The American Psychological Association Services, Inc. is committed to the complex and difficult work of using psychological science to improve public safety in the COVID-19 era. The current public health emergency has made it abundantly clear our nation must have a long-overdue reckoning to reimagine policing. It is incumbent for Congress to provide the resources necessary to address the sharp rise in mental health / substance use conditions and gun violence exacerbated by the pandemic. To change course, we must also acknowledge our nation’s tragic history of racism and that persons of color have disproportionately been impacted in the pandemic. Our first responders are encountering a general public in which four in 10 adults have reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder, an increase from the one in 10 adults who reported these symptoms from January to June 2019. Moreover, according to APA’s January 2021 Stress in America Survey, 84% of U.S. adults reported feeling at least one negative emotion—such as anxiety, sadness, and anger—associated with prolonged stress within the previous two weeks at the time of survey. The COVID-19 pandemic was reported among the top sources of stress.

Accordingly, APA Services, Inc. urges Members to reinvigorate efforts to pass comprehensive policing reform legislation before the conclusion of the 117th Congress. We thank the Committee for their willingness to engage in this important discussion and we appreciate the opportunity to submit the following recommendations for consideration.

- **Invest in Crisis Intervention Teams, Mental Health Response Teams, and de-escalation trainings.** Psychologists and other mental health providers play a key role in community-based, crisis intervention teams (CITs) and mental health response teams (MHRTs) that promote de-escalation practices to achieve better outcomes. CITs train police officers to safely and effectively deal with situations involving individuals with serious mental illness. Tailored by each community to fit local needs, CITs unite the efforts of police officers, mental health professionals and community advocates to resolve potentially violent situations in positive ways. Whereas MHRTs typically send health care workers as a first response to non-violent calls involving individuals in mental health crisis. CITs, MHRTs and de-escalation trainings should include a strong focus on equity, diversity and inclusion as well as racial trauma to help mitigate the influence of prejudice and stereotypes and improve police/community relations.
  - APA Services, Inc. encourages the committee to pass **H.R. 1368 - Mental Health Justice Act of 2021.** This legislation will authorize the Secretary of Health and Human Services to award grants to States to hire, employ, train, and dispatch mental health professionals to be the initial responders in non-violent emergencies involving persons with a mental illness or an intellectual or developmental disability.
  - APA Services, Inc. strongly supports the **H.R. 1914 - CAHOOTS Act,** which incentivizes state Medicaid programs to cover services provided by round-the-clock mobile crisis teams.
  - APA Services, Inc. endorses **H.R. 4305 - Crisis Care Enhancement Act** which reserves a higher set-aside amount under the Medicaid block grant for crisis services.
  - APA Services, Inc. urges the committee to consider Senator Cornyn’s forthcoming **Law Enforcement De-Escalation Training Act of 2022** which will amend the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 to provide for police officer training on alternatives to use of force, de-escalation, and mental and behavioral health crises.
• **Encourage private/public partnerships between mental health organizations and local law enforcement.** These partnerships can develop best practices for addressing community and police relations that can be disseminated widely across the nation to police departments and mental health facilities. Police-community partnerships encouraged by the Community Oriented Policing Office (COPS) of the Department of Justice (DOJ) can decrease stereotypes, increase citizen engagement and lead to better outcomes in law enforcement interactions with community members.

• **Bolster research and strengthen data collection.** APA Services, Inc. calls for re-establishing a Science Advisory Board at DOJ to help bridge the divide between research and practice in criminal justice fields. Through regular interactions with the Office of Justice Programs leadership and staff, members of the board would gain a deeper appreciation of the complexities of implementing and evaluating innovative approaches to the administration of criminal and juvenile justice especially as it pertains to policing interactions with members of the community with disabilities or in mental health crisis. APA Services, Inc.’s research priorities also include robust funding for the National Institute of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics and COPS.
  

• **Address the gun violence crisis facing our nation.** Recent reports confirm gun violence incidents have risen by more than 30% across the United States during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.iii APA Services, Inc. urges Congress to intensify efforts to pass legislation that will invest in: community and school-based gun violence prevention initiatives; lethal means safety training and safe firearms storage; gun violence prevention research; extreme risk protection order laws; and efforts to reduce the stigma of mental illness especially as it pertains to gun violence.

• **Increase the number of mental and behavioral health and industrial/organizational professionals in law enforcement agencies. Address police officer stress and mental health concerns.** Professionals with expertise in human behavior and psychological science are crucial to helping law enforcement agencies hire the right people, train them appropriately, provide wellness services, and engage in a range of organizational transformations that increase transparency and accountability to the community. Moreover, these professionals do imperative work as it pertains to ongoing psychological monitoring of police officers’ stress levels, mental health, burn-out, and attitudes toward the public including individuals with psychiatric, cognitive, or physical disabilities.
  

APA Services, Inc. stands ready to assist the Judiciary Committee in finding impactful bipartisan solutions to reimagine public safety in the COVID-19 era. Please contact Ben Vonachen at bvonachen@apa.org if our association can be a resource.

References

