

Date: January 14, 2022

To: Honorable Members of the Atlanta City Council

From: Micah Herskind, Southern Center for Human Rights

CC: Honorable Mayor Andre Dickens

Re: Buckhead Public Safety Task Force Proposal, 22-R-3001

I. Introduction

On January 10, 2022, the Atlanta City Council Public Safety Committee approved a Resolution co-sponsored by Councilmembers Mary Norwood and Michael Julian Bond to create a “Buckhead Public Safety Task Force.”

This Resolution (22-R-3001) would create a 19-person task force to partner with Buckhead businesses, neighborhood associations, and law enforcement agencies to “develop and implement a plan to deter crime and enhance public safety” in Buckhead. As proposed, task force membership would include only law enforcement officials or representatives (city, state, and private) from Buckhead. Proposed membership does not include any civic engagement or subject-matter expert organizations, or any representatives from the rest of the City.

As an organization working for dignity and equality for people impacted by the criminal legal system, we at the Southern Center for Human Rights encourage you to vote against this proposal for three key reasons, explained in further detail below: **(1)** The data do not support the need for a new anti-crime task force, either in Buckhead or in the rest of the City; **(2)** Buckhead has monopolized a disproportionate share of City resources in the last year on public safety measures and would not benefit from an additional, insular task force; and **(3)** Research supports a public health (rather than a law enforcement) approach to gun violence and other public health issues, which requires the involvement of public health, human rights, and direct service organizations in any proposed deliberative bodies.

As a new Council and Administration begins its leadership, we urge you to focus on the issues impacting public safety that are most pressing for the majority of Atlantans: affordable housing, homelessness, criminal justice reform, pandemic safety measures, public transportation, and other issues that make survival in these perilous times more likely.

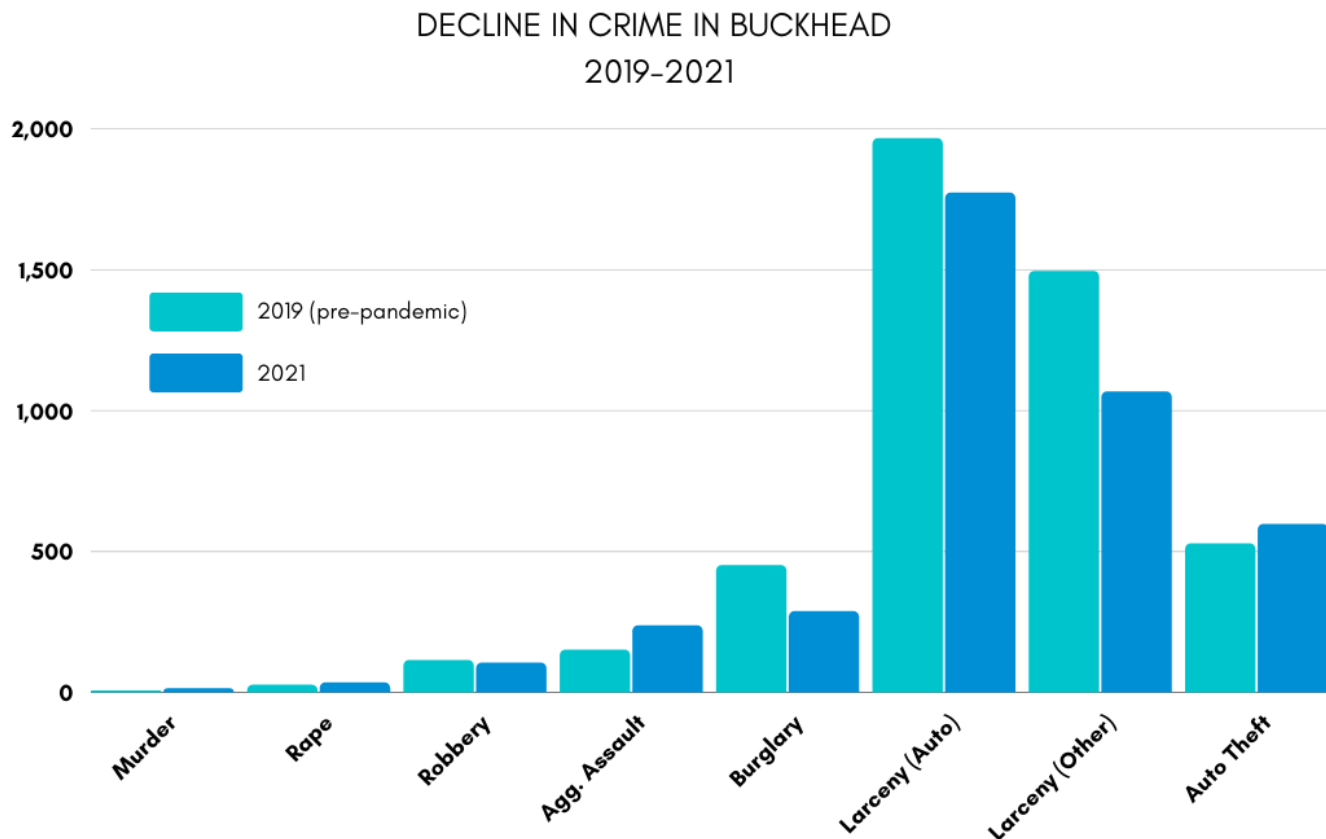
II. The data do not support the need for a new anti-crime task force, either in Buckhead or in the rest of the City.

Data from the Atlanta Police Department (APD) neither support the claim that Buckhead is a hotspot of crime in Atlanta, nor that Buckhead should be an area to focus additional public

safety efforts. In fact, crime data from the past ten years reveal that overall, Part 1 crime (crimes carrying high penalties) is at a ten year *low*—both in Buckhead, and across the city.

A. Buckhead Crime Data.

While there has been significant discussion of a Covid crime wave and particular focus on Buckhead, a closer look at the data reveals that overall, Part 1 crimes have *decreased* from pre-pandemic numbers. As the chart below demonstrates, Part 1 crimes in APD Zone 2 (where Buckhead residents reside) have fallen in recent years, for an overall decrease in serious crime by 623 incidents.



Source: Year-End COBRA Weekly Crime Reports, 2019-2021¹

Despite the overall decrease in Part 1 crimes, the following categories featured modest rises since the pandemic:

- Murder (6 in 2019 to 13 in 2021),
- Rape (26 in 2019 to 34 in 2021),
- Aggravated assault (151 in 2019 to 236 in 2021)
- Auto theft (527 in 2019 to 596 in 2021).

¹ All data analyzed in this memo come from Atlanta Police Department’s COBRA reports. We would be happy to review and analyze any additional or supplemental data as it becomes available.

While any instance of serious harm should be taken seriously, these numbers do not convey a “crime wave” or a crisis that should supersede and overshadow the many other crises facing Atlanta.

Just as importantly, the data reveal that **in 2021, Zone 2 had the fewest murders, robberies, and aggravated assaults of any APD zone.** Zone 2 had the highest number of rape cases (34, as compared to 33 and 27 in the next two highest zones) and larcenies (1067, compared to 1034 and 860 in the next two highest zones), and ranked second for Auto Theft and 3rd for both Auto Larceny and Burglary.

In other words, Buckhead is certainly not an outlier when it comes to crimes designated as serious in Atlanta—despite alarmist messaging that has elevated the concerns of Buckhead residents over those in the city actually experiencing the most harm. In fact, as Buckhead’s APD Zone 2 Commander Major Andrew Senzer noted in his Fall 2021 update, despite “media frenzy about crime in Buckhead, Zone 2 continued to remain the *safest place to live in the City, with just 11% of the City’s violent crime occurring in our footprint*” (emphasis added).²

Part 1 Crimes Against People by Zone, 2021

Offense	Zone 1	Zone 2	Zone 3	Zone 4	Zone 5	Zone 6	Citywide
Murder	31	13	36	32	20	24	156
Rape	27	34	23	33	25	22	164
Robbery	132	104	141	138	147	130	792
Agg. Assault	502	236	555	556	356	273	2478
Burglary	267	287	309	295	193	265	1616

Source: Year-End COBRA Weekly Crime Report, 2021

Part 1 Crimes Against Property by Zone, 2021

Offense	Zone 1	Zone 2	Zone 3	Zone 4	Zone 5	Zone 6	Citywide
Larceny (Auto)	724	1772	635	761	2159	1925	7976
Larceny (Other)	607	1067	595	758	1034	860	4921
Auto Theft	390	596	454	377	781	416	3014

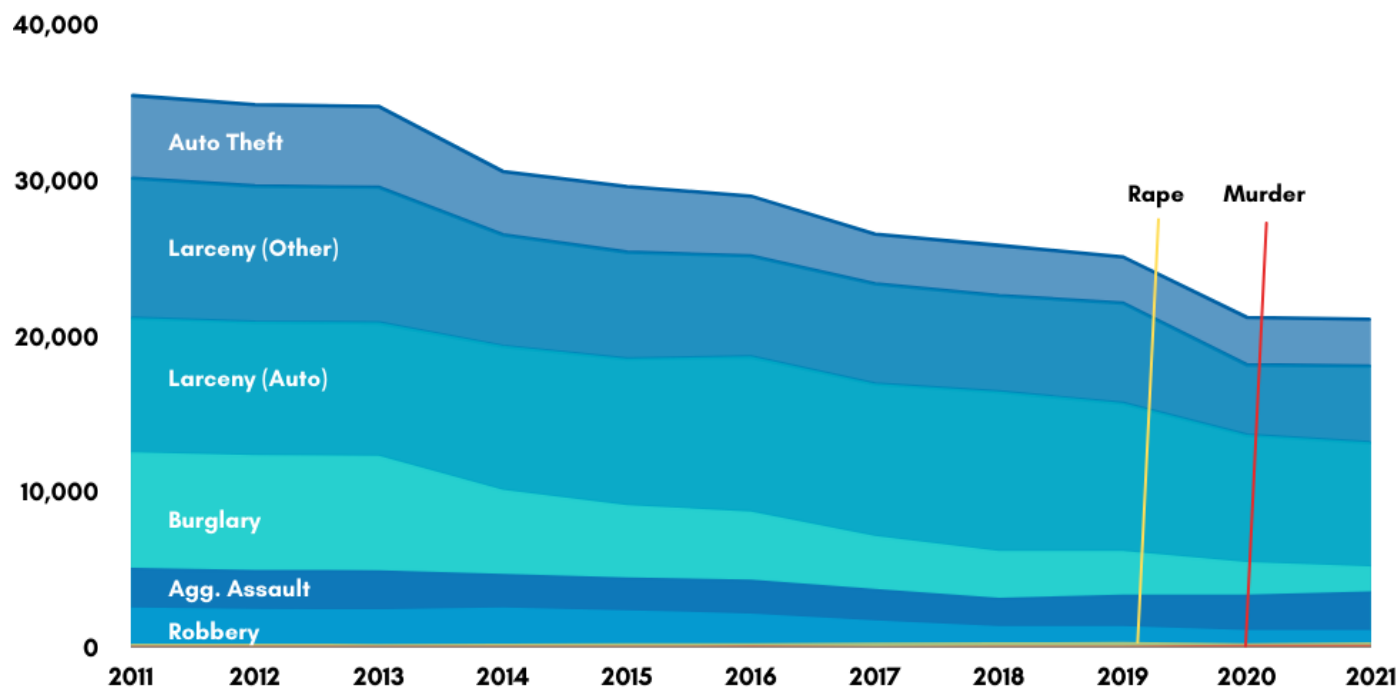
Source: Year-End COBRA Weekly Crime Report, 2021

B. City-Wide Crime Data.

Mirroring crime data for Buckhead, city-wide data from the past ten years reveal that overall, Part 1 crimes are at a *ten year low*. As the graph below demonstrates, the total number of Part 1 crimes has fallen every year since 2011, from 35,474 in 2011 to 21,117 in 2021.

² Andrew Senzer, “Buckhead Public Safety Update,” Fall 2021, <https://sites.google.com/atlantapolicfoundation.org/copy-of-bsp-update-sept-2021/home>.

DECLINE OF HIGH-PENALTY CRIME IN ATLANTA 2011-2021



Source: Year-End COBRA Weekly Crime Reports, 2011-2021

Since 2011, only two categories of Part 1 crime have risen: murder (from 87 to 156) and rape (from 136 to 164). More recently, since 2018, only two categories of Part 1 crime have risen: murder (from 88 to 156) and aggravated assault (1,807 to 2,478). While it is important to take these increases seriously, these numbers demonstrate that popular narratives which suggest a wholesale increase in crime are simply incorrect.

Just as importantly, national data suggest that the increase in homicides has resulted from an increase in gun violence, with pandemic-related root causes such as “a record increase in gun sales, children homebound like never before, social isolation, and economic struggles due to COVID-19 [that] put many people at increased risk for gun violence.”³ Consequently, to the extent that the City focuses on understanding and combating increases in homicides and pandemic-related gun violence, efforts should be narrowly-tailored to address the underlying causes while maintaining a balanced view which keeps the total numbers in perspective.

More broadly, these numbers should be incorporated into public-facing messaging to assuage concerns about a “crime wave”—in particular because polling data shows that while many citizens believe that crime has increased significantly (in large part because of media coverage), a much smaller number of individuals feels unsafe in their neighborhood.

³ Everytown For Gun Safety, “Gun Violence and COVID-19 in 2020: A Year of Colliding Crises,” 5/7/21, <https://everytownresearch.org/report/gun-violence-and-covid-19-in-2020-a-year-of-colliding-crises/#key-findings>.

For example, a June 2021 Washington Post poll found that 59% of Americans believed that crime is an “extremely serious or very serious issue in America”—however, only 17% said that this was true where they lived.⁴ A professional pollster found the same phenomenon in Atlanta, where 79% of surveyed Atlantans said they believed the crime rate in Atlanta had increased, whereas only 12% of people reported feeling unsafe in their neighborhood.⁵

As a new council begins its leadership, it is important to lead and educate with data. And as the data show, crime measured as most serious is at a ten-year low in Atlanta, and where crime has increased, it should be addressed at its roots.

III. Buckhead has monopolized a disproportionate share of City resources in the last year on public safety measures, and would not benefit from an additional, insular task force.

While the data do not support focusing public safety efforts on Buckhead, it is also important to note that Buckhead has already received a disproportionate share of public and private resources related to crime in the past year.

A partial list of public safety efforts concentrated on Buckhead in the previous year includes:

- The unveiling of a new precinct in West Village by summer of 2022, adding 24 officers to fill it.⁶
- Donations from three City Council members totaling \$125,000 to support the “Buckhead Security Plan.”⁷
- 28 new security cameras in the Buckhead area, with 22 additional cameras planned.⁸
- The creation and implementation of off-duty bike patrols and off-duty supplemental mobile patrols.⁹
- Passage of an ordinance to create a new Public Safety Training Center, or “Cop City” (advocated for by Buckhead residents and interests, and included in the Buckhead Security Plan).¹⁰

⁴ The Washington Post, “June 27-30, 2021, Washington Post-ABC News Poll,” 7/4/21, https://www.washingtonpost.com/context/june-27-30-2021-washington-post-abc-news-poll/9f67b281-b289-4e67-a9e1-9515018d7e90/?itid=lk_inline_manual_2.

⁵ HITstrategies, “Closing Atlanta City Detention Center,” 9/9/21, <https://hitstrat.com/closing-atlanta-city-detention-center-acdc/>.

⁶ Shaddi Abusaid, “Atlanta officials unveil new Buckhead police precinct,” 1/13/22, <https://www.ajc.com/news/atlanta-officials-unveil-new-buckhead-police-precinct/OXKWEFXGRH4ZEJMFHXUWRLSDA/>.

⁷ City of Atlanta, “Atlanta City Council Members J.P. Matzigkeit, Howard Shook and Matt Westmoreland Donate \$125,000 to Buckhead Security Plan,” 12/28/20, <https://citycouncil.atlantaga.gov/Home/Components/News/News/2374/>.

⁸ Andrew Senzer, “Buckhead Public Safety Update,” Fall 2021, <https://sites.google.com/atlantapolicefoundation.org/copy-of-bsp-update-sept-2021/home>.

⁹ Andrew Senzer, “Buckhead Public Safety Update,” Fall 2021, <https://sites.google.com/atlantapolicefoundation.org/copy-of-bsp-update-sept-2021/home>.

¹⁰ Atlanta Police Foundation, “Your Voice is Needed SUNDAY, 9/6 @ 4 PM!,” 9/3/21, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1sGoCn8P7hk9CoUFnLH2MFfhogAJwje1C/view?usp=sharing>; Buckhead

- The rollback of Atlanta’s bail reform ordinance (advocated for by Buckhead residents and representatives).¹¹

The Southern Center for Human Rights does not believe that more surveillance or policing increases safety. However, even under the belief that policing and surveillance *do* increase safety, Buckhead’s current surveillance infrastructure is already the most robust in the city: in addition to the citywide network of over 10,600 surveillance cameras connected to Operation Shield, over 90% of Buckhead’s 43 neighborhoods already have their own extra police patrol or security camera system, and Buckhead CID pays for an extra police patrol along Buckhead’s commercial corridors.¹²

In summary, Buckhead has already received a disproportionate share of resources devoted to public safety, despite lack of data to indicate that Buckhead should be an area of particular focus. The area does not need an additional, insular task force.

IV. Research supports a public health (rather than a law enforcement) approach to gun violence and other public health issues, which requires the involvement of public health, human rights, and direct service organizations in any proposed deliberative bodies.

While concern for crime has dominated much of the public discourse over the past two years, increasing public safety requires assessment and action beyond crime data. This assessment should include the broad range of public health and wellness crises facing Atlanta—of which a recent rise in gun violence is just one. Other escalating public health crises that deserve attention and resources in Atlanta include:

1. **Covid infection and deaths.** While data on Covid deaths are not available for City limits, data from Fulton County reveals that as of 1/10/22, there have been at least 1,800 total Covid deaths—far outpacing the rise in homicides over the past two years.¹³ Prioritizing an effective pandemic response is crucial in preventing additional deaths and to curbing the pandemic-related isolation and economic hardship associated with increased gun violence.

Community Improvement District, “Buckhead Security Plan Unveiled,” 12/2/20, <https://www.buckheadcid.com/buckhead-security-plan-unveiled/>.

¹¹ Jon Shirek, “Atlanta residents: Throw street racers in jail, impose heavy fines, then force them out of town,” 9/10/20, <https://www.11alive.com/article/news/local/atlanta-residents-push-for-tougher-street-racing-penalties/85-ac6628e5-5a98-4aa7-9af5-19d3e1f60bd7>.

¹² J.D. Capelouto, “New Buckhead security plan to address crime includes more police patrols,” 12/2/20, <https://www.ajc.com/news/atlanta-news/new-buckhead-security-plan-to-address-crime-includes-more-police-patrols/MDZSHNWI2VBHTPW5FGQ2VEAOZ4/>.

¹³ Fulton County Board of Health, “Fulton County Board of Health Epidemiology Report: Covid-19 Cases – 1/12/2022,” 1/12/22, <https://www.fultoncountyga.gov/covid-19/epidemiology-reports>.

2. **Homelessness:** In 2020, there were an estimated 3,240 people experiencing homelessness in Atlanta.¹⁴ That’s 3,240 people without a permanent place to sleep, who face additional difficulty securing work, sanitation, water, food, and other basic necessities. And while the City of Atlanta does not track hypothermia deaths, we know that these deaths occur every winter as homeless people face the cold. In 2019, for example, at least 18 people died during the winter after the closure of the Peachtree-Pine homeless shelter.¹⁵ Addressing the homelessness crisis in Atlanta is paramount to increasing public safety and wellness.
3. **Gentrification and affordable housing:** According to the Urban Displacement Project, nearly half of all Atlanta neighborhoods experienced a rapid increase in housing costs between 2000-2017, with 80,000 low-income Atlanta households living at risk of or already experiencing gentrification or displacement.¹⁶ Additionally, those who face displacement and are forced to move from their communities are disproportionately Black residents. Expanding affordable housing, preventing displacement, curbing gentrification, and keeping people in their homes is crucial to maintaining and increasing public safety.

These are just three other metrics by which to measure public safety and wellness in Atlanta, each of which paint a picture of pressing issues and crises that deserve significant attention and City resources. Along with improving public transportation, strengthening public education, and advancing criminal justice reforms, these are key areas of focus to truly improve public safety and wellbeing—and to reduce the gun violence and gun deaths that have increased in recent years.

Southern Center for Human Rights, along with other human rights and civic engagement organizations, would be thrilled to participate in any such task force identifying and working to solve the most pressing problems facing Atlantans.

V. Conclusion

The data make clear that this is not the time to devote additional resources to one part of the city that already has some of the lowest incidents of crimes considered most serious. Likewise, the data show that Atlanta is not experiencing a “crime wave” that is out of control, but rather an increase in a limited number of crime categories against a backdrop of continually decreasing crime. Rather than devoting more law enforcement resources to this issue, the City should pursue a public health response that focuses on the many public health

¹⁴ Partners for Home, “Point-in-Time Count 2020,” 1/3/2020, https://partnersforhome.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2020-PIT-Full-Report_FINAL-1.pdf.

¹⁵ Stephen Deere, “Hypothermia deaths multiply after Atlanta shelter closed,” 12/2/19, <https://www.ajc.com/news/local-govt--politics/hypothermia-deaths-multiply-after-atlanta-shelter-closed/FVA5V4XVkybH1VpRLzqznK/>.

¹⁶ Urban Displacement Project, “Atlanta—Gentrification and Displacement,” accessed 1/12/22, <https://www.urbandisplacement.org/maps/atlanta-gentrification-and-displacement/>

crises facing the City, and in so doing address the root causes that have led to increased gun violence.

Please feel free to reach out if we can clarify any of these points or provide additional information.

Best,

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