

**Written Testimony of Harlan Yu  
Executive Director, Upturn**

**Council of the District of Columbia  
Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety**

**Budget Oversight Hearing on the  
Metropolitan Police Department FY 2021**

**June 16, 2020**

Chairperson Allen, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony.

My name is Harlan Yu. I am the Executive Director of Upturn, a civil rights and technology nonprofit organization here in DC. I am also a Ward 4 resident with significant concerns regarding the safety and wellbeing of my family and all of our neighbors in the District.

Through my work at Upturn, I have developed a sharp understanding of the impact of surveillance technologies on our communities, especially those procured and used by the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD). In 2017, together with MPD and The Lab @ DC, we co-organized a series of community meetings to discuss the implications of the randomized controlled trial of MPD's body-worn camera (BWC) program.<sup>1</sup> I'm also one of the primary authors of the Police Body-Worn Cameras Policy Scorecard,<sup>2</sup> which evaluates the BWC policies of major police departments across the country against key civil rights principles.

**Consistent with the calls to defund the police by Black-led DC-based organizers, including Black Lives Matter DC, Black Youth Project 100, Stop Police Terror Project DC, and the DC Movement for Black Lives, I believe the District needs a new approach to public safety, including a significant reduction in taxpayer spending on police surveillance technologies.**

The District's experience with BWCs is a key case in point. In 2014, former MPD chief Cathy Lanier marketed BWCs to DC residents as tools that could reduce use-of-force incidents and complaints against officers.<sup>3</sup> But there's little evidence to suggest that department-owned,

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<sup>1</sup> Metropolitan Police Department and The Lab @ DC, Randomized Controlled Trial of the Metropolitan Police Department Body-Worn Camera Program (Oct. 2017), <https://bwc.thelab.dc.gov>.

<sup>2</sup> The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights and Upturn, Police Body-Worn Cameras: A Policy Scorecard (Nov. 2017), <https://www.bwccscorecard.org>.

<sup>3</sup> Transcript of D.C. Police Chief Cathy Lanier On Body Cameras, The Kojo Nnamdi Show, WAMU 88.5 (Oct. 2, 2014),

<https://thekojonnamdishow.org/shows/2014-10-02/dc-police-chief-cathy-lanier-body-cameras> ("... the technology's gotten better and better but across the board every single agency that has used these

officer-operated cameras have led to any meaningful community benefits. In fact, in 2017, the MPD's own rigorous study of its BWC program found that the presence of BWCs "had no detectable effect" on **any** of the outcomes that the study measured, which included documented use of force and civilian complaints.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the fact that the BWC program has not led to meaningful improvements in policing, the MPD has continued to spend more than \$4.2 million each year on the program, including a total of \$13.4 million between 2018 and 2020.<sup>5</sup>

It's not just that BWCs don't help. They can also be actively harmful. BWC systems are surveillance systems that disproportionately impact our Black, brown, and poor communities. Because cameras are worn on the bodies of officers, they are concentrated in the neighborhoods where officers choose to spend the most time. Cameras provide evidence to further prosecutions and drive the patterns of mass incarceration that nearly every Council member would reject.

BWCs are illustrative of a broader point: Surveillance technologies do not improve our communities, and no technology can fix policing. No increase in surveillance will create the conditions that lead to community safety. What communities need is a significant reduction in the footprint of policing — including a reduction in invasive surveillance that doesn't increase public safety — and an increase in investments that actually support people's wellbeing, including in our public schools, better housing, stable jobs, and quality healthcare.

Defunding the MPD includes defunding its use of surveillance technologies. The Council should begin this work starting with the FY 2021 budget.

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cameras said that citizen complaints against police dropped roughly 80 percent and that officers use of force went down 50 to 60 percent. So that's win-win for everybody as far as I'm concerned.").

<sup>4</sup> Metropolitan Police Department and The Lab @ DC, *supra* note 1.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Metropolitan Police Department, Performance Oversight Responses FY 2019 (Mar. 2, 2020), <https://dccouncil.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/JPS-Performance-Oversight-Responses-2020-MPD.pdf>.