use of force incidents on black people.

Other police incidents people in or associated with YPP have dealt with include an invasive patdown, an officer forcing himself into someone's room but left the room once realized he was being recorded, accusation of thievery to a student experiencing homelessness resulting in PTSD, unprovoked physical force at a McDonalds and more.

At the end of the 2020 use of force report, it mentions "The public expects and deserves a culture of transparency, accountability, fairness, trust, and respect, and every member of this department is held accountable for their actions. In today's environment of heightened public expectations and scrutiny of police department operations, it is important to emphasize that regardless of how well the department believes it is fulfilling its mission, the ultimate measure of success is how well the department is able to earn and sustain the trust and respect of the residents of Montgomery County."

As a YPP member, I don't trust officers to enforce drug policies until we see more convictions for police misconduct. Marijuana possession, being non-violent, is not worth police officers' disciplinary attention and force. I believe there are other alternatives to responding to community needs, besides policing and jailing our neighbors in need. Investing in housing, mental health, food security, education, and rehabilitation are far more intrinsic and productive to public safety than policies that criminalize and discriminate against Black people and POC in our county. The dangerous narratives that have been created around survival, dependency, and other non-violent crimes show their result in the disparities in arrests. We must dismantle these narratives and do better for our county's future.
