Politics • Chicago Elections 2023

Crime is on Chicagoans' minds. Here's how nine mayoral hopefuls say they would address it.

All together, candidates are offering more than 100 public safety promises, from traditional foot patrols to car-chasing drones.

By Chip Mitchell, Mariah Woelfel

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LISTEN 3:59

People wait outside police tape as Illinois State Police and Chicago Police SWAT respond to an incident at a high-rise in the 1100 block of North Wells Street in the Old Town neighborhood, Tuesday, Jan. 10, 2023. Tyler Pasciak LaRiviere / Chicago Sun-Times

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South Side resident Sherri Allen-Reeves is still looking for a candidate to support for Chicago mayor and, like many voters, she's looking for someone who can best address the city's violent crime.

From the Auburn Gresham neighborhood, where she lives, to Bronzeville, where she works as a homeless prevention advocate, Allen-Reeves, 60, said she and her neighbors tend to live each day in a "state of fear."

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"Always looking over your shoulder when you're in the gas station, trying to make sure that you don't get snatched up by someone," Allen-Reeves said. "You, as just a regular citizen, are often at risk of being [attacked by] somebody who has a gun illegally."

In December, her friend's husband was jumped and killed in an apparent road rage incident in the Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood, Allen-Reeves said. But the longtime Chicago resident said crime is not a new concern. And she's looking for a candidate with fresh ideas.

"How do we deal with this? I mean, the reality for me is that there is something systemically wrong with how we're managing this, how we're talking about it," she said. "It's a cycle that is happening. And I'm not sure who is having the conversations to break the cycle."

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Chicago ended 2022 with 697 murders, down 13% from 2021, which had the most in a quarter century, according to CPD data. But last year was the seventh year in a row with 500 or more murders. Zooming back further, the city has had more than 40,400 murders during the last six decades — an average of 673 per year.

When it comes to violent crime in Chicago, there are no good old days. But residents would not know it from flipping on their TVs.

"Crime is out of control," former Chicago Public Schools chief Paul Vallas says in an ad that hit airwaves this month.

An ad from businessman Willie Wilson decries "crimes and gang-related violence" as news headlines of shooting tallies flash across the screen.

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And Mayor Lori Lightfoot says the issue is more complicated than her opponents think: “Anyone that says there are simple solutions is lying,” a supporter in one of her TV ads says.

One expert says any real effort to reduce violence in Chicago would require massive spending on social programs and education.

“We don’t necessarily have a good reference point in our city’s recent history of what safety truly looks like for everyone who lives here,” said Kim Smith, the program director of the University of Chicago’s crime and education labs. “I don’t know that we, as a society, fully appreciate the level of investment and continued focus that it’s going to take for Chicago to be a truly safe city.”

Chicago mayoral hopefuls have shared plans for the future of the city at multiple forums, including this one sponsored by Access Living in the River North neighborhood on Saturday, Jan. 7, 2023. Pat Nabong / Chicago Sun-Times

The general election for mayor is Feb. 28, with the potential for a runoff April 4. All nine mayoral candidates have shared plans for how they will address public safety — or, in Lightfoot’s case, touted what she posed as her achievements in office. All together, the candidates are talking up more than 100 different promises and efforts for curbing crime.

Non-policing approaches

To one extent or another, all the candidates talk about root causes of violence, such as a lack of jobs and training for young people, a dearth of mental health resources, and economic disinvestment.

But, responding to questions from WBEZ and the *Chicago Sun-Times*, most of the candidates said they would address those ills without shifting resources from the police. Only state Rep. Kam Buckner and South Side activist Ja’Mal Green said they would reallocate CPD’s budget to programs that address root causes of crime.

“This is not an either/or proposition, as we have continuously proven,” said Lightfoot, who has increased police spending every year since she took office in 2019. This year’s CPD budget is $1.94 billion.

Lightfoot points to her main economic investment program, dubbed INVEST South/West, an effort to use public dollars to attract private development in 10 high-need neighborhoods. But she has come under fire for overstating the program’s scale.

Of her eight challengers, only Buckner and 6th Ward Ald. Roderick Sawyer — who both represent parts of the South Side — are promising to continue the program, though they say they’d give it “real teeth” and “fine tuning,” respectively. Some of the others say they would spend the time, energy and money on public institutions instead.

“As mayor, I’ll take those dollars and invest directly in South and West side people and communities via better and higher paying jobs, public amenities and fully resourced schools, so communities and local businesses can develop with resources from within,” Cook County Commissioner Brandon Johnson, who represents parts of the West Side, said in a written response.

Candidates are offering a slew of other ideas to address the root causes of violence. All but Lightfoot and U.S. Rep. Jesús “Chuy” García, who represents a swath of the Southwest Side, have said they would reopen city mental health clinics shuttered by former Mayor Rahm Emanuel.

And most of the candidates see opportunities for young people as crucial, vowing apprenticeships and job training for teens. Green’s public safety plan includes universal preschool starting at age 3.

Asiaha Butler, the CEO of the Resident Association of Greater Englewood, said it’s these long-term solutions she wants the candidates to focus on.

“No mayoral candidate is able to do it immediately,” said Butler, whose group in part focuses on at-risk residents of that South Side neighborhood. “You could possibly arrest people more, but that still is not changing the culture or behaviors of individuals. What could be done immediately is really [making better use of] some of the anti-violence groups.”

While most of the candidates have avoided promising dollar amounts for violence prevention work, Ald. Sophia King, 4th Ward, vows $200 million a year. King, who represents another part of the South Side, says some of the money would be to pay people at “highest risk for gun violence” $600 per week if they participate in violence intervention work.

The Lightfoot administration has stepped up city support for community violence intervention in which former gang members reach out to shooters and potential shooters and connect them to jobs and services ranging from trauma therapy to parenting support.

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“All the outreach groups are reaching 15% to 20% of who needs to be reached,” said Teny Gross, executive director of the Institute for Nonviolence Chicago, which employs dozens of former gang members on the South and West sides. “We got to go to scale. So I want to hear from candidates. Do they have the stomach to go to the taxpayers and look in their budget?”

Institute for Nonviolence Chicago’s Executive Director Teny Gross at an Illinois House Judiciary Committee hearing in the Loop, Thursday, Dec. 15, 2022. Pat Nabong / Chicago Sun-Times

Numerous candidates — including García, Green, King and Sawyer — say they would quickly expand mobile teams designed to curtail the police role in handling mental health crises. Those promises echo community groups and aldermen who say Lightfoot’s Crisis Assistance Response and Engagement program is ramping up too slowly.

Adding more of those mobile teams could make a big difference for Englewood, according to Terry Williams, a University of Illinois Chicago police sergeant who grew up in that neighborhood.

“I think that’s a phenomenal way to shift the budget into spaces like that, where you can have community health workers employed to help with violence prevention [and] clinicians responding to different mental health crises,” said Williams, a board member of Imagine Englewood If, a youth-serving nonprofit group.

Policing approaches

Despite increased “defund the police” activism in recent years, most mayoral candidates seem resigned to — or even enthusiastic about — the Police Department’s role as the city’s main instrument against gun violence.

“We need to deal with how best to train and support police and hold police accountable, but we cannot keep our city safe without them,” García said as he released his public safety plan, which starts with “fully staffing” the Police Department.

Of 298 big cities reporting in 2020 to the FBI, Chicago had more police officers per capita than any except Washington, D.C., according to a WBEZ analysis of the data. The 298 included St. Louis, Detroit, Memphis, Cleveland and others with higher murder rates than Chicago.

King, Sawyer, Vallas and Wilson, nevertheless, are all promising to bring back some retired cops for roles in the patrol and detective bureaus. King’s plan would turn 1,000 retirees into a “reserve unit” for festivals, desk work, academy tasks and “other less dangerous duties.”

That prospect worries some experts.

“We need to make sure those officers are bought into the goals of reform and constitutional policing,” and not into abusive tactics that have long been used by the Police Department, said Smith, the University of Chicago researcher.

Most of the mayoral candidates, meantime, appear to favor shifting away from mobile and specialized police units, including two citywide teams formed by police Superintendent David Brown in response to the 2020 unrest. Roving units in Chicago have often been criticized as prone to abuses because the officers do not see the same citizens day after day.

Chicago Police Supt. David Brown speaks to reporters about a shooting outside Benito Juarez High School that happened Friday, Dec. 16, 2022. Tyler Pasciak LaRiviere / Chicago Sun-Times

Instead of the roving units, candidates are pushing plans to strengthen ties between officers and neighborhoods.

Sawyer, the alderman, proposed in his public safety plan to create incentives for officers to spend more years in a district and focus on “community policing.”

“That allows officers to become acquainted with a community, and allows communities to become acquainted with them,” he wrote.

Vallas, the former schools chief, is promising “beat integrity” in which each of the city’s 277 police territories would have at least one officer at any hour.

“Every police beat needs to have a police car,” he told the audience at a candidate forum in December in Jefferson Park, a Northwest Side neighborhood where many officers live. Vallas was endorsed Jan. 6 by Fraternal Order of Police Chicago Lodge 7, the union for the city’s 10,000 rank-and-file cops.

Other mayoral candidates are promising more foot patrols.

“Fewer and fewer officers walk the beat,” Buckner, the state lawmaker, said in his written plan. “Instead, they drive from hot spot to hot spot and miss out on getting to know the real fabric of the communities they serve.”

Several candidates are vowing to solve more murders and nonfatal fatal shootings by expanding CPD’s detective bureau and investing in witness protection. Wilson, the businessman, says he would also diversify that bureau, a part of CPD where Black members are especially underrepresented.

Candidates are also promising a range of new technology to fight crime. Green, the activist, vows vehicle tags and license plate readers to foil car jackings. Buckner wants 911 call takers accepting text messages. King, the alderwoman, wants drones to follow fleeing motorists and wants body cameras activated automatically by holsters that detect when an officer’s weapon has been drawn.

But Johnson, the county commissioner, would subtract some CPD technology, namely Shotspotter gunfire-detection sensors set up in many police districts. The city’s inspector general’s office found those sensors “rarely lead to evidence of a gun-related crime.”

The mayoral candidates so far have said hardly a word about soaring numbers of traffic stops in recent years — now the department’s main method of seizing illegal guns.

Civil libertarians have found the stops mainly target Black and Latino drivers. And Cook County State’s Attorney Kim Foxx’s office has criticized an increase in gun-possession arrests of people who have no prior convictions and may be carrying the weapon for protection in violent neighborhoods.

Police accountability and wellness

Chicago’s next mayor will work with the newly created Community Commission for Public Safety and Accountability — a seven-member panel tasked with acting as a watchdog over the Police Department, proposing police policy and playing a role in selecting and removing the department’s superintendent, among other things.

The commission’s creation was a major victory for police accountability advocates and delivers some checks on the mayor’s power over the police. The mayor, for instance, will have to choose CPD’s superintendent from candidates the commission chooses.

Still, the mayor will have the power to veto commission-proposed police policies. Experts say a mayor who believes in the panel’s mission — to give community members a greater say in police practices — will be important to the success of the new model.

“We’ve been excited so far about the level of dialogue that CCPSA has had with CPD,” Smith, of the University of Chicago, said. “They’re diving into complicated questions about staffing and the department’s strategic plan. It’s a window into the inner workings that we haven’t had. It’d be a shame to see a mayor change that.”

The 16th District police station in the Jefferson Park neighborhood, Thursday afternoon, Dec. 1, 2022. Pat Nabong / Chicago Sun-Times

Numerous candidates prioritize police accountability in their public safety plans. In a seeming nod to recent controversy over Lightfoot’s handling of a police officer with ties to the Proud Boys hate group, Green said his Police Department would have “zero tolerance for any officer with proven affiliations with any extremist group with a racial agenda.”

Buckner, the state legislator, said he’d require use-of-force incidents to be recorded and the video to be posted within 30 days.

Meanwhile, two candidates with tough-on-crime campaigns have advocated for less oversight of police. Wilson has repeated the refrain that he’d take the “handcuffs” off police and let them do their job. He has cited changes to the department’s policy on foot pursuits that were prompted in part by the death of 13-year-old Adam Toledo. Vallas, too, has said he wants that policy revoked.

Mayoral hopefuls are also vowing to strengthen police-wellness efforts after another spate of suicides. Three officers killed themselves in December, bringing to at least 22 the number of active CPD members who have died by suicide since 2018.

Responding to WBEZ and *Sun-Times* questions, all nine candidates said they would limit hours and day-off cancellations to avoid burnout and suicides. The public safety plans of Green, Sawyer and Wilson all promised to increase the number of CPD clinicians for officers.

Those plans drew applause from Williams, the UIC sergeant.

“You’re dealing with trauma on a weekly — at times, daily — basis, and it has to be treated,” he said. “Officers are human and they need to be treated as such.”

Read the candidates’ public safety plans

Candidates are listed in the order in which they will appear on the Feb. 28 ballot. Tap their names to read their full plans.

Ja’Mal Green

- Establish universal preschool starting at age 3 to stimulate the children and support the parents.
- Fund block clubs to build community trust and culture.
- Have zero tolerance for police officers who have proven ties to any extremist group with a racial agenda.
- Supply 100,000 vehicle tags to send signals from stolen vehicles and double the number of license-plate readers to foil carjackings.

Sophia King

- Invest $200 million a year in violence prevention programs, including $600

weekly payments to participants at highest risk for gun violence.

- Hire 1,000 police retirees to form a reserve unit for less-dangerous duties such as festival patrols and case management.
- Use drones to follow motorists fleeing police.
- Move officers to four-day, 10-hour shifts to improve community coverage and increase days off for officers.

Kam Buckner

- Shift officers to foot patrols instead of assigning them to drive between crime hotspots.
- Require police use-of-force incidents to be recorded and the video to be posted within 30 days.
- Equip 911 staffers to accept emergency messages via text.
- Form a civilian-staffed Internet Intelligence Unit to combat crimes planned online including gang murders, carjackings and smash-and-grab retail theft.

Willie Wilson

- Increase employment among young Black males by bolstering vocational education in schools and requiring students to master a trade.
- Diversify the detective bureau, of which Black members are especially underrepresented.
- Invest in witness protection to solve more major crimes.
- Increase police salaries and provide a housing allowance.

Brandon Johnson

- Double youth summer employment programs to more than 60,000 jobs and target at-risk individuals.
- Train and promote 200 patrol officers to become detectives.
- Expand support for victims and survivors of crime, especially domestic violence.
- Scrap the city's ShotSpotter contract for gunfire-detection sensors.

Paul Vallas

- Prioritize beat integrity in which each of the city's 277 police territories has a staffed car.
- Adjust background screening of police applicants to avoid rejecting quality applicants because of ties that come from where they were raised.
- Create a CPD unit to review decisions by prosecutors and judges and publicly hold them accountable.
- End CPD's nomination-based "merit" promotions and fill leadership posts using objective criteria.

Lori Lightfoot

- Boosted community violence intervention in which former gang members link shooters and potential shooters to jobs, therapy and services.
- Created mobile teams that curb the police role in mental health crisis response.
- Doubled unarmed security guards on public transit and deployed 50 canine teams.
- Expanded a program that diverts substance users away from the criminal justice system and into treatment and rehabilitation.

Roderick Sawyer

- Enable police officers to retire with a full pension after 20 years, making the job more attractive and boosting CPD's diversity and training.
- Create incentives for officers to spend more years in a district and focus on community policing.
- Expand the mobile teams that respond to mental health crises and nonviolent problems.
- Curb police suicides by hiring more clinicians and routinizing mental health check-ins.

Jesús "Chuy" García

- Return police resources from citywide teams to local units.
- Fill administrative positions with civilians and shift the sworn personnel back to patrol.
- Scale up and better coordinate community violence intervention. Improve the pathways to social and economic services.
- Increase investment in re-entry efforts for formerly incarcerated people.

Chip Mitchell reports on policing, public safety and public health. Mariah Woelfel covers Chicago city government for WBEZ. Follow them at @ChipMitchell1 and @MariahWoelfel.

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