

***Asheville's Policing  
Crisis with Ursula  
Wren of Asheville  
Free Press***



**The Final Straw Radio**  
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The city of Asheville likes to make headlines. The Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority, or TDA, has been working alongside other tourism industry groups, to make an impression in the minds of people worldwide and entice you to visit this little mountain city with its big fuck-off estate, the Biltmore, the beautiful mountains for hiking, waterfalls for swimming, artsy and crafty culture for consuming and rivers of beers for tourists to tube down. But in the last year, Asheville has, once again, let its “crisis in policing” also reach national and international audiences with two New York Times stories, one reaching the front page, which spoke about a 34% attrition rate of the Asheville Police Department since the George Floyd Uprising and renewed, local efforts to defund or decrease the police in Asheville in favor of social and restorative infrastructure. The article spoke mostly from official viewpoints. According to the Asheville Citizen-Times, to deal with the bad press, the APD hired a public relations firm called ColePro Media for \$5,000 a month to shift narratives and bring the veneer of progressive policing back to our fair, “land of the sky.”

This week, we spoke with local journalist, activist, abolitionist and anarchist, Ursula Wren of the **AvlFree.Press** about Asheville’s “crisis in policing”, a brief blooper roll of Asheville police foibles over the last decade, homeless camp evictions, prior and current efforts to restructure public safety, the reactionary business effort to bolster the police with blue ribbons of support, housing issues and other fare.

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**TFSR: So could you introduce yourself for the audience with any name, pronouns, location or other info that could be useful to the listeners?**

**UR:** Yeah, so my name is Ursula Wren. I live in Asheville, North Carolina. I use she and her or they and them pronouns, I kind of alternate between the two. I'm a police and prison abolitionist. I consider myself an anarchist. I'm a writer. I do web programming work, I design. I try to be creative in service of liberation, like a lot of people that you have on this podcast, and I'm really excited to be here.

**TFSR: Yeah, thanks so much for being here. We don't talk about Asheville very much here, but I think that a lot of the discussions and a lot of the work that people are doing around here is interesting — maybe not more interesting and stuff that's happening elsewhere — but I'm glad this is gonna air on national FM at some point. So random listeners get to hear it.**

**UR:** Very cool.

**TFSR: So Asheville has been in the media spotlight for a bit in the past year or so because of the “crisis in policing.” The uprising from last year seemed to be a major shifting and breaking point for policing here in Asheville, despite obviously, years of the police being a problem, including the reemergence of widespread discussion of the APD murder of Jai “Jerry” Williams, and the beating of Johnnie Rush a few years back. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about if you see that being a major focal point — like definitely there was a lot more discussion about police abolition coming about and defunding the police — but if you could sort of like set the stage with what you're aware of, of what's been happening in the last year to year and a half around policing here.**

**UR:** Yeah, so it definitely seems like Asheville has been in the spotlight quite a bit. You know, we had that front page New York Times article about us, about a month or two months back, something like that. I see that as mostly a reactionary effort, that has been sort of a concerted effort to try to undermine some of the gains that have been made last year, I'm not the only person to make this observation. There's been a media blitz of pro-police propaganda, and almost exactly one year after the largest civil

rights uprising in recorded history, as far as I'm aware. And you know, it's hard to ignore the implications of that happening almost on a year to date.

I would want to say one thing that comes to mind is sort of why this has been happening, not just Asheville, but everywhere, is that the FBI puts out a quarterly crime report — I think it's called like the Uniform Crime reporting, UCR, something like that — and in the wake of that report, there's just been a ton of crime wave propaganda, based on misinterpretation of the data. I mean, even on the FBI website, if you go look at that data, they recommend not trying to look at trends and stuff it, because the way the reporting works changes and all that other stuff.

So I would love to just sort of give a little bit of a brief history timeline of some of the things that have happened with Asheville police in particular, and why we might be more of a hot spot than other places. We're a bit of a microcosm because we've lost something like 30% of our police through resignation and retirement. And just to put that in context, for people who are not around here, Asheville is about a sixth of the size of Portland, about a fifth of the size of Atlanta in terms of population in the city proper. That's not even including their metro areas, which are way, way larger. So it's only been about 80 cops who've left our force, but that is about 30% of our force. And as you sort of mentioned, the "crisis in policing" isn't new here. We've actually had five new police chiefs since 2005 and several of them have resigned amid controversy of various kinds. One of the earlier ones was named Bill Hogan, and he actually resigned amid some controversy about missing evidence, including drugs and money that they couldn't account for. And then you mentioned Johnnie Rush, and Tammy Hooper was the police chief during that incident, it actually came out that the police department was conducting surveillance on several racial justice organizing groups here in Asheville, and she lied about it publicly and then had to backtrack.

**TFSR: That was during the Jerry Williams incidents right. Or, or was that Johnnie Rush?**

**UR:** You know, both of them were pretty close together. I actually have a breakdown timeline here we can go through.

**TFSR: Cool.**

**UR:** So yeah, I'll just start with that. So there were three Black men killed in one week in 2016, and that's where I'll start. Jerry Williams was killed on July 2, 2016. He was shot seven times by a cop who's still in the forest named Tyler Radford. Alton Sterling was killed on July 5, so three days later, by the Baton Rouge police, Louisiana. And Philando Castile was killed July 6, so the very next day, near Minneapolis, where George Floyd was killed in 2020.

So I'd say that the 2020 organizing efforts were an outgrowth of the organizing to happen here in Asheville, back then. In 2016, there were marches, there was even a group that like occupied the police station for something like 36 hours. I don't know if you remember that. They had some demands, one of the bigger demands that they put forth was something called "Million Dollars for the People", which sort of like, is echoed in defunding the police. But basically, the actual police were expected to get a million dollar increase to their budget. And there was a community effort basically in response to these killings, that demanded that that money be put towards community stuff, community programs for safety. Like I said, very echoed in the defund the police movement several years later. Ultimately, unfortunately, that failed. Then the million dollars went to the police sort of as a nod to racial justice organizers. The city implemented this thing called "the equity department", and they put body cams on the cops.

So February 2017, was sort of the crescendo of the Million Dollars for the People thing. In August 2017 Johnnie Rush was beaten and tasered for jaywalking. And for folks who aren't familiar with that story, I'd recommend looking into it, there's a lot of details. But basically, it was at night, there was no traffic or anything. This Black man named Johnnie Rush was trying to cross the street and a cop, I mean, just kind of wailed on him and beat him within inches of his life. And this is all caught on body cam. But that didn't come out until way late. So that happened in August of 2017. It didn't come out until March of 2018. Tammy Hooper had a meeting with the public. And during that meeting, because of the Johnnie Rush situation, she was accused of surveillance and she denied it publicly. So that was in March and then in May, it actually came out that she was lying, and that she had been surveilling a couple of groups, one group called Showing Up for Racial Justice, and the local BLM group.

So then she has announced to resign in 2018, but she doesn't actually, it's

not effective until 2019. Then we had another chief for 45 days — which is wild to me — who quit for personal reasons. And then in March 2020, we got our current chief. So May 31 of 2020, our brand new chief was giving orders to tear gas children and babies and people in Asheville for demonstrating in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. So that sort of brings us up to the Defund movement.

**TFSR: The funny thing about chief Hogan, to break down the evidence from scandal: so at the time, the Asheville 11 conspiracy case was going on — people who were arrested, accused to be an anarchist riot, on May Day of 2010 — the lawyer for a couple of the defendants asked to see evidence in their case. And the evidence room was unable to come up with this bag of broken glass, this broken phone and a hammer that were allegedly in there, tied to the case. And so the lawyers called for a survey of the evidence room and came back with — of the 10% of the evidence room that they had surveyed to see what was there — something like 20% of it was missing, including 1000s of dollars in money, a whole bunch of weapons, a whole bunch of guns, apparently tools like hammers and stuff. And the civilian who is in charge of the evidence room resigned to just sort of like skip town. We lost the chief and I think there was another cop that quit over that. And I think with that 45-day-cop, I may be wrong, but it seems like if he came from Greensboro that he was the one whose son had gotten a DUI hitting a pole on Merriman Avenue. And when the cops showed up, they found an unregistered gun in the car. But the charges just sort of seemed to go away for the son of the chief. And so there was sort of a question about them covering up investigations internally.**

So we've got a great history of good-old-person policing in North Carolina. But yeah, thanks for that breakdown. That's really... that's memory lane for me \*laughs\*. So can you talk a little more about the more recent iteration of the movement to call and pressure the city to defund the Asheville police department? As you said, there were echoes between what happened in 2016 with the Millions for the People and what happened in 2020, and what's continuing I guess. What sort of tensions exist between like the city's politicians, the bureaucrats and the police department, and what's the deal with the monuments and the manure coffin that I keep hearing about?

**UR:** The manure coffin. Okay, yeah. So had or has depending — some aspects of it have died down — but there were a few aspects to it. It was people calling into City Council, like every single meeting and demanding the defunding of the police. There's some problems with this strategy, namely that the City Council they own that process and they moved very quickly to sort of shut down — I mean they were being barraged with calls, every single meeting — so they put in a bunch of restrictive stuff to just tamp that down. And it has largely worked.

**TFSR: Which is basically shutting down public comment on a public meeting, right?**

**UR:** Yeah.

**TFSR: So the public good and make comments on a lot of different stuff.**

**UR:** Right. And just to be clear, “legally speaking”, they didn't shut anything down. They just added a whole bunch of new hoops, you had to jump through, like you had to register in this like, you know, certain window of time, you had to provide personal details about where you live, and your name and your phone number. And basically, they were asking you to give all of the information necessary for them to make a list of dissenters, which is maybe not what they would have done, but it certainly doesn't feel good to activists to give them that information and so readily. And yeah, they had like names and phone numbers attached to the calls that they were playing publicly. So yeah, unfortunately, that was pretty effective.

There were some other aspects of the defund movement. There were some really good, like militant street actions and shutting down streets and highways that went on for a couple of months, you know. Like, every couple of weeks, there would be a big street action, and I mean, they would do a pretty good job of totally shutting down streets, which was great. There were some theatrical aspects. Like at one point, there was a giant check floating around. Like people had made a giant check for 50% of the police budget. And they taped it to the library door or something like that, to sort of demonstrate where that money could go, I guess.



There was this one demonstration where people made pink slips for the cops, like firing slips, and were handing them out to cops on the street. And like repossession tickets, and putting them on cop cars. Asheville has a bit of a reputation for being like an “artsy city” or whatever. And I thought that was an interesting way— that stuff got on the news, more, you know, made its way through the public conscious through social media and stuff more than the more militant actions did. So I thought that it was a good way to lift up the rhetoric.

So yeah, there was a decentralized day of action, which was where this like anonymous activist group put out a call for people to go do things like that. And folks, you know, did some, some tagging of buildings and did, like a, there was a big...I’m not sure what the word is, but it was made of cloth — not really a banner because it was attached to the wall — of art that you see all over the internet, of a cop under a Klansmen robe, like with the Marilyn Monroe picture with the skirt blowing up. I don’t know if that makes any sense at all \*laughs\*.

**TFSR: Yeah, yeah.**

**UR:** So things like that, you know. But I would say that overall, the defund movement was largely rhetorical. It was effective in terms of shifting narratives. And if the cops are to be believed, then the shifting narrative has a lot to do with why we lost 30% of our cops. So I chalked that up as a win even if we didn’t get abolition, we managed to get 30% of the cops to quit just by being mean to them. Which I think is a win.

So yeah, that’s sort of the defund movement. I would say the only material gain that we got was council agreeing to remove some monuments. Like you mentioned, they have not really followed through super well. So they removed one monument that was to a Confederate general or something — I’m not even actually sure what it was for — but it was definitely Confederacy related near the courthouse. They removed that sort of quietly one night without much fanfare. But there is a giant, I mean, I don’t know...do you know how tall the Vance monument is?

**TFSR: No idea.**

**UR:** It’s huge.



**TFSR: It's not very tall right now, which is great.**

**UR:** Yeah, it's significantly shorter, but it was, you know, like super tall obelisk in downtown, dedicated to this man whose last name is Vance. And he was a slave owner.

**TFSR:** And a governor. And in the Confederate military, too.

**UR:** Yeah. All around racist guy. For sure. Yeah, giant obelisk downtown, the community had been trying to get that removed for years and Asheville, after a lot of kicking and screaming, did decide to take it down. It has not come all the way down yet, because it keeps getting ensnared in legal battles with these, like Confederate, you know, historical society groups.

**TFSR:** Yeah, I think the upkeep was the Sons of Confederate Veterans, like they were the ones who would remove paint and who were, quote unquote, "responsible for the upkeep", which sounds like an ability to funnel money to this group of good old boys. But as I understand, like the latest— there was a question along the way in the past when it had been discussed of who had the authority to remove the monuments — and this is not dissimilar to the silent Sam question at UNC Chapel Hill, where the University would say we have authority, the county would say we have authority or we don't have, everyone would say we don't have authority. The state would be a part of it. And in this case, as I understand the state has put an injunction on removing the base of the monument saying that the city doesn't have the jurisdiction to remove it under some historical monuments laws on the books. I don't know if that's— is that sound about right?

**UR:** That's not what I have heard. But, you know, I, to be honest I gloss over when I start trying to read about legal proceedings—

**TFSR:** Yeah.

**UR:** — so I'm not sure exactly who it is I thought that it was a confederate preservationist group that was suing them, but definitely somebody is suing them right now.

**TFSR:** That could just be the state of North Carolina.

**UR:** \*laughs\* I mean, they are kind of a confederate preservationist group. So yeah, somebody's suing the city right now to get them to stop removing it. Unfortunately, for those folks, they have already removed almost all of the obelisk, all that's left is the base that says "Vance". So that's sort of dragging out. I, you know, I read an article about it every, like couple of weeks where they're like "oh, and here's some more nothing that happened in court, and nothing has moved forward with this".

So yeah, in addition to those things, folks asked for them to change the names of a bunch of streets, because we have a ton of streets that are named after slave owners as well. It seems like, at present, they're not going to proceed with that, because business owners don't want to change their marketing materials. Just such a perfect demonstration of capitalism and white supremacy coming together against community demands, because it's just a street name, but people don't want to change what's—they'd rather have the name of a slave owner on their window than pay somebody to come change the vinyl.

So last thing from what you just said, was the manure coffin, which I'm excited to talk about. It wasn't really theatrical. It wasn't meant to be fun. The coffin was part of a protest that happened on the day that some Kentucky grand jury released indictment information in the case of Briana Taylor. And from what I can tell, from what I saw, it was mostly younger Black folks trying to demonstrate their grief and their, you know, they wanted to symbolically bury some of the folks who have been killed by police. So what they did is they took a coffin that appeared to be constructed out of something like plywood, and they dropped it at the front door of APD's headquarters, and they poured dirt over it.

The cops took that gesture, despite the fact that these folks were standing outside chanting "Say her name, Breonna Taylor!". I mean, the flyer that went out in preparation of this event had Breonna Taylor's name really big on it, despite all of that the cops turned it into a victim narrative for themselves. And they said that it was a threat against their lives. And they also made the false claim that it was full of manure, which is just such a wild thing to lie about. Because it was, yeah, it was a closed coffin that they poured mostly what looks like regular dirt, and maybe a little bit of potting soil, over the top off. I would say this type of "we're actually the victim here", twist is a big part of their overall media strategy and narra-

tives that they've been putting out over the past year. But yeah, it definitely wasn't not a threat to them at all.

**TFSR:** Yeah, and there's like, it's a pretty terrible PR move also to try to symbolically shift the significance of the soil inside of the box to being animal feces, when it's about laying to rest people that were victims of state violence or like anyone, but yeah. It's a grasping at straws type thing.

But to just sort of step back — and thank you, thank you for that breakdown — to sort of step back to the question of — because I packed that, that with a lot of different elements — there is a tension that that has sort of come to the fore visibly between city politicians. Like the pressure, according to City Council, activists had left signs requesting that City Council members vote to decrease police funding at the residences of some of the City Council members, and that was considered to be a threat by the city council members, or was presented as such during one of the one of the meetings that happens every other week.

But during the pressure campaign that folks were trying to call in and apply pressure, it wasn't just that people were calling into City Council — obviously, this is during COVID and so people couldn't show up and stand at a podium and talk because these events were close to the public, which creates a huge amount of obscurity to the process and difficulty to like participating in this quote unquote, “representative democracy” system we have. But also, I think it came to light at some point to a lot of people that actually City Council isn't directly responsible for the hiring, directly responsible for the budgeting choices for the police, that it comes down to the bureaucratically appointed city manager. Which kind of while people were attempting to — I don't fault people at all for taking the approach of attempting to use the rules in place to shift agency and apply pressure and make the changes happen that they want to see happen — but it seems like the power, the existing power structure for the city already had the barricade set up and ready for people to come up against. Can you talk a little bit about those tensions between the elected city officials who maybe did want to make changes, maybe didn't, and the police department and the city bureaucracy?

**UR:** Yeah. So you know, you said something earlier about how they were basically trying to pass the buck on the monuments, right? There's always mechanisms in place with these systems where everybody can just shrug and say, "oh, not my department", you know, it's sort of they like, they diffuse responsibility in such a way that there are these failure points that are designed to — I mean, City Council's job is basically to be yelled at, and not do anything about it, right? They can pass things...but for the most part, when it comes to actual change, the mayor loves talking about the "weak mayor system" we have here in North Carolina. I'm not clear on all the details but basically what it boils down to is what you just said, which is: the mayor is an elected person who doesn't actually have the power to do all the things that she claimed she wants to do, and has to instead defer to the city manager, which is an unelected position, appointed position, and the city manager is actually the person who, in this case, is responsible for the police department for all of city staff.

So a big rhetorical strategy that you see out of city council is basically being like, "oh, we'd love to help you with this stuff, but you see, city staff has told us we can't, and we don't have the power to override them". So I mean, I'm a cynic. So of course, I see this as a ploy. If they really wanted to, they could find some way...they find ways to make things happen that they want to make happen. In my experience. This sort of diffusion of responsibility is just, is very clever. And there have been a couple of folks, never at the same time, on City Council who— we had a council member who did actually support, vocally supported cutting the police budget in half. Which was the demand by a group called Black AVL Demands, which was like a multi generational Black organizing group. And their number one demand was cut the police force budget in half. And we had one council member named Brian Haynes, who actually was in support of that. He's no longer on Council, we actually had an election in the middle of all of this. So, you know, we lost a potential ally in Brian Haynes during all that. He was planning to retire anyway.

And now we have a new, more progressive council member named Kim Roney, who has not been vocally in support of defunding the police, but has sort of always voted "no" on anything that gives them more resources or money, things like that. But again, the power is diffused in such a way that she doesn't really have any power as far as I can tell. It's more of a symbolic thing, that there's always one "no" on the record.

I'd say there was some other sort of tensions, especially among the leadership because of Chief Zack being brand new, having just started in March of 2020, which is basically right before COVID kicked off here. And I mean, obviously, COVID was already happening across in other places in the world, but typical American fashion, we weren't really concerned about it until it started affecting us. And that's started happening in April, late March, early April, so Chief Zack had not been in place very long. And then, of course, the George Floyd Uprising started happening in early summer.

**TFSR: So you had mentioned a little while ago about the attrition rate of the police department and the city losing about a third of its police force due to retirements or cops quitting. Can you talk about why this is a crisis? It's not like the police actually get trained for a long period of time before coming on to the job, right? It's not like they have to go through a four year degree program or something like that. Why are they so concerned? How abnormal is this? Like, how long does it take for a city to replace a cop? Where are they going and what what are they doing as far as we know,**

**UR:** According to the police department, it'll take a long time, several years at least, to get the police numbers back to where they were from this attrition. They say it takes as much as a year to get someone from the point of "I want to be a cop" to actually being able to do that job on a daily basis without being at a training capacity. And this could have something to do with the fact that Asheville is a nominally progressive city and we put our police through more training than the average police does. I'm not actually sure. But I know we do like Verbal Judo training and things like that.

So I know in 2020, for example, they graduated six cadets, and five of them have already quit. So the point in that that I'm making is that they put quite a bit of money, time and resources into training these cops and it does not guarantee the cops will actually stay cops. According to the chief, a lot of the people who are quitting are younger, newer recruits, who basically just feel hated immediately upon becoming cops and decide to change career paths. According to the chief it's about a 50/50 split between people who are like, "Wow, I didn't realize that I would be this hated, I'm gonna go do something else. Like, I'm gonna go be a refrigerator repairman or something like that".

**TFSR: Awesome.**

**UR:** Yeah, which is great. And people who just moved to — Asheville is considered, you know, a blue dot in a red sea because we're in North Carolina — so a lot of the cops just move to the county or move to a surrounding city where it's more friendly to police and they continue being. But I think a 50/50 split is pretty good. If we can get 50% of people who quit to stop being cops altogether. That seems like a good number to me.

**TFSR:** There's a billboard in the city on Patton Avenue that's, you know, pretty prominent as you're driving from West Asheville down towards downtown that's just like four, I think, four very diverse — ethnically and gender — police officers in uniform and then an empty spot in the middle with like a frame and it says "This could be you!" or whatever. It's like an advertising campaign from the Greensboro [correction, Winston-Salem -Editor] police department, which like for folks who don't know, is a much larger city. It's what? Like two and a half hours to the east of here. And they're, I guess they're, they're being like, "Nobody likes you in Asheville? Come on down to Greensboro. We love cops, we'll hire you". But I was surprised to hear that that wasn't where, that wasn't necessarily what was happening with the police that were leaving, they were probably just like, well, if they've already got the training, and that's paid for, we can just scoop them up.

**UR:** Right. Yeah, I mean, and again, like I said, we have to trust what the chief is saying. And he has political reasons why he would fudge these numbers. But according to the chief, it's been about half and half in terms of people who have just totally quit the job, and who have moved to other departments. They also tend to cite low pay, which, without getting too much into the weeds on this, Asheville in general is an extremely expensive place to live, pretty much everybody here is underpaid. It's the tourists with money who come and drive up costs.

So yeah, the police force despite claiming that they're underpaid, they start higher than the median salary here in Asheville. Maybe some of them are going to get better pay elsewhere, maybe some of them are going to find a more "friendly" area to police. And apparently half of them are quitting altogether.

**TFSR:** Because of paywall \*laughs\* I didn't actually read the New York Times article that came out, but I do know, I'm familiar enough with one of the cops that featured prominently in there, is a white officer, is queer — Lindsay Rose is the name that I saw in the New York Times — it sounded like they had said that they had quit because they had felt people were being mean to them. But I had also heard that they had been rehired. So maybe some of that saved budget from the cop attrition has gone towards upping their pay. I don't know if you have anything to say about that.

**UR:** I actually do know for a fact that just a couple of weeks ago, City Council voted for a budget that does increase police pay, they're all getting raises. And they are actively using the attrition. So they fully funded the police force again, despite this attrition. So they gave them the same amount of funding as they had before with the larger number of cops. And they're using that extra money to try to refill those positions, but they realize they know that they can't do all of that in one year. So the extra money is going towards giving all of the cops a raise and more training and technology, of course. So I have more to say about Lindsay Rose, about the media angle, but we can come back to that when you get to that question.

**TFSR:** Can you talk about what sort of material changes have happened with police in town in terms of patrol areas and frequency of patrols and response times? And has that affected crime rates? Like one thing I've seen [that] is good [is] the cops saying that they are not wanting to show up to certain kinds of calls or I guess be doing the foot patrols that they were doing before? Is that, do you have any insights on that?

**UR:** Yeah, I've said it a few times, but just to reiterate: it's been about 35% attrition, they have refilled some of those roles, but not nearly all of them. So there are substantially less cops. That's definitely the biggest material impact of the last year. As a result of that they have, as you said, they released a statement saying that they would not always respond to certain kinds of infractions crimes. To me it read as a piece of political theater, because the things that they list are things like a simple assault that is reported after it occurred, or a theft under \$1,000 when there's no suspect, which like, I don't know, I've never been one to call the cops much, but from what I understand, they don't really help or do anything about



in those situations anyway. Like, what? What is the cop going to do if they show up after an assault has occurred, a simple assault has occurred. Which, “simple assault”, just to be clear to anybody who might not know is something like being punched. It’s not, you know, it’s nothing super violent. It’s...simple.

So yeah, to me, it read as political theater. Of course, the chief has come out and publicly sort of lambasted anybody who says that it’s political theater, but I remained steadfast in my conviction that it is political theater. There have been a few more, in terms of crime rates, as I mentioned, at the top, there was this FBI Uniform Crime reporting standard, they released these reports every quarter. Notably, the reports don’t include a lot of, like, major cities and things like that— I think it’s something like 30-40% of police forces around the country are actually involved in this most recent report. And that’s been used to sort of foster this narrative of a “crime wave”. In terms of our local crime statistics that I’ve looked at, there has been a few more gun related crimes, and things of that nature. It’s also worth mentioning that gun sales skyrocketed in 2020. I don’t know the exact numbers, but it was huge. Like a huge increase in the amount of guns that were sold. And I’m not anti-gun or anything, I just, I think it’s important to point out that if there are more guns, it follows that there would be more crimes committed with guns, because there are more guns.

So in terms of our local crime statistics, it looks, to me, mostly like everything is remaining flat overall. The overall crime rates are — people will say this all the time — are way down from like, the 90’s. And there are a multitude of reasons that I don’t want to super speculate on as to why that is. But this fear mongering about there being this big spike in crime just doesn’t bear out in the data that we have. And the data is notoriously manipulative, and things of that nature. But you know, if you accept their framing of looking at the numbers, even that doesn’t bear out. The increase in gun crime is offset by decreases in other types of violent crime. So even violent crime rates are not trending upwards right now. They’re pretty much flat.

**TFSR: Yeah and I guess a point-a point of mostly white supremacists fear mongering around violent crime and the othering of folks — and just, whether it be racially or poor folks or whatever, will tend to focus on gun crime, rhetorically as a thing that is coming from those popula-**

tions — but so this is—this is like a third hand thing. I was at the grocery store, I was listening to two people talk about a shooting recently that happened at a bar in West Asheville, where somebody drove up and like shot into the place. Which is scary. It's definitely scary. Yeah, the cops are not going to stop that. Well, super gun advocates say the cops are not going to stop that and that's why people need more guns. Which is not, I'm not making the argument that people need to bring guns into bars. But that's the argument finally that law enforcement makes is “we will track down and trace the person that was in traffic that got out and shot into the bar”. Which, possibly from security cameras they might be able to do that sort of thing. But like honestly, it's pretty, it's pretty unlikely. And more cops in this situation does not mean less of this sort of incidents. Like there's a lot of things that can sort of like lead into that situation, including the fact that we're in the middle of a year and a half long pandemic. There's relatively high unemployment. People are on the verge to eviction. People are continuing to try not to get sick or care for people that might get sick from this increasingly dangerous pandemic but—

**UR:** — largest wealth transfer in, I mean, I don't want to, I don't want to make a false statement, but from what I understand, one of the largest wealth transfers ever occurred during this pandemic. The poor got significantly poorer. And the rich got significantly richer throughout this global crisis. And that has to do with the crime data, stuff too. Like what you just said, speaks to something about the crime data. Which is, there's so many levels on which we have to sort of combat their narratives, while also combating their framing, right? You have to either accept some of their framing stuff, like that the gun crime thing that you brought up. It's like, “why are we even discussing that in relation to their being police attrition”? Because they don't really have anything to do with one another? More cops does not make there be less gun crime. There's conflicting evidence on whether or not that is even the case.

**TFSR:** Yeah. So thanks for running down that engine with me. So can we talk a little bit about what you've learned about the media angles on this? Like, what-what is mainstream media saying about this? And what is the APD-Public Relations connection? When did that start, and do you have any details on that?

**UR:** Yeah. So and this goes back to officer Rose, you mentioned earlier. She's an interesting character in this aspect, in particular. During the protests last summer, to sort of take it back, there was, after the first few days of tear gassing and stuff like that, the community support kind of swelled. One of the ways in which this manifested was people started showing up to protests prepared to take care of folks who were tear gassed. And they actually set up a medical — it had medical stuff and snacks and water and things of that nature — in an alleyway near where the protests sort of coalesce downtown. Right after, I think it was actually like five minutes before curfew — because you know, last summer, all these cities were putting out these curfews which drew ACLU ire — but right near the curfew, the cops, according to the folks who work there, without warning, sort of stormed this medical tent. And not only did they like, you know, throw the folks who were working the table to the wall and stuff like that. They started actually destroying the medical supplies. So there's this photo, that goes around that's been going around by a local reporter named Angie Wilhelm, of a APD officer stabbing a water bottle. So they were stomping and stabbing water bottles—

**TFSR:** — **in full riot gear.**

**UR:** In full riot gear, yeah. And that photo went national, right? It got a lot of attention and went viral on Twitter. Folks who are listening to this might have even seen it, maybe not realized it was Asheville. So that was obviously a horrible PR moment for Asheville, which is a tourist town that tries to market itself as “progressive” and “liberal” and stuff like that. Directly after that incident the Asheville Police Department hired this company called Cole Pro Media, which is a PR firm. Interestingly, the PR firm, if you go to their website right now, it'll have a bunch of talk about how they never spin anything or anything like that. They're just trying to help police be more transparent and accountable, is their line. But the local paper, Citizen-Times, did a little bit more investigating and found an earlier iteration of Cole Pro Media's web presence in which they advertised that they would help cops outsmart journalists. Like openly stated that that was one of their goals.

So this transparency and accountability language reappears in that New York Times article. The New York Times sent this guy here to interview the chief of police, the mayor, of a handful of locals and they ran it on the

front page. And one of the cops that they interviewed was officer Rose, who you mentioned earlier. Officer Rose quit the force pretty spectacularly. Because as a queer person, they didn't feel like the queer community was being accepting of them being a cop. And according to the New York Times article they went back to retrieve their badge to give it to their mother or something like that, and—

**TFSR:** \*mockingly\* Awww.

**UR:** Right, so sweet. And Chief Zack talked them into rejoining the force as a, I can't remember the exact term, like community liaison or something like that, right? And in the New York Times article, it's notable that they use the same language, "accountability and transparency", like it's almost word for word for their justifications that they gave for hiring this PR firm. Was we want to be more accountable and transparent. So then, you see that she came back to do that job and then is on the front page of the New York Times, like posed up in this very dramatic photograph of her, like, looking sad out a window. And it's hard not to tie all that together in my mind: the water bottle incident, the PR company, the victim narrative of the coffin and all of the stuff that's been happening very recently with the, you know, "we're losing cops and we can't keep up", the accountability and transparency language, officer Rose going into the New York Times, they started a community engagement division of the police force, which officer Rose is also on whose job is again, using that accountability and transparency language.

**TFSR:** **What do cops in Asheville actually do? It seems like the evictions of houseless folks that happened over the summer this year from public parks put a lot of stress on the APD's morale. Can you talk about that, and what you see is the relationship between homelessness, non-profits — or what some might call poverty pimps — and harm reduction efforts with the police in Asheville?**

**UR:** You can't really understand the function of Asheville Police Department without understanding that we are primarily a resort town. We make the majority... I say "we", the people who actually have money and capital in the city... make the majority of their money from tourism. We're known as "beer city", we have a ton of breweries and bars. In fact, it's been suggested to me very recently that we might have one of the highest num-

bers of breweries and bars per capita from just about any city nearby or anything like that. We have a ton of breweries, and the craft beer scene is really big, the music scene. We're also nestled in southern Appalachia, it's a very lovely environment. All of that to say that those are used as justifications for why we need to focus the lion's share of our resources, as both a city and a county, on appeasing tourists.

So one function of that, one aspect of that, is that we have the most bloated police force per capita of any North Carolina city. To my knowledge. And the reason for that is because police in the city function to use their fascistic language, in my opinion, "keep the streets clean", right? And what they mean by that, of course, is not, you know, like public service of picking up trash. They mean by keeping the streets clean that they want to keep folks who tourists might not like to see, such as unhoused folks, out of line of sight.

So to me, that's just so remarkably fascistic, the idea that human beings are trash to be cleaned up. But that is one of the major functions of the police. And there are several, you know, reactionary, right wing business groups who are super focused on that tourist money who make this argument themselves all the time. I don't have to put words in their mouth at all, they will straight up say, "why can't we use more tourist money to keep the streets clean of unhoused individuals?" I mean, they'll call them homeless folks.

So it's really important to understand that's one of the major functions of Asheville police, is keeping the town free of things that might remind folks who are coming here to have a cozy vacation. They don't want anything reminding them of capitalism, the failures of capitalism. You know, as I mentioned earlier, a lot of the folks who work in Asheville can't actually afford to live here. I think it's the most expensive city in North Carolina, from what I understand, to live in. So keeping unhoused individuals out of sight is one of the biggest functions of the police. We've long had an affordable housing crisis in the city. And it's just getting worse recently with all of the recent buyouts and stuff that these investment firms are making.

**TFSR: And Airbnb's.**

**UR:** Oh, yeah, Airbnb, that's a big one, huge one. A lot of them are not

even, like, legally allowed to exist. But of course they do because folks can just list their house on a website. That's about to get a whole lot worse, because, I mean, we're recording this today on Saturday [August] the 31st and as of today, the eviction moratorium, federal eviction moratorium has expired. There might be something in place at the state level, but in any case, that's signaling the end of protections for renters, who are behind due to the pandemic. So that's sort of a high level. What the police do in Asheville has a lot to do with basically keeping it a comfortable place for rich tourists.

In terms of the like, day to day what they actually do— somebody put out a really cool zine last summer, that's sort of where they like, actually sat and listened to police calls, or on the scanner or something like that — I'm not actually sure how they did their research — but documented a lot of calls. There's also this group called AVL Watchdog that got ahold of call center data and like actually broke it all down. So basically mostly what Asheville actually does, according to this, is traffic stuff. Assist motorists, deal with improper parking and things like that. That's 23% of their time. According to this. To be more clear, it's 23% of the calls that they get. How they actually spend their time can look a lot different from the percentage of calls that they get for sure.

What's notable on this is that when you're talking about things that a lot of people consider harmful, such as theft or violent crime or anything like that, you're down in the like, I mean 5% were reports of theft, including shoplifting. 3% of their calls had something to do with mental health, people having issues publicly. So the point being that it's such a small amount of what they actually do on a day to day basis, they mostly just exist to keep unhoused individuals out of sight. And one part of that is, they have been evicting folks from these public parks. There was a big one, there were two that really drew a lot of attention very recently. One was on literally the coldest day of the year of 2021, so far. And the police decided to evict a camp of folks who were camping under a bridge. And the reason that they did this is notable, it's because they got a report from this thing called the Asheville App, which is tourists using it as a direct line of communication with police and city council and stuff. And you know, the officials of various capacities. So there was a report made, and then within a few hours, they went out there and evicted this camp that was under a bridge.

And then there were folks camping at a couple of different parks, public parks. Which as I understand it was where they were told to move, to the public parks from more public spaces where they had been under bridges and things like that. I'm not sure of the details of that, but from what I understand they were directed to go there [by the city]. And somewhat recently, they decided that they weren't allowed to be there either, and sent out notices that everybody had to get out. And they gave them like a week or something like that to get out. Most of the folks not really wanting more trouble for themselves and more legal trouble, did decide to just move on, find somewhere else to be. One camp in particular had some folks who were like, "no, we're not going to move". And they ended up sending out something like 30 cops, which of our police force again, just a reminder, we lost 35%. That's a big proportion of our police, 30 cops is a lot of our police.

So yeah, they sent out a huge proportion of our police to evict this camp, they made several arrests of folks that they claim are activists. But again, there's...it's not like those are two distinct categories of unhoused folks and activists. So yeah, that's what police do in Asheville. They function as an apparatus to basically hide the effects of the policies that they want to uphold, the policies of never ending growth and tourism.

**TFSR: So I did kind of bring up harm reduction efforts in that question, and maybe that wasn't the best place to bring it up. But this next one, I think is. So there was recently a push by a small section of right leaning business owners in the city to put up a very ugly-ass, boot-licky billboard in support of the police, and to get local businesses that specifically support the police to put little blue ribbons in their windows. You know, because the FOP [Fraternal Order of Police] stickers that a bunch of diners have in their windows aren't enough, or whatever. But I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the billboard effort and any of the characters or group names that are affiliated with the push against public visibility of homelessness, or of safer alternative harm reduction opportunities for intravenous needle users or other folks that are using illegal or concentrated substances in our community. Like I know Steady Collective and Firestorm — and we talked about this a couple of years ago — we're getting a lot of pressure from the West Asheville Neighborhood Alliance. Which sounds like a very legit group but in fact is spearheaded by some some people that are**



**pretty far to the right and involved in some of the counter-protests to BLM stuff last year. Yeah, wondering if there's anything you can say about WANA or the billboard or the blue ribbons or that sort of thing?**

**UR:** Yes. So I have not gone down the West Asheville Neighborhood rabbit hole just yet. I only know what I've heard from other folks. And like you said, you guys probably have some great information in your archive about the situation with Firestorm collective, which is a local bookstore and coffee shop run by anarchists and in a collective fashion, and the Steady Collective, which is a harm reduction program here in Asheville. Not necessarily run by anarchists from what I understand, but just yeah, harm reduction, syringe exchange program and outreach program that works with drug users to mitigate some of the effects that they face, not only as a result of using drugs, but uhhh being in a society that criminalizes people for things that other folks can do in their homes without facing persecution to the same extent, at least.

I can say that the billboard is part of a very concerted effort for this group that's calling themselves AVL Business Owners. They actually had a private meeting with the mayor about a month ago. I say "private", it was at a place called the ISIS Music Hall, which is a concert venue in West Asheville. And they only invited business owners, that's why I say it was private. They sent it out via email to local business owners and invited them to come. And we're very upfront about the fact that they were not going to talk about defunding the police or anything like that. They asked for people to submit questions in advance. And then they were going to have a moderator who basically spoke on behalf of all these folks.

So over the course of this meeting, they brought up a lot of issues, mostly anecdotal issues around folks using drugs and sleeping and sort of just existing in their line of sight. And their solution to that is to crack down on them, to have more police and more punishment for these folks who are already being displaced by the systems by these very business owners and their insistence on profits, through the means of tourism. So, that business owners group is called Asheville Business Owners and they are responsible for both of things that you mentioned. The big ugly billboard — that's, I think, at the intersection of patented Haywood, in West Asheville — it just says, "Thank you, Asheville police department. We support you" or something like that, and has their email address avlbusinessown-

ers@gmail.com, I'm sure they wouldn't mind if folks drop them a quick line to let them know how much they appreciate that billboard.

That same group is also responsible for the Blue Ribbon campaign — which is kicking off on August 1, which is tomorrow as of the recording — where folks are going to be putting blue ribbons up on their business fronts to signal their support for police. So these folks are all very concerned about unhoused individuals in particular. In the invitation email, to their meeting, they were very much like “we are not going to be discussing homelessness”, the majority of the meeting was about homelessness. Without even meaning to they make these connections for us. At one point, one of the folks who were in the meeting asked “why can't we use the money that's generated from tourism to do something like build a facility to send homeless folks to?” So yeah, the connections between drug users and unhoused folks, and these right wing businesses is super thick, there's a lot of stuff there. To bring the harm reduction efforts into it, they are all of course, very against harm reduction, because they see it as you know, through that sort of outdated lens of enabling, as opposed to you know, helping people stay alive. And they want instead there to be further criminalization, further punishment of these folks.

**TFSR: I know, it's it's impossible to speak on everyone's behalf, but if you could talk a little bit about some of the alternatives that people are proposing to police here in Asheville or have been or were last summer. If your impression is that people from over-policed communities are participating in creating those demands, or if it's like... I know sometimes it gets proposed that it's a bunch of white middle class activists that are presenting these things when really they don't have a sense of the problem. Outside agitators, I think they call them.**

**UR:** So yeah, I'll start off by saying that I think that the idea of alternatives is sometimes the wrong framing for what a lot of folks actually say in this space. From what I understand from reading abolitionists like Mariame Kaba and folks like that, in many cases, they say the best alternative to the things that police do is simply nothing at all. And that sometimes trips up well meaning progressive liberals who do think we need to one to one alternatives. But in reality, the alternatives I hear from a lot of abolitionists are focused on background needs, and giving resources to people in ways that don't have a one to one relationship with “crime” but instead, they're

more focused on building healthy communities.

And again, I don't want to speak for anyone, but I can tell you that, from what I've observed, there was a group that formed very early on last summer during the protest movement called Black AVL Demands. It was, according to them, a multi-generational Black organizing group. They put forward the demand that sort of overtook the public discourse locally of defunding the police by 50%. To my knowledge, they didn't really put forward any direct alternatives.

There is another group, totally anonymous group, that has identified themselves as multiracial, including Black folks, just to be clear, and they're called the Defund AVL PD Instagram account. They actually put forward some more concrete ideas. I actually have a little list of those here. They suggested that the police funding could go towards jobs programs, restorative justice programs, affordable housing — which as we've talked about is a huge issue in Asheville — public education, mental health service, evidence based substance use treatment and harm reduction services, rent subsidies and eviction diversion, and free public transportation, which we do not have here.

In addition to the Defund AVL PD group, there's another group called the Racial Justice Coalition. They have a community liaison named Rob Thomas, who is a Black man who is from Asheville, has a deep ties to the community here, the Black community and has some personal experience with the justice system in particular. I just want to quote him, because I think it's really important that we hear from somebody who's not me, who's not a white person on this issue. So this is Rob Thomas talking about defunding the police:

“I want to be totally transparent about my stance on defunding the police departments. I don't think that the call to defund the police is going to solve all of the issues within law enforcement. What it does do is free up funding so that we can start up alternatives while keeping law enforcement active. We can create structures that can replace some of their duties as has been shown in other cities. The culture of policing is directly reflective of the culture of America. Structural and institutional racism is embedded in the DNA of America. And the only way to change disparities in policing, disparities in school systems, disparities in gov-

ernment, and disparities in the criminal justice system, is to completely dismantle the systems as they currently stand and restructure them completely. This may sound drastic, but if you look at where we are now in racial equity, and where we were 100 years ago, you will see that many systems have been completely overhauled. I'm looking at where we need to be measuring against where we are right now."

So that's to offer some outside perspectives. You know, folks have offered everything from "we need these specific things that will help folks have the resources that they need to prevent crimes in general". And then we have, yeah, spoke to people saying we need to completely tear down the system and then restructure it from the ground up. There's also been talk of Reparations in Asheville. The City Council passed a resolution for reparations. And for folks who aren't familiar with some of the sort of city government jargon, a resolution is really just them all agreeing to read something out loud that they agree with. It's not really an actionable plan. So they basically apologized for racism and said that they would do better. Part of that was they've been attempting to institute a reparations program, which does not provide any cash payments, it sort of uses market mechanisms and city contracts to attempt to transfer some wealth towards Black folks. But even that program has not been going well.

**TFSR: Yeah, for folks in town, there's actually a really nice mural about reparations and the demand for the city to actually cut a check on it on the side of the El Dorado building on Haywood Road in West Asheville by the artist Destro. Shout out to Destro.**

**UR:** I mentioned way earlier that they created the Office of Equity in response to some of the protests a few years back. That office is currently sitting with zero, not a single person who is a full time employee of that office. They had an interim director that they just appointed, like the day before yesterday, after two directors have quit. The first director who quit very publicly said that they were not getting support from the city, from the city manager in particular and that's why they were quitting. And there is no other staff in that department at all. So they had made a promise to have this Reparation, I'm not sure the exact word, but this "Reparations Coalition" or something like that, up and running one year from the day that they declared it. And that deadline passed kind of without fanfare, I think like a week or so ago.

So yeah, the only material thing that I've seen and heard in terms of alternatives to policing is: there is talks the city is looking into a CAHOOTS model crisis intervention team. Which, again, for folks who aren't super familiar with that, CAHOOTS is a program that I believe was started in Oregon... Eugene! Yeah, there we go. And the point of that group is basically if someone's having a mental health crisis or something like that, you can call these folks and they'll come and they're not police. And they will help defuse the situation and de-escalate and that sort of thing without getting cops involved. So that's the only like, straight up alternative that I've heard really being floated.

**TFSR: I understand that you did not just do all this preparation for this conversation. I'm wondering if you could talk about projects that you're involved in, any sort of support that they need, or how people could learn more?**

**UR:** Yeah, so I try to do as much as I can in service to liberation. I do design work and things like that, for anybody who needs it. One of the things that I like to do, or spend a lot of time doing at least, is researching the police and the media narratives, as I mentioned earlier. One of the group projects that I'm working on as an outgrowth of that is we're trying to launch a new locally focused news blog. We're calling it the Asheville Free Press. By the time this airs, it will have launched if everything goes according to plan. So if folks want to find me on Twitter, it's just my name, Ursula Wren and the Asheville Free Press is just going to be a website <http://avlfree.press>. And yeah, we're gonna do, we actually have a couple of pieces lined up about things that we've talked about in this this interview. I have a more in depth reporting of what all was said at that Asheville Business Owners meeting with the mayor, and a more thorough debunking of the manure coffin victimization narrative that cops have talked about. Both of those should be out by the time that this airs. So yeah, that's, that's what I've been working on. Asheville is home to lots of great media projects and my goal is to just sort of do what I can to help contribute to that in any way I can. I'm so glad that I got to be on here and talk to you about this. That's definitely part of that for me.

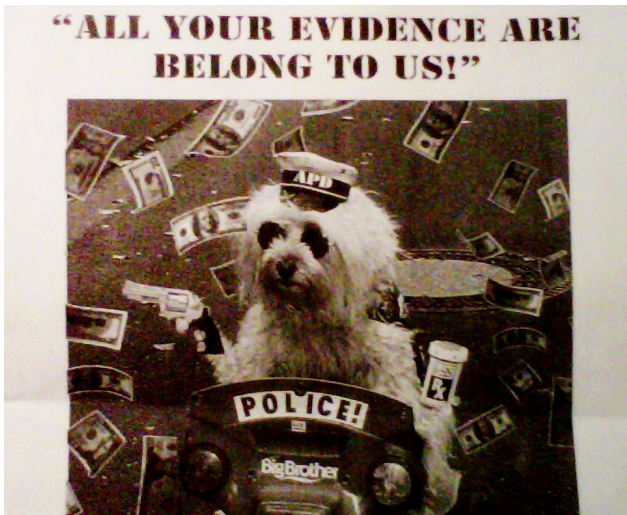
**TFSR: Aww, that's, it's my pleasure. I'm glad to have you on.**

**UR:** In addition to the media project that I just mentioned, I am 1/4 of a

screen printing collective called Syndicate Press. We do, like, live events where we print propaganda t-shirts, for lack of a better term. There's a shirt that you'll see all around Asheville that says "Fund communities, not cops", and that was something that we put together. So, those are the projects that I'm involved in.

**TFSR:** Well, Ursula, thank you so much for taking the time to have this chat and all the work that you do. \*trying to keep a straight face\* We'll see you at the barricades, comrade.

**UR:** \*laughs\* Alright. Thank you so much Bursts.





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