Today’s Reality

Community safety in the United States, and here in New Haven, is deeply unequal: some American communities—especially working class communities—have much higher rates of violent and property crime than others; and members of some American communities—especially Black Americans—experience unfair outcomes at many points in the criminal justice system.

Over the past decade, many more Americans have become aware of this long-standing truth. Public safety is a policy area where government simply must work. When people are fearful or distrustful, not much else can work well. March is Criminal Justice Month, so this is an important moment to examine what we can do to provide a safer, fairer New Haven for all who call the Elm City home. The national conversation around police reform has become intense, and the reactive response to these facts by many with vested interests in the status quo just makes it harder to pursue effective solutions.

A Twenty-First Century government requires Twenty-First Century solutions. For as long as there has been government, there has been a need for government reform. Too often politicians fall back on tired and outdated policies because they have no idea what else to do. New challenges are always arising, so we need new solutions, not the same old broken plans.

This campaign is all about imagining a better future for our community. But we don’t suggest pie-in-the-sky solutions: we examine the best information available to identify root causes of our common challenges, and identify the best solutions to address them. As a pragmatic progressive, I have a holistic plan for public safety that recognizes the importance of this issue and draws on
the best insights from around the policy world to address root causes of our perennial challenges. This plan will make us stronger tomorrow if we work together today.

The Plan for a Stronger Tomorrow

My plan for reforming the system for public safety in New Haven embraces a holistic approach and relies on best practices.

Stronger community engagement

The first step to addressing a community challenge is carefully listening to the community that is most affected. The current paradigm for getting “tough on crime” does little to actually enhance public safety, and often undermines public trust. While crime rates in New Haven have fluctuated up and down during the pandemic era, they remain stubbornly higher than in the rest of Connecticut. We need real partnership between New Haveners and their local government, and that begins with listening and building trust.

Following best practices from experts on public safety, we will engage in a deep audit of our public safety practices in New Haven. This audit includes listening meetings with community stakeholders from crime victims to those affected by incarceration, comprehensive review of current policing activities, rigorous analysis of all the evidence available to identify what is working, what isn’t, and where resources are being used in inefficient or counterproductive ways. We will be open to questioning every assumption about
what produces safe and secure outcomes for the public and willing to reallocate resources or restructure the police department and other public safety agencies in ways that respond to the public's needs. These meetings will also provide resources and educational opportunities for members of the public to better understand the relationship between crime, safety, and policing. This approach will help shape a productive conversation among New Haveners to set community priorities and goals.

End the Failed War on Drugs

For decades, local governments across the U.S. have focused an enormous amount of resources on enforcing draconian drug laws. The results are in: these policies have failed to achieve their goals. Arresting and incarcerating individuals for drug possession does not result in reduced drug use or addiction rates. Instead, it has resulted in overburdened courts and prisons, and disproportionately impacted communities of color. To put it more concretely: there are plenty of people who use and distribute drugs at Yale and in Westville, who do so with impunity, never fearing consequences from law enforcement. However, someone in Newhallville or Fair Haven engaging in the same activity could end up with long prison sentences and a felony record. This two-tiered system of law enforcement is not only unjust, it undermines the rule of law because it turns legal impartiality into a farce.
The consequences are clear and deeply troubling: while drug use doesn’t vary much across community, the consequences of how drug laws are enforced falls almost entirely on communities of color. Studies in New Haven and across the nation have found these stark disparities again and again.

In New Haven, police resources have been disproportionately devoted to enforcing drug laws, even though that isn’t the case in neighboring towns. Because the punitive approach doesn’t have any significant positive effects, it is effectively a waste of resources that could be more effectively used in other ways to meet our community’s needs.

A better approach is to decriminalize drug possession and shift resources towards prevention, treatment, and harm reduction. This will allow law enforcement to focus on violent crime and serious offenses, while also providing a public health approach to drug addiction.

The idea of decriminalization has been around for decades, but in the U.S. it has only been taken up relatively recently as a policy solution in some places. We can learn what to expect from places that stopped criminalizing drug use decades ago. The change in policy hasn’t led to social decay, or even to more drug use. It has allowed other government agencies to provide support rather than punishment for users who suffer from addiction and the other unhealthy effects of drug use.
Use city authority more proactively to prevent gun violence

In the decade since the unconscionable murders at Sandy Hook, it has become clear that American communities face a clear and present danger from the easy availability of guns. The epidemic of gun violence here—guns are now the leading cause of death for children in the U.S.—doesn’t happen everywhere, and it doesn’t have to happen here. While the public is overwhelmingly in favor of tougher gun regulations, the national government has been mired in gridlock, lacking the will to move forward.

Again, using insights from public health to make gun deaths from all causes—homicide, suicide, and accident—rarer, we can make the community safer. To its credit, Connecticut is a leader in policies that reduce gun violence. But the city of New Haven can use its legal authority to do even more and truly lead on this issue. My administration would enact a cutting-edge gun removal ordinance to get more illegal guns off of our streets. Additionally, New Haven should pilot two policy interventions to support the gun removal ordinance:

- The use of police commissioner subpoenas to develop evidence about the existence and location of illegal guns, and
- A Chief Inspector position, a skilled legal advisor experienced in developing evidence to act as a legal shepard in guiding the police department in developing the evidence
necessary to use an investigatory subpoena and defend the subpoenas when challenged in court.

We know that more guns in the environment generates more gun deaths, and we shouldn’t sleep easy if we’re not doing all we can to limit access to illegal guns in our community.

Rebuild community trust with robust, independent oversight of police.

In New Haven, as in most cities across the country, the current system for police accountability resembles that of the employed by the military: when potential misconduct is reported, the police investigate themselves. Time and again, we’ve seen that this is an ineffective way to correct mistakes or discipline officers who violate the law or department policy.

This lack of oversight is unacceptable for any city bureaucracy—especially for bureaucrats who carry lethal force and engage with members of the public in stressful, high-stakes situations. The public can only trust the police when it is the public that oversees the police.

New Haven made a step toward democratic oversight of policing with the institution of the civilian review board. However, the city has not supported the board in a way to make it effective, and the department’s accountability practices have a long way to go to achieve best practices. City Hall has not given the board the attention it needed to launch successfully, nor has it given the commissioners the support they need to be effective.

Independent oversight is a crucial first step to rebuilding public trust in police. I was the first permanent Inspector General in Hartford, a position created in 2021 to provide real, independent oversight of police misconduct.
My administration would follow this blueprint, and improve upon it in partnership with partners in city government, law enforcement, and the wider community. This office would replace internal affairs and act as an independent check on the department. It would have the authority to investigate and address complaints of police misconduct and report those findings to the Civilian Review Board and the Chief.

This office is a relatively small investment that can reap large rewards in more effective governance. My experiences from leading the federal Public Corruption Task Force in Connecticut to standing up the Inspector General’s Office has taught me how to build and implement programs to investigate government officials - including the police- and deliver true accountability.

Addressing Root Causes Means Taking Bold Steps

There will be many more elements in my public safety plan, and details will incorporate what we learn from our community engagement. A comprehensive, holistic approach to public safety also includes other areas of policy making, including housing affordability, economic development, and schools policy. Enhancing overall community strength will build community safety.

But we know that doing the same thing over and over again, or simply increasing resources to pursue the same failed policies isn’t the right answer. It’s time to imagine better.