

June 3, 2022

In 2021, the city of Atlanta came to an agreement with the Atlanta Police Foundation to construct the Atlanta Public Safety Training Center in a forested area in southeastern Atlanta. Amongst the stated purposes of the project is the construction of a mock city for 'urban police training' and 'Emergency Operations Center for collaborative law enforcement training'¹. This \$90 million project to be built over at least 85 acres in one of the largest urban natural green spaces in the city has been met with opposition from community activists, dubbing it 'Cop City'.

As physicians who work in Atlanta and participate within the Georgia Human Rights Clinic, and with experience evaluating asylum seekers and victims of various forms of abuses, we have grave concerns with the establishment of such a facility. We witness the further militarization of police in Atlanta and throughout this country and grow increasingly alarmed. This facility will be one of if not the largest police training facilities in the United States. The plans for creating mock buildings to train in urban settings is worrisome, especially given the city of Atlanta's ongoing and problematic relationship with the Georgia State University's GILEE (Georgia International Law Enforcement Exchange) program in which various local and national police departments train and participate with foreign police forces that have a history of human rights abuses and violations; in particular targeting historically vulnerable populations including indigenous communities, minorities and those living in poverty. We also worry that given its size and ambitions and stated goal of 'collaborative law enforcement training', this massive center will serve as a training ground for other police departments including possibly foreign police forces, further perpetuating this problem. To this point, police in Atlanta recently demonstrated a lack of self-awareness and concern for the wellbeing of the people and residents of Atlanta when on May 14, 2022 they [violently] arrested individuals peacefully protesting the plans to build this very police training center.

As physicians, we are concerned about the crises of poverty, racism, and people experiencing homelessness as well as poor health care and mental health access in this city. We see the physical and emotional scars in our patients that enter our clinics and lay in our hospital beds as a result of this violence of poverty and neglect. We also are well aware that those with mental health disorders and other disabilities are at increased risk of becoming victims to police brutality. Since 2012, there have been at least seven incidents where individuals with various mental illnesses were fatally shot by police in DeKalb County as well as an additional eight victims in Fulton County². Unfortunately, these grim statistics are not limited to the Atlanta metro area. Rather, similar fatal outcomes are replicated throughout the United States, where those individuals suffering from mental health disease account for 27% of those shot and killed by police in the period from 2015 through 2022³.

Finally, as physicians we are acutely aware of the effects on human health that the degradation of our environment has. The increased risk of infectious diseases and pandemics that we and future

¹ <https://www.atlantaga.gov/Home/Components/News/News/13827/1338?npage=2&arch=1>

² Over the Line, Police Shootings in Georgia. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. (n.d.). Retrieved May 23, 2022, from <https://investigations.ajc.com/overtheline/>

³ Washington Post database of police shootings. (n.d.). Retrieved June 3, 2022, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>

generations face stem in part from the encroachment of humans on wildlife. The ongoing COVID19 pandemic is best attributed to zoonosis. It is well established that environmental destruction and climate change negatively impact the public health and we should avoid further contributions to this catastrophe. Trees and the forest canopy play a crucial role in combating climate change⁴. This forested area that has been earmarked for the 'Atlanta Public Safety Training Center' and also nearby Blackhall studios should be preserved for the wildlife that reside in it and not destroyed for human consumption.

The policing apparatus does not need more funding or training. Rather than spending 90 million dollars in building this facility, this money could be used for a variety of other purposes including those that can directly or indirectly improve public health in the city, such as for much needed programs and services to improve medical and mental health care, funding our public schools and childcare programs, improving food access, alleviating poverty, providing assistance for immigrants, supporting the unhoused and ensuring affordable housing.

We call on the mayor of the city of Atlanta Andre Dickens and the Atlanta City Council to cancel the lease on Cop City, and the Dekalb County government to deny all permits for Cop City/Atlanta Public Safety Training Center and Blackhall Studios. We also call on all developers and contractors including Brasfield & Gorrie and Long Engineering to withdraw from these and other future similar projects that will ultimately harm the community, the public health and destroy the forest.

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⁴ <https://www.fs.usda.gov/ccrc/topics/urban-forests>