

**Philadelphia City Council,
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Reparations for the health and wellbeing of Black and brown people of Philadelphia

Testimony by

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NOTE: Opinions in this testimony are those of Dr. Mariana Chilton and not those of Drexel University.



SOLUTIONS BASED ON SCIENCE AND THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE



Rooted in love, generational wisdom, and empirical evidence

This testimony is rooted in a deep love and respect for my friends and neighbors in Philadelphia. Almost all of them are Black and Latina women. To them I owe enormous gratitude for teaching me about hunger, poverty, racism, and other injustices over the last 20 years. I write this based on the pain they have shared with me, and also on their love, care, respect, brilliance, and inspiration that they have demonstrated through their example. I have yet to meet some of the original peoples of the Lenape Nation of this area. But, over twenty years ago through my work in Oklahoma, I met and learned from some members of the Delaware Nation (Lenape). In their honor, I pay my respects to this land that was originally stewarded by them, and I honor their elders and young ones, past and present.

I have met people of Philadelphia through my research as the Director of the **Center for Hunger-Free Communities, at the Drexel University Dornsife School of Public Health** where the staff, students and I have carried out research, action and policy work based on the deep and painful reality of hunger, poverty, and trauma. We have also been inspired and emboldened by the brilliance and wisdom of people who know poverty and trauma first-hand, which have informed our work on solutions. Some of our programs in are *Children's HealthWatch* (through interviews with over 11,000 families), *Witnesses to Hunger*, where we worked with over 40 women and men to advocate on their own behalf through their photographs and testimonies, and the *Building Wealth and Health Network*, where we have worked with over 1500 women and men to face their personal and collective traumas to find healing, develop social connections, and build their wealth. Research confirms, the Building Wealth and Health Network reduced the odds of hunger by 55%, without providing food.¹

Racism and runaway capitalism are at the root of hunger and poverty

In fall 2018 we released a report showing how racial and ethnic discrimination in schools, in workplaces, in the streets, *and by police* are related to higher rates of household food insecurity and child hunger. I attach that four-part [report on discrimination in Philadelphia](#) to this testimony, with the associated [peer reviewed research article](#). In early 2019, Sherita Mouzon, and I met with leaders in Mayor's office to discuss this work. I include [Ms. Mouzon's letter to the Mayor's office](#).

Black and brown people in Philadelphia are suffering like never before during the COVID-19 pandemic protocols of "shelter-in-place" and social distancing. Without a guaranteed job or income, they're experiencing increased poverty and stress-related health conditions like high blood pressure, depression, and more. Because of these adversities and more, my Dornsife School of Public Health colleagues show, they are dying in higher numbers than the white people of Philadelphia just a few doors down.²

Many of us are inspired by the tens of thousands of people in the street who are asserting that **Black Lives Matter** and that we should **defund the police**. It is a forgone conclusion that the people who are protesting are at greater risk during the pandemic, simply adding to the spiral

of poor health and early death for Black people and people of color. They are protesting police brutality, and in response, the Philadelphia Police has used aggressive and violent tactics and deployed tear gas. All the while the city allowed in the National Guard who take rest in at the Free Library, which has been closed to Philadelphians since March.

Defining moment, defining budget

This is a defining moment for City Council. I hope you make the right choices and take on the tremendous opportunity before you. These times are only a harbinger of what is to come. The **climate crisis** caused by our greed for oil, gold, silver, meat, and other riches, and the dehumanization of millions of people around the globe, including Philadelphians, will create catastrophes like we have never seen before. This includes unbearable and deadly heat waves, widespread hunger, and starvation due to interruption in our food supply, and a potentially contaminated water supply due to storms.³ We need ways to build strong, connected, and resilient communities to face police brutality and poverty today and meet the challenges ahead. Black communities of Philadelphia have endured and risen through every single challenge put to them since the city's beginnings. They have a wealth of resiliency and wisdom, and many ideas for solutions and transformative change. Philadelphia City Council's budget should find ways to enhance and support Black people and their priorities.

In my own review of the Mayor's budget, there are four line items missing.

Line Item 1: Reparations

Philadelphia will not truly be serious about addressing poverty and racism unless it demonstrates in the budget a line item for reparations. Reparations are *not* programs, nor are they connecting people to public assistance such as SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and Medicaid. Rather, reparations are direct payments to people and their descendants to compensate for government funded wrongs committed against them. These can be cash payments or unique benefits such as free college, land, or some other tangible benefit. For starters, City Council can seek to repair wrongs of the previous fifty years. Consider:

- People who have had to suffer from living around the **Philadelphia Energy Solutions Refinery**, its explosion, shut down, and unfinished clean-up.
- Families that have suffered from the **MOVE bombing**.
- The elders and descendent of the **Black Bottom Community** wrongly pushed out of their homes to make way for Penn, Drexel, and many white-owned businesses.
- Families who have had to suffer having a **parent in prison due to racial profiling**.
- Families who have been harmed by living in substandard housing due to **redlining**

Line Item 2: Abolition of prisons and police

The US has the highest incarceration rate in the world. One in 9 children who are Black have a parent in jail or prison. In the Building Wealth and Health Network, 50% of the parents we work

with had a parent who spent time in prison. Having a parent in prison is an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) and is related to poor health and high rates of depression later in life.

Though Philadelphia has reduced its prison population, that is not good enough. Evidence shows that the police are still stopping and harassing Black people and people of color more than white people.⁴ We should look for other forms of addressing our social and health problems through more mental health supports, afterschool programming, meaningful education, and skill building. These items should receive increased funding in the city's budget and not the cuts seen in this current proposal.

Minneapolis City Council just committed to dismantling their police system. Philadelphia has many organizations that can work with City Council to close the Philadelphia Police Department, close its prisons, and to establish a community commitment to well-established concepts, principles, and activities of trauma-informed **restorative justice**. City Council needs committed and paid staff to convene this work.

Line Item 3: Universal basic income (UBI)

No one should have to toil in low paid work in order to feed their families, pay for shelter, and clothing. No one should have to suffer the indignity of applying for benefits even if they are working. Members of *Witnesses to Hunger*, Tianna Gaines Turner and Joanna Cruz Simmons and I assert in our publication, "*Recommendations From SNAP Participants to Improve Wages and End Stigma*," SNAP benefits are simply a way to perpetuate stigma and poor health.⁵ UBI takes away stigma, as it treats everyone as equals. That is, everyone is equally deserving of a minimum standard of living for the health and wellbeing of themselves and their families. This is a fundamental *right to health* enshrined in the [United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#).

Other cities have begun to provide UBI. Look for examples in Oakland, Stockton, and Ontario. Research on UBI shows that public health improves, and it does not impact people's ability or willingness to work. What it does do is promote a sense of wellness. It eliminates forced work for paltry wages that is demoralizing and dehumanizing and encourages people to be innovative with their time, by engaging with children and family, doing community work, being creative through the arts, or starting their own businesses.

Line Item 4: Rematriation of lands and cultural traditions to the Lenape Nation

My work on hunger and deep poverty has shown that trauma and associated poor health get passed on generation to generation.⁶ There is an ongoing silent trauma that we are all re-enacting and suffering from: the ongoing silencing and disappearing of Indigenous people, and the theft of their lands and lifeways.^{7,8}

While much of Philadelphia was granted to William Penn by the Treaty of Shackamaxon or Great Treaty, that treaty and other supposed "agreements" have been violated many times

over. As a result, the Lenape, like hundreds of other indigenous nations, have suffered catastrophic genocide. City Council should fund staff of Lenape descent to work with present day tribal members to devise a plan to return lands and other important cultural items to the Lenape Nation. City officials should have a line item in the budget to ensure we are upholding the original treaty rights of the Lenape people.

City Council should fund city staff of Lenape descent to work with present day tribal members to devise a plan to return lands and other important cultural items to the Lenape Nation and to remove statues and other offensive indicators of the violation of treaty rights. As owners of the William Penn Statue atop City Hall, City Council may need to reconsider this placement, or add the Lenape Leaders who were also party to the original treaties. Otherwise, City Hall is a monument to white supremacy and injustice.

If Philadelphia could acknowledge this genocide and the land theft of the Lenape people openly, we all might have greater opportunities for healing.

This is your moment

Thank you for your attention and consideration for adding these missing line items. If you can put these items in the budget, I would be honored to work with you on helping to ensure that these efforts can promote public health and resilience for years to come.

Works Cited

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