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People's Budget of San Jose: Focus Group Report

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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

The People's Budget of San José (PBSJ) Project was inspired by persistent public protest and testimony in San José about police violence, some of which reflected the global Black Lives Matter protest movement. This movement reached record high participation rates during the summer of 2020, following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and many more by police. That summer, "People's Budget" projects were initiated in cities across the United States from major metropolitan areas like Los Angeles and New York City to smaller cities like Nashville, TN. These People's Budget projects were designed to learn about the interests and needs of community members, evaluate how money is spent within cities, build solidarity among community residents, and propose budget revisions based on people's demands.

Direct public involvement in budget decisions already exists in one form or another in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world. One approach to this is "Participatory Budgeting" [PB], a process of participatory democracy where community members decide how municipalities spend certain public monies, particularly with regard to the provision of public goods and services. PB was first introduced in Porto Alegre, Brazil over thirty years ago (de Sousa Santos, 1998; Gonçalves, 2014; Souza, 2001), and has been implemented in forty countries and thousands of cities across the world (Su, 2017).

The body of literature on PB ranges from reports by community organizations (Davis 2020; Oregon Task Force on Public Safety 2016; Silicon Valley De-Bug; Temblador 2020; and The People's Budget LA Coalition 2020) to scholarly articles on the history and implications of PB as an approach, with seemingly mixed results. Significant scholarship points to the transformative possibilities PB brings to democratic decision making and community

involvement in those decisions at various levels of government (Bateman, 2019; Cabannes, 2004 and 2020; Cabannes Lipietz, 2018; Hagelskamp, Schleifer, Rinehart, and Silliman, 2018). At the same time, PB has come under increasing criticism from scholars and community members for the lack of structural change and community control in some municipalities that have publicly committed to PB (Calabrese, Williams, and Gupta 2020; Godwin 2018; Holdo 2020; Saguin 2018; and Su 2017 and 2018). While more research and experimentation is required to understand the challenges of PB, it demonstrates the possibility for more direct democratic decision making when it comes to city budgets.

Guided by this history and case examples from elsewhere in the U.S., and following the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in June of 2020, the San José State University Human Rights Institute [SJSU HRI] released a report on the current status of "People's Budget" projects nationwide, and the need and potential for such a project for San José. Also in the summer of 2020, Sacred Heart Community Services [SHCS] and the Silicon Valley Council of Nonprofits [SVCN] formed the Race, Equity, Action, Leadership [REAL] Coalition, made up of leaders from community-based organizations throughout San José and Santa Clara County. In the 2020-21 academic year, this coalition partnered with the SJSU HRI to lead the People's Budget of San José [PBSJ] project.

The SJSU HRI was founded to study and address social problems confronting local communities while contributing to broader collaborative efforts to realize universal human rights practice in the U.S. and the world. For the PBSJ Project, the SJSU HRI, in partnership with Sacred Heart Community Services and members of the REAL Coalition, designed a mixed method study (focus groups, interviews, and a generalizable survey) to determine the interests, needs, and perspectives of community members with regard to public spending for the provision of “public safety” or “community safety.” In the process of collecting necessary data from community members, the PBSJ project has also been designed to organize interested community members in further engagement, under the leadership of SHCS and the REAL coalition. Finally, beyond a wide release to the public, findings of the PBSJ project will inform the new “Re-imagining Public Safety Community Advisory Committee” --a community advisory board tasked with re-envisioning criminal justice and police reform in San José for the foreseeable future.

Following the initial report, the PBSJ project can be understood in two phases: (1) focus groups and (2) the city wide survey. While the SJSU HRI’s first PBSJ Report described the PBSJ Project process and goals, this second report documents the findings from a series of focus group discussions held by local community organizations targeting the various, diverse communities of San José. Focus groups aimed at learning what people think about community safety, the city’s budget, and the alignment between what people think “makes us safe” and how money is allocated towards public safety.

Beyond providing some early findings, focus group data informed the design of the People’s Budget of San José Survey, which is being conducted during the summer and early fall of 2021. Following survey data collection, the SJSU HRI will release a Final PBSJ Project Report that summarizes findings from both phases of data collection. This report will be made available to the public, the Re-imagining Public Safety Community Advisory Committee, and local policy makers once all data analysis is complete.

GOALS OF THE FOCUS GROUPS

- 1. Community members have the opportunity to build relationships among themselves and the organization hosting the focus group across the issue of community safety.**
- 2. Brainstorm with the community to understand what community safety means for them and their families.**
- 3. Assess the community’s support with respect to considering divestment from police and reinvestment in other methods of achieving community safety.**
- 4. Educate the community around the way that the police, jails, prisons, courts and other components of the criminal justice system are funded and understand what additional information would be helpful for them to learn in order to develop a successful campaign around community safety.**

The findings of the PBSJ project will inform the new “Re-imagining Public Safety Community Advisory Committee” --a community advisory board tasked with re-envisioning criminal justice and police reform in San José for the foreseeable future.



DATA COLLECTION METHODS

In fall and winter of 2020 the SJSU HRI and SHCS developed a Focus Group Discussion Guide designed to facilitate conversations between small groups of community members about community safety, policing and criminal justice, and the San José city budget. The goals of these focus groups were: (1) Community members have the opportunity to build relationship among themselves and the organization hosting the focus group across the issue of community safety, (2) Brainstorm with the community to understand what community safety means for them and their families, (3) Assess the community's support with respect to considering divestment from police and reinvestment in other methods of achieving community safety, (4) Educate the community around the way that the police, jails, prisons, courts and other components of the criminal justice system are funded and understand what additional information would be helpful for them to learn in order to develop a successful campaign around community safety.

The intention of the Focus Group Discussion Guide was to provide structure and facilitation guidance to organizations that were interested in conducting a focus group of their own. These focus groups were envisioned as opportunities for organizations to learn from their membership and to create space for community members to engage in dialogue. The Focus Group Discussion Guide was tested and refined through two pilot focus groups conducted by SJSU HRI with SHCS volunteers. An invitation to conduct focus groups was then extended to community organizations throughout San José and Santa Clara County and coaching on how to conduct the focus groups was offered by SHCS.

Focus groups consisted of people who either lived or worked in San José. Those who worked in San José, are generally participants that resided in surrounding communities such as Los Gatos or Campbell. All sessions were conducted over Zoom. During each focus group notes were taken and then shared with an organizer from Sacred Heart and the SJSU HRI. Ideas were also captured using a "Jamboard" - a shared brainstorming tool, where focus group discussion participants could directly type their ideas onto virtual sticky notes.

In addition to the focus groups held using the Focus Group Discussion Guide, members of the Race, Equity, Community & Safety (RECS) Committee of Sacred Heart Community Services designed and conducted a series of focus groups (labelled, "Listening Sessions") similarly aimed at exploring community members' experiences and perspectives about community safety, policing, and the city's budget. Notes from these listening sessions were then shared with SJSU HRI and were included in the analysis described in this report. Data from focus groups came in the form of synthesized notes composed by focus group facilitators, participant notes via the utilization of Google Jamboard, and through direct statements from participants. In rare instances, direct quotes were written down, but more typically the notes captured the participant's comments and ideas but were not direct quotes.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES OF DATA

SJSU Human Rights Institute faculty conducted a small set of additional interviews and focus groups to ensure the diverse perspectives of community residents were heard.

Dr. Michael Dao had discussions with members from the Vietnamese community in San José. He conducted interviews with members of the Vietnamese community in Vietnamese-owned establishments (e.g., coffee shops and restaurants) about their experiences and perceptions related to community safety and policing in San José. A total of five Vietnamese men ages 34-50 engaged in a conversation with Dr. Dao. Of the five participants three were born in America and two were born in Vietnam, but moved to America at an early age. The demographics of the participants are not inclusive of the entire Vietnamese population in San Jose. Rather, the data gathered illustrates only a surface level analysis of San José's Vietnamese community's thoughts on community safety and policing.

The Red Earth Women's Society (REWS), previously called Motherhood is Sacred which was founded by Kelly Gamboa, conducted three focus groups in May of 2021 that were not specifically part of the People's Budget project, yet asked several questions that were similar to some of the questions asked in the PBSJ focus groups. SJSU HRI faculty member, Dr. Soma de Bourbon co-facilitated these focus groups, and recognized the overlapping topics of conversation. For example, in the PBSJ, two of the questions asked were "What makes you feel safe" and "What makes you feel less safe." Two similar questions asked in the REWS focus groups were "What does safety look like for you, your family, and/or your community?" and "What does healing look like for you, your family, and your community?" In addition both the PBSJ and the REWS focus groups asked participants to come up with solutions to problems facing the community. For the PBSJ the solutions were in the context of the city budget and safety, and for the REWS focus groups the solutions were around safety and violence against Native women. This report includes responses from the three questions mentioned above from the REWS focus groups.

Each of the REWS focus groups had between three and eight participants in addition to the two co-facilitators of the groups, Beatriz San Juan, a member of REWS, and Dr. de Bourbon. All participants were over eighteen and identified as women. Participants' ages ranged from early twenties to early seventies. All participants self-identified as Native American or Indigenous. Participants were from many different Native nations, primarily from within the United States, but also from some tribes in Mexico. Each group was between 90 and 120 minutes. Focus groups met over Zoom and were recorded, transcribed and de-identified before data analysis began.

ANALYSIS APPROACH

Notes from the (12) focus group discussions and (7) listening sessions were analyzed by an interdisciplinary team of four SJSU HRI researchers. As an analysis team, each person read through the data multiple times to identify explicit as well as latent themes. We explored these data for areas of commonality as well as differences in perspectives. After discussing our observations, we each coded the full dataset with independently generated themes. Observations from the interviews with Vietnamese residents and REWS focus groups were also discussed and incorporated. Finally, through continued discussion and review of each other's themes, we agreed on three dominant themes with several sub-themes, which are presented in this report. An initial draft of these findings was developed and shared with Sacred Heart staff and facilitators of several focus group discussions for verification of accuracy of representation of the listening sessions and focus groups. The report was then further revised to ensure that the findings reflect the diverse conversations that occurred in support of the PBSJ Project.

RESULTS

FOCUS GROUP THEMES

1. Basic Human Rights for Vulnerable Populations

There was a shared recognition that the basic human rights of all members of the community were not being met and a yearning for our city to do better at meeting these needs. Specifically, participants who felt that their basic human needs were met wanted people who are the most vulnerable in their community to have their basic needs met, too. Participants expressed particular concern for community members who were homeless, struggling with mental health issues, and/or addiction. Participants connected community safety directly to the city meeting the needs of homeless community members.

2. Stop Policing Complex Social Problems

While there was disagreement about the role of the police in San José, there was agreement that the police were not able to solve social problems such as homelessness, mental health crises, addiction, and racism. Almost all groups expressed support for non-police approaches to solving these complex problems. It is important to note, participants had divergent experiences with San José police that were impacted by factors such as skin color, race, ethnicity, gender, and social class.

3. Racism, Classism, and White Supremacy Make Communities Less Safe in San José

When envisioning a safer community, many participants spoke about their strong desire to feel accepted, welcomed, and safe walking through their community. While this was something that some (mostly white or white-passing) discussion participants experienced already, many other participants did not feel safe because of experiences with racial profiling and gender-based harassment. There are three sub-themes related to different experiences of participants: the experience of people of color in “white spaces,” desire for greater neighborhood and community social cohesion, and interest in community spaces for cross-cultural connection.

Focus groups and listening sessions provided opportunities for a diverse sample of San José residents to share their visions of a safe and thriving community, as well as the perceived barriers to achieving those visions in San José. Participants reported appreciating these conversations, and that learning more about the city budget was informative. Many also experienced frustration, and even anger at an apparent mis-alignment between the amount of money that the city spends on police and what makes people feel safe. Focus groups and listening sessions revealed some areas of broad agreement among participants, and other areas where people’s particular experiences led them to distinct insights and perspectives. This report will bring forward the shared aspirations and areas of difference reflected in rich discussions among community members.

1. Basic Human Rights for Vulnerable Populations

In this section, we describe three main areas where community members felt that the human rights and basic needs of their fellow residents were not being systematically attended to: housing, mental health, and infrastructure.

1. A: Housing

The issue of housing was brought up in every focus group as a central concern. Throughout the conversations, people expressed dismay that although “we live in the richest part of the state,” there are members of our community living on the streets, struggling to pay rent and/or to put food on the table. Community members’ focus was not on protecting their own rights, but rather to promote and support the basic needs of others in their community. There was broad interest in allocating city money to build housing, particularly for those without housing. A participant from Fresh Lifelines for Youth (FLY) noted housing for everyone as a “safety net”:

“They need to spend more on housing and that is a safety net for everyone.” (FLY Focus Group 2)

And a participant from Peninsula Family Services [PFS] noted when discussing what the city should spend money on:

“Money to build homes for the homeless.” (PFS Focus Group)

When participants were asked what makes them feel safe or what they wanted the city to spend money on, many simply wrote “housing” on the Jamboard.

It is notable that participants—even from focus groups that felt that things were otherwise going well in the city and policing did not need any reform—described housing as a “basic human right.” This sentiment was expressed both by participants who had themselves experienced homelessness and by residents who were well-off and had never themselves experienced homelessness.

Legal frameworks and background on human rights and basic needs in San José

Housing

The human right to housing is described in the Right to an Adequate Standard of Living (ICESCR Article 11). According to the most recent City of San José Homeless Census and Survey Report (2019), there were 6,097 residents who experienced homelessness at some point in their lives. San José has the second highest rent (averaging \$3K+ for a 2 BR home) and highest median housing price (\$1.2M+) in the country. Taken together with one of the highest homelessness rates and encampments of record breaking size, community members’ description of this social problem represents a human rights crisis.

Mental Health

Access to medical care, education, and food are fundamental social and economic rights enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). There are stark differences in access to these fundamental rights among the communities in and around San José: in Santa Clara County towns like Cupertino and Los Gatos only 12% of households struggle with the cost of living, compared to more than half the households in East San Jose (San Jose Mercury News, Bedayn, 2021). In many conversations, access to mental health care (ICESCR Article 12), quality education and after school activities for young people (ICESCR Article 13), and supportive, safe working environments (“just and favourable” ICESCR Article 6) were also discussed.

Infrastructure

The City of San José recognizes that infrastructure and managed growth can support a “strong economy, create and preserve healthy neighborhoods, ensure a diverse range of employment and housing opportunities, and encourage a diverse range of arts, cultural, and entertainment offerings” (San José City Government, 2021). Yet the benefits of these improvements have not been felt equally in all neighborhoods and by all residents. We encourage the City to consider residents’ calls for improved lighting to promote safety, as well as investments in street and park maintenance and cleaning.

Participants from several focus groups expressed frustration, anger, and disgust at the funding priorities of San Jose:

"It makes me feel frustrated because there is a lot of need in the community, especially in housing. This Tuesday I had a meeting with the public health campaign and they asked us to pick 3 problems that are affecting the community. The number one issue was housing." (GFS Focus Group)

"The city chooses to ignore the issues of the houseless and I think this is frustrating to see. Many of us call this city home and grew up here - it is sad and disturbing to see they continue to turn a blind eye." (RECS Listening Session 1)

Housing is a "basic need" that if met would solve many other social problems, as noted by a participant from the Black Leadership Kitchen Cabinet (BLKC):

"But at the end of the day, housing is a basic need and I think all these issues, you know, that our community members are facing would be solved...Because you're on the right track, housing for everybody and safety for everybody would cause people to have less behaviors that are quote, unquote dangerous." (BLKC Focus Group)

1. B: Mental Health and Other Basic Human Rights

Mental health was the next most discussed area of concern after housing in the area of basic human rights. Participants discussed mental health as both an area of concern for their community and an area they wanted the city to spend more funding addressing.

Many participants noted the interconnected issue of housing, mental health and substance abuse:

"Not all homeless people are creating safety issues. But there is a segment that have mental illness that are creating safety issues for everybody. We need to work with them and provide for them." (BLKC Focus Group)

"Put money into helping homeless community members with mental health issues." (RECS Listening Session 3)

Other human rights concerns raised by participants:

"It makes me feel frustrated because there is a lot of need in the community, especially in housing. This Tuesday I had a meeting with the public health campaign and they asked us to pick 3 problems that are affecting the community. The number one issue was housing." (GFS Focus Group)

"Not all homeless people are creating safety issues. But there is a segment that have mental illness that are creating safety issues for everybody. We need to work with them and provide for them." (BLKC Focus Group)

“Food security and having access to healthy produce and having access close to you and not having to drive across town to get it, accessible mental health and general health care and reassessment of funds, safer recreational areas.” (FLY Focus Group 2)

“I think, particularly with Native people and whether it be Native children, Native women, Native men, there is a trust issue, a lack of trust to other people, to outside people. And so, I think getting as many Native women, like [she names several Native women in the group] who can interact with Native people. There is a sense of trust there, you know.” (REWS Focus Group 1)

“Food security and having access to healthy produce and having access close to you and not having to drive across town to get it, accessible mental health and general health care and reassessment of funds, safer recreational areas.” (FLY Focus Group 2)

“Security also is job security. That our community has houses and rents that are affordable and have communities for our children to have higher success and activities.” (GFS)

Although there were similarities in what participants wanted across the different community conversations (PBSJ focus groups, RECS Listening Sessions, Dr. Dao’s interviews, and the REWS focus groups) there were also differences. Some of the similarities were that participants wanted solutions such as community centers or mental health and addiction recovery programs. A difference was that REWS participants wanted programs that were Native-centered and there was an acknowledgment that the solutions needed to be led by Native people, as this participant noted:

“I think, particularly with Native people and whether it be Native children, Native women, Native men, there is a trust issue, a lack of trust to other people, to outside people. And so, I think getting as many Native women, like [she names several Native women in the group] who can interact with Native people. There is a sense of trust there, you know.” (REWS Focus Group 1)

Many REWS focus group participants noted the lack of programs specifically for Native people, as noted by the following participants:

“There was a Native woman and she was homeless and needed intervention, and in a domestic violence situation, and she reached out for help . . . I had to tell her, “No there isn’t anything for Native women in San José.” (REWS Focus Group 3)

"In San Francisco we have the Friendship House, and looking at the possibility of what that would look like down here. How long would it take to organize and plan for it?" (REWS Focus Group 1)

Beyond Native specific programs for the Native community, participants wanted places to come together as a community and heal from historical trauma:

"I'd like to see some type of recovery home for healing historical trauma, because it's still affecting our communities today, and I think I would like to go in, to be able to go somewhere for like a week and just get replenished with all the goodness our culture gives to us." (REWS Focus Group 1)

"When you can go to a center that understands your culture and understands who you are . . . you know the healing that does." (REWS Focus Group 2)

1. C: Infrastructure

Several focus group discussions also surfaced infrastructure investments that would improve safety. Participants described these improvements as simple, straightforward, and needing to be made in an equitable fashion. In many conversations, participants identified that they would feel safer with better lighting, well-maintained streets, and cleaner public spaces. In this way, there ought to be more focus on physical city infrastructure that is similar to a current San José city plan. Indeed, people's perception of safety seemed directly linked to their physical surroundings and the spaces that they occupy on a daily basis. There was thus support from many participants for this city to spend more on these public goods.

"50 million to spend, super simple but having lights on our streets since some neighborhoods are very dark and can't see anything or lots of trees in the way. We need more proper lighting and open spaces so there are no hidden spots." (FLY Focus Group 2)

"The area that I was at, not cleaned, not checked up on, grass super long, the lighting not good, dark, no camera." (FLY Focus Group 2)

"Some parks, especially at night, since the time changes and it gets darker earlier, are insecure." (LCC Focus Group)

"Clean streets that are fixed. Had to call 911 because my car was damaged." (BLKC Focus Group)

"A place for people to rest and feel safe will equal less calls to the police." (YWCA Focus Group 1)

What is apparent is that people's perception of safety is directly linked to their physical surroundings and the spaces that they occupy on a daily basis. It is important then to consider how safety is also about ideas related to space and place, more so than it is about physical police presence.

"I'd like to see some type of recovery home for healing historical trauma, because it's still affecting our communities today, and I think I would like to go in, to be able to go somewhere for like a week and just get replenished with all the goodness our culture gives to us." (REWS Focus Group 1)

2. Stop Policing Complex Social Problems

Each of the conversations directly addressed policing by asking participants to reflect on the city budget, the allocation of the budget that goes to the police, and whether the current allocation is the best allocation to achieve participants' vision of a safe community. Across most discussions, a mismatch was perceived between the allocation of resources to the police and the impacts of police-driven solutions to the complex problems that participants identified as the most important to solve to achieve a safer community.

It is important to recognize the divergence of perspectives when it comes to policing complex problems. Focus groups that had primarily people of color or people who were currently or had formerly been economically vulnerable reported more negative experiences with police, especially as related to homelessness and mental health, than focus groups that were primarily white and/or wealthy. Yet, despite these different experiences with policing, people across social groups consistently identified what one participant described as "a feeling of helplessness" about how to respond to these complex problems given his certainty that police would not address the problem appropriately.

2. A: Police cannot provide solutions to homelessness, mental health, or addiction problems

Participants did not feel that the police were the appropriate tool to address problems related to homelessness, mental health, or addiction. Many participants had either witnessed or had experienced police interventions to these problems and felt that the police caused more harm and did not offer solutions.

"[Last year, there was] a homeless man in the neighborhood, people wanted to get indoors due to the fires. I think he and others were squatting, I saw 4 [police] SUVs and brought out the man and arrested him. I felt powerless, no one's living in that house. I don't think he did anything wrong." (RECS Listening Session 2)

"I definitely think there should be more resources for mental health. Someone who is arrested is not necessarily for a crime but an underlying issue of mental illness." (RECS Listening Session 1)

"Heavy police presence in our neighborhood and both the police actions in this neighborhood and the larger context, make me view police as contributing to danger and risk of harm." (SHCS Focus Group 2)

"I want... the police to have a thorough, complete transformation. Because the whole thing just does not work at all. It would need to be different training. Not just authority but community. Addressing problems in a more compassionate and safe way." (RECS Listening Session 1)

"I'm also not happy how they [the police] respond to our houseless neighbors who they harass and humiliate and belittle. I personally don't feel they create safety in our community." (RECS Listening Session 1)

Participants were upset that people experiencing mental health crises or homelessness were often villainized. They yearned for respectful solutions that address the core challenges these community members experience and lead to long-term solutions. One participant described the current approach to addressing these problems as "causing a deep hurt." Another participant said:

"Housing, like others have mentioned. What the community really needs. There have been a lot of situations where you call the police and they can't even help you." (GFS Focus Group)

2. B: Police lack racial and cultural knowledge, appreciation, and training

In addition to a general concern that police were not able to address complex problems, participants reported that San José police did not always have the training, knowledge, or cultural aptitude to appropriately handle situations. Participants discussed a tension between their desire for police to provide safety and their actual experience of police, which were often of police misinterpreting behavior as dangerous or violent that participants described as normal according to their culture (e.g. speaking loudly or drinking heavily). In addition to the immediate harm caused by these interactions with the police, these stories led to a general sense of fear and distrust.

"I am upset because all of my life I called the police to help and they are assholes.... What are you getting trained on? Customer service? Deescalate situation? Killing people?" (FLY Focus Group 2)

"I'm concerned about walking around with my kids and police addressing problems incorrectly." (BLKC Focus Group)

"Heavy police presence in our neighborhood and both the police actions in this neighborhood and the larger context, make me view police as contributing to danger and risk of harm." (SHCS Focus Group 2)

"Seeing a cop while driving – knowing that I'm not doing anything wrong; but the fact that there is a power imbalance there, and the cop can pull me over adds to my discomfort." (YWCA Focus Group 1)

"The more [police] there are, the more unsafe I feel." (SHCS Focus Group 1)

One participant described how the police had been called when the participant's brother had a mental health episode. The "cops came and tried to handcuff [him]" and the participant was able to de-escalate the situation. "What would have happened if I wasn't there?" the participant wondered, noting "The Police aren't really qualified when it comes to that kind of situation. We need different responses." (FLY Focus Group 1).

Two other participants noted:

"Police need mental health training just to be able to interact with people." (FLY Focus Group 1)

"I want... the police to have a thorough, complete transformation. Because the whole thing just does not work at all. It would need to be different training. Not just authority but community. Addressing problems in a more compassionate and safe way." (RECS Listening Session 1)

While a small number of focus group participants reported that they supported a police presence in their neighborhood, other participants felt threatened by police presence. For example, this dialogue occurred between two focus group participants from Grail Family Services:

Participant 1: *"I can't go to the store because everywhere I turn there are a lot of homeless people. Right now I don't feel safe. I would like more security and more police patrol."*

Participant 2: *"I agree with having more police patrol but at the same time it's hard because sometimes I don't feel the same with the cops around. I should feel safe but I get scared."*

Another participant was frustrated that in the places they felt the least secure, "The police don't do anything to make sure people feel secure and safe in these places." (GFS Focus Group).

It is important to note that even in communities of color there were nuanced perceptions of policing. For example, a Latina participant noted *"I came from a country where you see a lot of gangs and social delinquent groups and the police presence made me feel safer"* (LCC Focus Group). But when provided information about the police budget, the same participant felt dismayed: *"It is sad to know that there is enough security funded yet it is still unsafe."* (LCC Focus Group). The lived realities and histories of participants informed their perception with police in a way that created divergence among and within focus groups.

One of the Vietnamese men interviewed by Dr. Dao described his negative experiences with the police. The person explained that he is profiled by the police due to the visible tattoos on his body. Describing his experiences, he discussed how police officers will see his tattoos, and, in turn, will create an issue to *"try to hurt or kill you."* He felt that San José police can at times abuse their power and authority. He made the connection to San José police officer Jared Yuen publicly taunting Black Lives Matter protesters in the summer of 2020 and said that if a tattooed Vietnamese man had taunted the police, there would be repercussions. This specific discussion speaks to a person's experience with the police that is underpinned by race, gender, and external appearance.

An alternative perspective was shared through the conversations with two other Vietnamese community members. When Dr. Dao spoke with two adult Vietnamese males (age 35-40) at a coffee shop, both described not noticing the police and there was a feeling of neutrality towards the police. One person shared that he felt the police did not have an intimidating presence and felt neutral when interacting with a police officer. Another man shared that he does not feel threatened by the police even when he is driving without using his seatbelt. Both comments signify a sense of indifference and/or a sense that San José police do not find the Vietnamese community to pose a threat. This was notable because some conversations took place in spaces where illegal sports betting was visibly occurring.

This perception of police indifference to Asian residents was also described by one of the RECS Listening Session members:

"I have not had a lot of encounters [with police]... Asian people have not had to experience the brutality of the police. They assume that we are nice - have no weapons." (RECS Listening Session 2)

"I have not had a lot of encounters [with police]... Asian people have not had to experience the brutality of the police. They assume that we are nice - have no weapons." (RECS Listening Session 2)

2. C: Recommendations for Non-Police Solutions

In light of their concerns that police could not address complex problems and a desire for improved community safety, participants recommended several non-police solutions. Many explicitly suggested that these solutions be funded by shifting some resources away from the police and investing in community organizations and agencies:

"Put money into a task force that are trained to assess drug abuse, mental health issues, or homelessness." (FLY Focus Group 1)

"I think we can give 20 percent to the police and all the rest to other resources like community resources [such as] mental health." (GFS Focus Group)

"Personally I don't think we need the police. I think they respond to crimes after they happen, so they don't really add safety to the community. I resort more to my neighbors and community as my source of safety." (RECS Listening Session 1)

This section identifies the challenges of using a law enforcement approach to address social problems and the perceived inability of San José Police to protect and promote the safety of community residents in an unbiased manner. This section also documents support from diverse community members to reallocate money from the police to funding other basic needs as an approach to improve community safety.

3. Racism, Classism, and White Supremacy Make Communities Less Safe in San José

The final theme that emerged from the discussions, listening sessions, and interviews was about people's visions for safer communities. There are three sub-themes to this finding that highlight different intersectional experiences of community. In the first sub-theme, we discuss the experience of many participants of color that "white spaces" are fundamentally unsafe for them. In the second sub-theme, we discuss participants' interest in having greater social cohesion and opportunities for self-reliance within cultural groups. In the third sub-theme, we discuss participants' desire for opportunities for cross-cultural connection.

3. A: Experiences of People of Color in "White Spaces"

Participants described feeling unsafe in stores that were mainly frequented by white people, like Whole Foods, or in neighborhoods or nearby towns that were predominantly white. Sometimes these feelings were based on experiences of being followed by security guards or pulled over by the police for no reason; other times these were visceral or embodied feelings.

"I'm in Los Gatos, and it's a predominantly white, super wealthy town. Even though there's not a lot of crime on the streets, as a black person it's a suffocating experience of whiteness. I feel safe when I go back to my childhood neighborhood, or am with people with a shared experience." (RECS Listening Session 5)

"I'm in a neighborhood that is predominantly white, so I have to find a community that is like me.... I can't really breathe unless I am with people that I know understand my position." (RECS Listening Session 5)

"White dominated spaces are where I do not feel safe and do not feel welcomed. If there are no BIPOC people there it makes me feel unsafe and unwelcomed." (FLY Focus Group 2)

"As a person of color, feels unsafe when traveling in other neighborhoods not familiar with, regardless of income status of the neighborhood." (GFS Focus Group)

"Treatment by staff in some stores if you are a person of color or don't fit their idea of what customers should look like. Doesn't feel safe walking into a space where you know you aren't welcome." (YWCA Focus Group 2)

The embodied sense of feeling "other" in "white spaces" also intersected with other social positions and identities. For example, when asked about places where they felt unsafe, one participant shared that they felt unsafe whenever there were "groups of straight white men" (YWCA Focus Group 1). Other participants noted similar sentiments:

"White people (both men and women), always a threat there for people of color." (YWCA Focus Group 2)

This phenomenon was also named in the reverse: white or white-passing people named their whiteness as protecting them from harm or making them more safe.

"I'm in Los Gatos, and it's a predominantly white, super wealthy town. Even though there's not a lot of crime on the streets, as a black person it's a suffocating experience of whiteness. I feel safe when I go back to my childhood neighborhood, or am with people with a shared experience." (RECS Listening Session 5)

"Treatment by staff in some stores if you are a person of color or don't fit their idea of what customers should look like. Doesn't feel safe walking into a space where you know you aren't welcome." (YWCA Focus Group 2)

"I think I get a pass from the police no matter what I do, by virtue of being an older white woman. When I might walk into the situation, the tone changes. I know that I'm given some kind of pass. I did have a situation with a daughter who is biracial, and when police were called on her the officer talked down to me, and got into spiritual stuff which is really bizarre." (RECS Listening Session 1)

"As a white male in San Jose - not a whole lot of times feel unsafe." (RECS Listening Session 7)

"White so have not had many issues. Husband is Italian (can look various races) and in Texas often pulled over. How often targeted based on looks, even when doing absolutely nothing. No fault of their own, looking the way they do, treated very disrespectfully from the get go." (RECS Listening Session 7)

People of color reported regularly feeling unsafe walking in white spaces or more broadly where their culture was not taken into consideration by other residents or by law enforcement. Several participants of color reported feeling safest when they were with and around people who had similar experiences and positions. Participants discussed how some people have more privilege in their experience of safety because of their class status or skin color. One participant who described "passing as white" contrasted his experience with his brother's:

"Brother doesn't pass as white (Mexican) - walking through relatively wealthy neighborhood and stopped and had his car searched." (RECS Listening Session 7)

In the current political climate, participants in several discussions reported that the presence of symbols like the American flag made them feel uncomfortable and unwelcome. Symbols of white supremacy triggered participants to express their discomfort.

"Europeans who don't think they have a culture and don't see the idea of white supremacy in all systems of people activity (economics, education, entertainment, labor, law, politics, religion, sex and war)." (BLKC Focus Group)

"American flags have become triggering for me." (BLKC Focus Group)

"They have flags so we don't feel safe as Latinos because we feel unsupported or not accepted. These people don't make us feel safe and secure." (GFS Focus Group)

The focus group discussions and interviews highlighted that community safety is underpinned by one's relationship to physical spaces and the dominant, often unnamed, culture of those spaces. While conversations among some white or culturally-white participants captured a desire for ways to have multicultural and integrated spaces, some people of color explicitly identified "white spaces" as hostile, unwelcoming and unsafe environments.

"The racism always makes me feel scared or the sensation of not realizing how many people support our current president [Trump]. It makes it very difficult to feel safe and secure especially for us as Latinos." (GFS Focus Group)

Efforts to improve community safety cannot be considered separate from efforts to reduce racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and other forms of systemic and interpersonal hate. To feel safe, people must also feel respected, and these data reflect the intersectional forms of harm that many in our community experience.

3. B: Social Cohesion in Communities of Color

In many conversations, particularly those attended by primarily or exclusively people of color, safety was identified as something that communities build from within, not something that police can provide. There was a strong desire to create a safe community by people working together. Specifically, participants felt that they could achieve community safety by cultivating genuine relationships with other members of their community and building a neighborhood where people look out for each other.

What emerged in these discussions was a notion of safety not as a physical experience, but more of a relational process with other members of the community. In this way, despite disparate experiences based on race, class and gender, there was a consistent desire to have a safe and inclusive community where neighbors supported neighbors and kept each other safe:

"The word trust and tranquility. It is true that in our home origin that our children would feel safe. However, here in East San Jose they don't feel safe. I would like my child to go to the liquor store at the corner, but they won't feel safe because we don't know our neighbors. There is no communication between our neighbors." (GFS Focus Group)

"Can we try to police ourselves and be in touch with our neighbors?" (SCHS Focus Group 1)

*"It looks like the community patrolling Chinatown in Oakland to help keep Asian elders safe - we take care of each other without needing the police department or another institution that *might* protect some of the community but would marginalize/threaten the safety of others."* (YWCA Focus Group 2)

"The feeling of a village mentality is crucial, but it's something we've lost. Ties to housing, safety and all of it." (BLKC Focus Group)

"Knowing my neighbors, knowing they are looking out for me [makes me feel safe]." (YWCA Focus Group 1)

"They [Riverside] had a community center and they had a corner store where everybody gathered. Everyone knew each other's name. You had that village kind of feeling. that everyone was looking out for each other, everyone played sports together, everybody knew each other's grandmother and there was a sense of safety. There was a sense of community because of knowing each other and bonding and being able to connect with each other. We don't necessarily have that here in San Jose." (BLKC Focus Group)

Complementing these observations, in the conversations with Vietnamese men, two people said that the culture within the Vietnamese community is centered around taking care of those around them. In this way, there are cultural elements that promote community safety that may not be inclusive of non-Vietnamese community members. This is consistent with the calls by Native women to have Native spaces to promote community safety. Indeed, it was a resonant theme throughout the conversations that people feel safer in spaces with people who share similar cultures, values, experiences and understandings.

"They [Riverside] had a community center and they had a corner store where everybody gathered. Everyone knew each other's name. You had that village kind of feeling. that everyone was looking out for each other, everyone played sports together, everybody knew each other's grandmother and there was a sense of safety. There was a sense of community because of knowing each other and bonding and being able to connect with each other. We don't necessarily have that here in San Jose." (BLKC Focus Group)

3. C: Desire for Community and Cross-Cultural Connection

In addition to this desire for increased social cohesion within groups, participants also shared a yearning for connection across different groups within a particular neighborhood or geographic community. There were several specific suggestions for how to build these stronger social ties across cultural groups. These ranged from investing in community resources like after school programs for youth and community-based parenting classes to community-centered spaces like a maker space and tool lending library. Other ideas are described below:

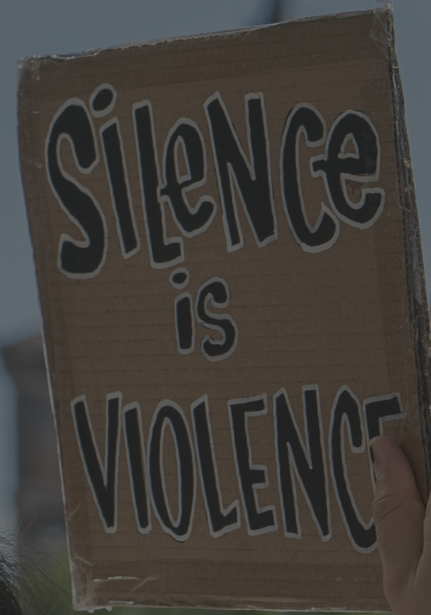
"A street that is blocked off with tables in the street and you can bring food to a common table. You can sit with people you've never met before and start a conversation. Feel a sense of community. You can start to realize they are your neighbors." (SHCS Focus Group 1)

"The farmers market is a place where I can learn about other cultures, through food and connection with others. It's a place where so many different people come. I would like more spaces and places [where] we can make these kinds of connections with people from different cultures and where we can bond and talk with each other. That will help us understand and trust each other." (SHCS Focus Group 1)

"Community gardens - great space for connection with people and with the soil and food." (SHCS Focus Group 1)

"Another idea that just came to me is an open space like a park that provides local musicians or art." (SHCS Focus Group 1)

"A community center where high schools students can hang out with their friends, get services, and/or get mental health services/mentoring." (SCHS Focus Group 1)



Other participants suggested training for community members to better equip them to address some of the social problems currently being addressed by the police.

“Bystander intervention. A safe community is free of the bystander effect. Community knowledge of how to intervene. Trust that people will look out for you. Community accountability, responsibility for other people. Community involvement will stop potential acts of violence.” (YWCA Focus Group 1)

In many discussions, there was recognition of the wide diversity in San José and an interest in more opportunities for integration, while also ensuring culturally-centered community spaces for specific sub-populations.

When envisioning what a safer community would feel and look like, many participants spoke about their strong desire to feel accepted, welcomed, and safe walking through their community. While this was something that some (mostly white or white-passing) discussion participants experienced already, many other participants did not feel safe because of experiences with racial profiling and gender-based harassment. The focus group discussions and interviews highlighted that community safety is underpinned by one’s relationship to physical spaces and the dominant, often unnamed, culture of those spaces. While conversations among some white or culturally-white participants captured a desire for ways to have multicultural and integrated spaces, some people of color explicitly identified “white spaces” as hostile, unwelcoming and unsafe environments. Many people of color focused more on building within-group social cohesion as something that would enhance their safety. Thus, while all participants shared a desire for a stronger sense of community, there was also a sense that the specific ideas raised about how to achieve this goal might be incompatible.

“Bystander intervention. A safe community is free of the bystander effect. Community knowledge of how to intervene. Trust that people will look out for you. Community accountability, responsibility for other people. Community involvement will stop potential acts of violence.” (YWCA Focus Group 1)

“A community center where high schools students can hang out with their friends, get services, and/or get mental health services/mentoring.” (SCHS Focus Group 1)

CONCLUSION

NEXT STEPS

In addition to providing the information detailed here, focus group results were used to design a brief, online, city-wide People's Budget of San José Survey available now for residents to complete at their convenience. The PBSJ Survey is available in 7 languages and can be taken on any electronic device (phone, laptop, tablet) connected to the internet.

Please take the survey here:



Surveys will be collected through fall of 2021. Once survey collection is complete, data from the Surveys and Focus Groups will be combined for a final People's Budget of San José Report. The report will be presented to the current Reimagining Public Safety Community Advisory Committee [RiPS] to inform their recommendations on reform to City Council and the general public. The PBSJ Report will also be made widely available to the public via the SJSU HRI website and social media.

Overall, these focus groups provide insight into how citizens of San José perceive community safety and the role of the police in supporting this safety. They reflect concerns that the San José City Budget is not being allocated appropriately to handle pressing social issues in San José related to housing, mental health, and addiction, and insufficient and inequitable access to basic needs like education and food.

People expressed dismay, anger, and shock at the inequality this represented: in the heart of Silicon Valley, home to some of the richest companies and individuals in the world, people are allowed to live without access to basic needs. Participants wanted the city to pay more attention - and devote more funding - to these problems by supporting community members to meet their basic needs.

These conversations took place in the context of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Many in the San José community have experienced the death of a loved one, illness, loss of income and childcare, and food and housing insecurity. At the same time, policies like eviction moratoriums and improved access to unemployment insurance may have provided a social safety net otherwise not available. During the pandemic, evictions from homeless encampments were halted and there was an increase in the amount of housing available to support the city's homeless population. These protections represent a step towards meeting the needs of the city's most vulnerable population.

This report is limited in scope. While many diverse residents participated in the focus groups, organizations did not necessarily hold focus groups for people with specific social identities or experiences (e.g. there was no exclusive focus group for people who identify as LGBTQ or those who currently or previously experienced homelessness or disabled community members). Conversations that occurred within more mixed groups may not have surfaced the same ideas as conversations within salient segments of the population. Despite this broad outreach, we were able to hear from many community members with wide-ranging experiences. We would like to thank all the participants for their deep reflection and personal stories. While not all of the ideas expressed are included in this report, we hope this report does justice to the perspectives that were shared.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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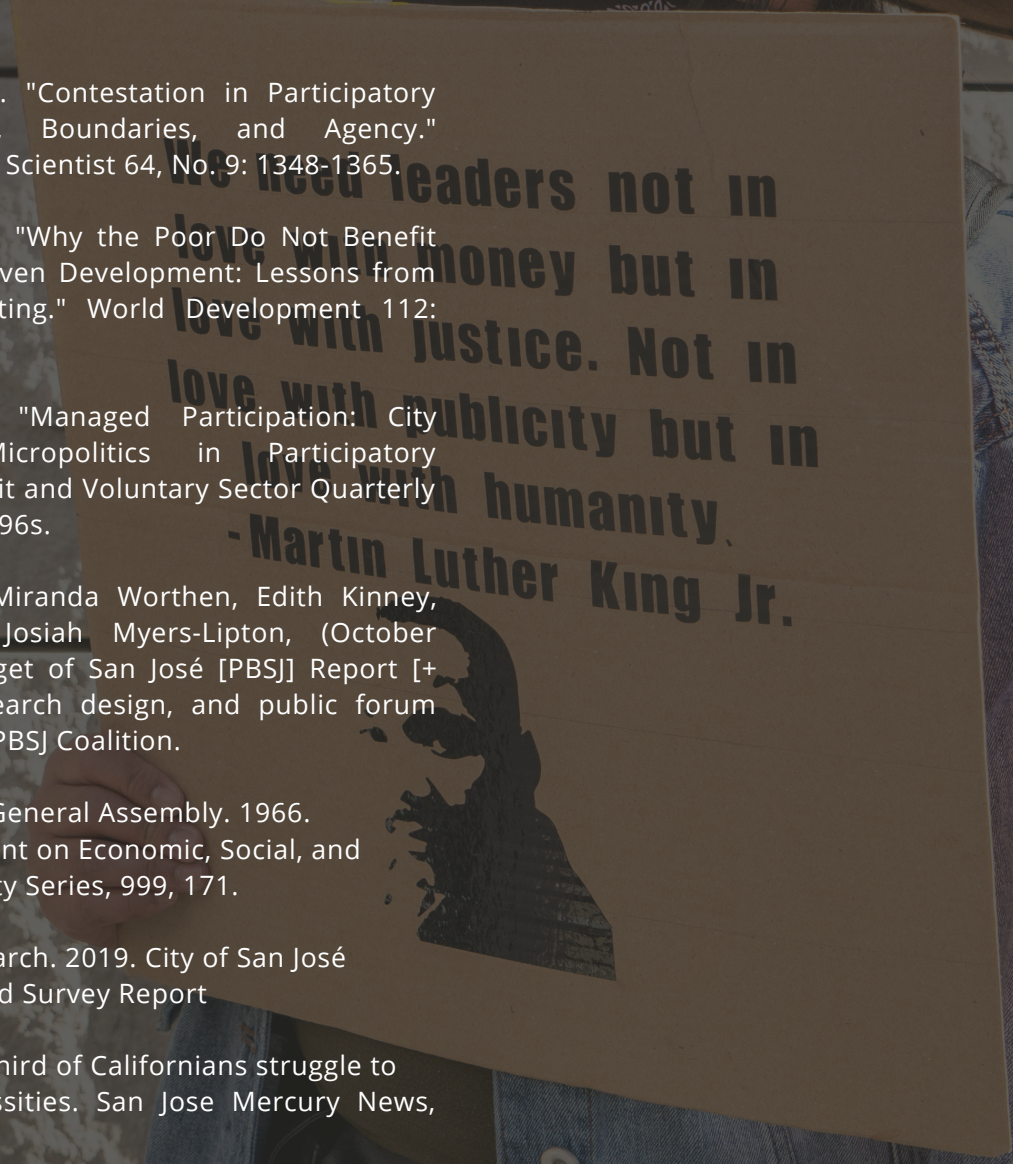
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We need leaders not in
love with money but in
love with justice. Not in
love with publicity but in
love with humanity.
- Martin Luther King Jr.

FOCUS GROUP INFORMATION

BLKC

The Black Leadership Kitchen Cabinet (BLKC) is made up of a broad cross section of over 50 community based organizations, agencies, churches, businesses, fraternities, sororities, social groups, individuals and community members. The BLKC addresses community health, education, business opportunities, promotional advancement, and cultural diversity for the African American community in Silicon Valley.

SHCS

Sacred Heart Community Service (SHCS) works to unite communities in Santa Clara county to ensure every child and adult is free from poverty. The vision statement places equal emphasis on the building and uniting of community and on the freedom from poverty. Sacred Heart's work emphasizes both engaging and strengthening our community and developing solutions to poverty.

GRPC

Guadalupe River Park Conservancy (GRPC) leads, partners, advocates, organizes and informs the public on a number of projects, initiatives, and plans that impact the River Park and the surrounding community. Their goals are to support the health and stewardship of the Guadalupe River, make the park and trail more welcoming and inviting, and support community development while uplifting the neighbors and the city.

FLY

Fresh Lifelines for Youth's (FLY) mission is to prevent juvenile crime and incarceration through legal education, leadership training, and one-on-one mentoring. Where other people only see a youth's problems, FLY sees strengths that can be directed toward positive, healthy participation in the community and focus on bolstering young people's belief in themselves. FLY is one of the Bay Area's longest-standing, most respected agencies working with youth who are currently, formerly, or at risk of involvement in the juvenile justice system ages 11 to 24.

GFS

Grail Family Services (GFS) partners with families, schools, and communities to promote children's success and well-being. GFS operates under the objectives to support young children who thrive in school and in life, support parents who confidently help their children thrive, and provide a community of parents who support and encourage each other.

LCC

Latinas Contra Cancer (LCC) works to create an inclusive health care system that provides services to the underserved Latino population around issues of breast and other cancers. LCC works to decrease cancer-related health disparities among the Hispanic population in Santa Clara County through culturally and linguistically specific community health outreach, education, screening, and navigation services provided by bilingual, bi-cultural patient coordinators and navigators.

PFS, SECOND CAREERS

Peninsula Family Services, Second Careers Employment Program (PFS) works to prepare older adults re-entering the workforce for today's competitive job market. PFS, Second Careers Employment Program serves adults 55 years and older who are unemployed, reside in San Benito, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz or San Mateo counties, and have an income at or below 125% of the federal poverty level.

YWCA

YWCA Golden Gate Silicon Valley (YWCA) is on a mission to eliminate racism, empower women, and promote peace, justice, freedom, and dignity for all. The YWCA offers therapy services, housing, child care, education, and employment programs to help promote a continuum of response to the challenges of racism, sexism, and gender-based violence. These direct services are offered to meet immediate needs, issue education to change hearts and minds in the local communities, and legislate advocacy to change the rules and systems in order to achieve greater equity and justice for all. The YWCA serves communities in Marin, San Francisco, San Mateo and Santa Clara counties.

FOCUS GROUP INFORMATION

WVCS

West Valley Community Services is a non-profit, community-based agency that has been providing direct assistance and referral services to the west valley communities of Santa Clara County for over 45 years. West Valley Community Services provides a continuum of basic needs, including an in-house and mobile food pantry, homeless support, affordable housing, emergency financial assistance, family support, referrals, education, and case management. West Valley Community Services serves homeless and low-income individuals and families in the west valley communities of Cupertino, Saratoga, West San Jose, Los Gatos, Monte Sereno, and the surrounding mountain regions.

REWS

The Red Earth Women's Society, is a grass roots alliance of Indigenous women dedicated to holding Sacred Space for women of all Ages & Nations.

A space where she can feel safe, be supported, and empowered by the care & concern of the circle. They are dedicated not only to raising awareness but also promoting change regarding the injustices affecting our Native families and the communities we live in.

They stand for what is right and Sacred.

RECS

RECS, is a Sacred Heart Committee for Race, Equity, and Community Safety. Their vision is a police-free community created through organizing for racial and economic equality and justice.

Their mission is to reshape community safety through inclusion, rather than exclusion, to advocate for alternatives and policy changes to the police state by organizing for racial justice, to strengthen connections and resources and to create a community where everyone feels safe and accountability is ensured.

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