Ensuring Equitable Distribution of Law Enforcement Resources in Columbia, MO

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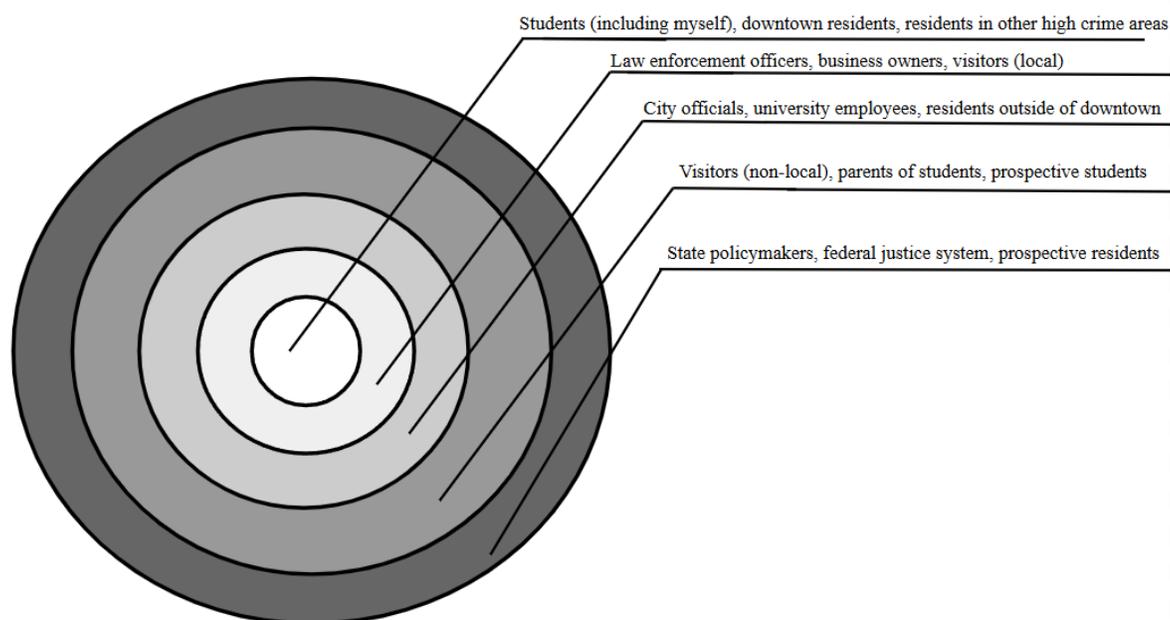**Ensuring Equitable Distribution of Law Enforcement Resources in Columbia, MO**

The recent fatal shooting of a Stephens College student in downtown Columbia, Missouri prompted significant discussion regarding policing downtown. A prominent voice in the Columbia community, Dr. Mun Choi, president of the University of Missouri system, and Chancellor of the University of Missouri, issued a 'Call to Action' demanding: "more policing downtown, hiring of more security officers, passing of a loitering ordinance, and prosecution to the full extent of the law for crimes" from the Columbia Police Department (CPD) (Choi, 2025). Dr. Choi pledged to "place all available police resources to patrol downtown" for the duration of the proclaimed "period of emergency" (Choi, 2025). Within three days of Dr. Choi's plea to city leaders, numerous "immediate action items" were set to be implemented including: increased staffing for both CPD and MUPD, increased foot patrol during peak weekend hours from both departments, provision of both Boone County Sheriff deputies and Missouri Highway Patrol officers during peak weekend hours, meetings with Missouri Governor Mike Kehoe to advocate for the use of state resources to combat crime, meetings with U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Missouri Matt Price, and sweeping reform of city ordinance (Choi, 2025b). These measures are significant and imply a rise in crime in downtown Columbia greatly disproportionate to crime in other areas of the city. Dr. Choi identified these crimes as causing the most disturbance to the downtown and University communities: shootings, burglary, larceny, property damage, trespassing, and loitering. The drastic and immediate action following Dr. Choi's call to action prompts the question: How has Dr. Choi used rhetoric, and the influence and institutional resources of the University, to misrepresent the public safety concerns of downtown Columbia and promote himself as a prominent community leader?

University stakeholders are identified as follows: students, parents, faculty, administrators, employees, donors, and other entities responsible for providing funding. It is also necessary to identify stakeholders for the CPD and Boone County Sheriff's office. These are individuals who would otherwise receive the support of the department's respective resources, primarily local, permanent residents. Tensions between these two groups of stakeholders are expected and present. A challenge in the interaction between institutions such as the University of Missouri and surrounding communities, in this case the residents of Columbia, are "the power structures preventing under-resourced communities from dealing with local issues," (Guhlincozzi, 2025). The University of Missouri is a powerful institutional voice within Columbia, and it must be cautious to not crowd out the perspectives of residents. In the context of policing, there is a finite amount of resources in demand from both the university and surrounding community.

Community geography offers a spatial perspective based on "committed action towards social justice and knowledge production" using community-institution relationships (Guhlincozzi, 2025). The issue of crime in downtown Columbia offers an opportunity to utilize a community geography approach by visualizing the spatial distribution of crime in Columbia to make recommendations about an equitable distribution of law enforcement resources. In the context of community geography, equity is defined as: "providing resources to communities and individuals based on need to create equal results," (Guhlincozzi, 2025). This research project aims to ensure that marginalized communities' needs in Columbia are not overshadowed by more powerful institutions' demands, namely the University of Missouri. The intent of this research is to use community geography techniques to "redistribute power [that] can provide voice to

underrepresented and under-resourced communities", if Dr. Choi's demands are determined to

be unjust (Fischer et al., 2021).

      To make clear my relation to this issue as well as the relation of various stakeholders, I

will utilize the adapted Ring Theory Model. The inner rings of the model represent those who

will be impacted most by this issue and subsequent research. The model is shown below:

Students (including myself), downtown residents, residents in other high crime areas

Law enforcement officers, business owners, visitors (local)

City officials, university employees, residents outside of downtown

Visitors (non-local), parents of students, prospective students

State policymakers, federal justice system, prospective residents

      The innermost ring represents those who depend on the safety of downtown Columbia

daily, students and downtown residents, as well as residents in other areas of Columbia who do

not receive the same level of law enforcement response due to increased policing downtown.

Students and downtown residents interact with the downtown environment regularly and thus

face the greatest risk if downtown is unsafe. The second ring represents groups who rely on the

safety of downtown but are impacted less directly: local visitors and business owners. Business

owners rely on a safe environment to bring in foot traffic and locals seek to enjoy the offerings of

downtown without concerns for their safety. Law enforcement officers can expect changes in

their assignments, policies, and perceptions as a result of decisions made surrounding crime in downtown. The third ring has groups that rely on the safety of downtown to advance their interests: city officials, university employees, and Columbia residents outside of downtown. City officials seek reelection or job security and are responsible for decisionmaking regarding public safety, and thus ensuring the safety of residents is critical. Given the direct border between campus and downtown, university employees inherently interact with the downtown environment; the identity of campus and downtown are closely tied together. The fourth ring represents groups with non-imminent stakes in the safety of downtown: visitors, parents of students, and prospective students. These groups all want downtown Columbia to be a safe area as they have a future stake in the city or have a loved one whose safety is at risk if not properly addressed, but their personal safety is not at risk. The outermost ring is for groups that are far removed from the proximity of downtown Columbia but still benefit from promoting public safety: state policymakers, the federal justice system, and prospective residents. These groups all stand to benefit from equitable and efficient policing to increase the attractiveness of Columbia and Missouri as a whole as a place to live. The adapted Ring Theory model visualizes the stake that various groups have in the safety of downtown Columbia.

My position in the center most ring displays the importance of this issue to myself and my peers. As someone who consistently interacts with space in downtown Columbia during the school year, I have a unique understanding of how a feeling of safety (or lack thereof) can impact the student community. Admittedly, I have little interaction with local politics as Columbia is not my permanent residence. My status as a student alters my perception of the functions of downtown Columbia as opposed to permanent residents. As such, I should be cognisant of

critiquing policy design that is intended for permanent residents, not for the temporary student community.

With a sufficient understanding of the origins of this issue, and an understanding of those impacted by the outcomes of equitable policing, research progressed towards understanding how various actors responded to Dr. Choi's 'Call to Action' and the subsequent list of 'Immediate action items'. In an effort to gain a holistic understanding of perspectives on crime in Columbia, responses from one group within each of the first three rings of the adapted ring theory model were collected and analyzed. The Missouri Students Association (MSA) is the undergraduate student government organization responsible for advocating the interests of the University of Missouri student population. In response to Dr. Choi's 'Call to Action', the MSA passed Senate Bill 65-05 in which they made the following requests: student representation in local policy regarding public safety, access to ride-sharing programs, self-defense training, and the use of the University's educational resources to address systematic issues related to gun violence (Corkery & Strubelt, 2025). Columbia's mayor, Barbara Buffaloe, shared the students request for student representation in policy decision, advocating for the creation of a 'Collegiate Advisory Council' composed of student representatives from the four higher education institutions in Columbia: The University of Missouri, Stephens College, Columbia College, and Moberly Area Community College (Kaminski, 2025). Ken Rice, an executive of Pickleman's, a local business with a location located in downtown Columbia, expressed disappointment in the city's 'tepid' initial response that allowed Dr. Choi to "set the tone for everything" (Kaminski, 2025). Rice also stated he was glad that a joint task force between the university and city had not been formed, citing previous task forces that produce actionable items that ultimately were not implemented. Although the community of business leaders in Columbia is not homogenous,

Rice's perspective provides insight into the opinions of those who have been dealing with crime in Columbia for much of their lives, in stark contrast to the perspectives of students who typically only reside in Columbia for four to five years.

Dr. Choi made an effort to respond to each of these communities; when analyzing these responses, tensions became evident. A meeting was held between Dr. Choi and a group of MSA officers to discuss several MSA bills, including senate bill 65-05. Senate bill 65-05 requested clarification to several of Dr. Choi's statements from his 'Call to Action'. An officer present at the meeting described the discussion around crime in Columbia as unenthusiastic and unsatisfactory: "Dr. Choi has lacked any sort of apparent zeal for including differing perspectives" in public safety discussions (MSA, personal communication, December 5, 2025). Additionally, when Dr. Choi's office was asked about Mayor Buffaloe's proposed Collegiate Advisory Council, they responded: "President Dr. Choi's focus will be on implementing the 11 action items with the city, county, state, federal and business leaders to improve public safety and the homeless crime problems" (Kaminski, 2025). The Collegiate Advisory Council was ultimately established though " Dr. Choi was not a part of the formation or consideration of this board" (MSA, personal communication, December 5, 2025). These statements prompt two main concerns: Dr. Choi's seemingly lackluster support for student representation and Dr. Choi's targeted rhetoric towards homeless individuals, which will be addressed extensively in a later section. Additionally, the statement regarding including business leaders seems to have been misleading. When Rice, the Pickleman's executive that operates a sandwich shop open until 2:00 a.m. in downtown Columbia, learned that Dr. Choi planned to conduct a walkthrough of downtown Columbia on the night of October 4th, he assumed he would be able to join Dr. Choi as he was a business leader in the community. Instead, Rice said it became clear that Dr. Choi's

walk was not open to anyone who sought to join, and was instead turned away (Kaminski, 2025).

Analysis of these responses provided three different directions for continued research: What

trends in crime can be identified from CPD data, what tensions exist in institutional relationships

between local organizations and the University, and why does Dr. Choi ultimately target the

unhoused population in his rhetoric?

First, the validity of Dr. Choi's claims were investigated. The CPD maintains two crime

mapping apps that are publicly available. For this portion of research, the Crime Trends

Dashboard was used to "explore statistical trends and hotspots across individual crime types"

(Columbia Police Department, 2025b). The CPD police transparency website page states "By

sharing accurate and timely crime data, we aim to provide a clear and honest picture of public

safety in our city. Reliable data empowers both the department and the community to identify

trends, respond effectively, and work together on long-term solutions" (Schlude, 2025).

Unfortunately, while the CPD states they recognize the value of reliable, accurate data, the

research process revealed several concerns with the extent to which the Crime Trends Dashboard

upheld these standards. For instance, use of the dashboard has revealed when filtering by 'Crime

Type', at least 8 crime classifications are no longer used by the CPD in reports. These include:

- 'Aggravated Assault'
- 'Aggravated Assault - Shots Fired'
- 'Burglary
- 'Driving Under the Influence'
- 'Identity Theft'
- 'Larceny-Other'
- 'Simple Assault'
- 'Robbery'

However, these classifications were used as recently as last year. Consequently, there are at

least 8 new crime classifications that were not utilized or minimally utilized until this year.

While this seems like a simple clerical change, this lack of attention to detail can grossly

misrepresent trends in the data, especially if the user is unfamiliar with interpreting statistical outputs or is hastily selecting multiple types of crime. A recommendation stemming from these concerns is the CPD should remove or merge old data with the new classifications, or post a disclaimer about the potential inaccuracies of the 'Crime Type' filter. Further, the dashboard also allows users to filter by National Incident Base Reporting System (NIBRS) code, which research has identified as the most accurate source for crime data classification on this dashboard, though this is not officially noted anywhere on the page.

The CPD uses 'beats' to establish geographical responsibilities for officers on patrol (Columbia Police Department, 2025a). The CPD beat map is shown below:
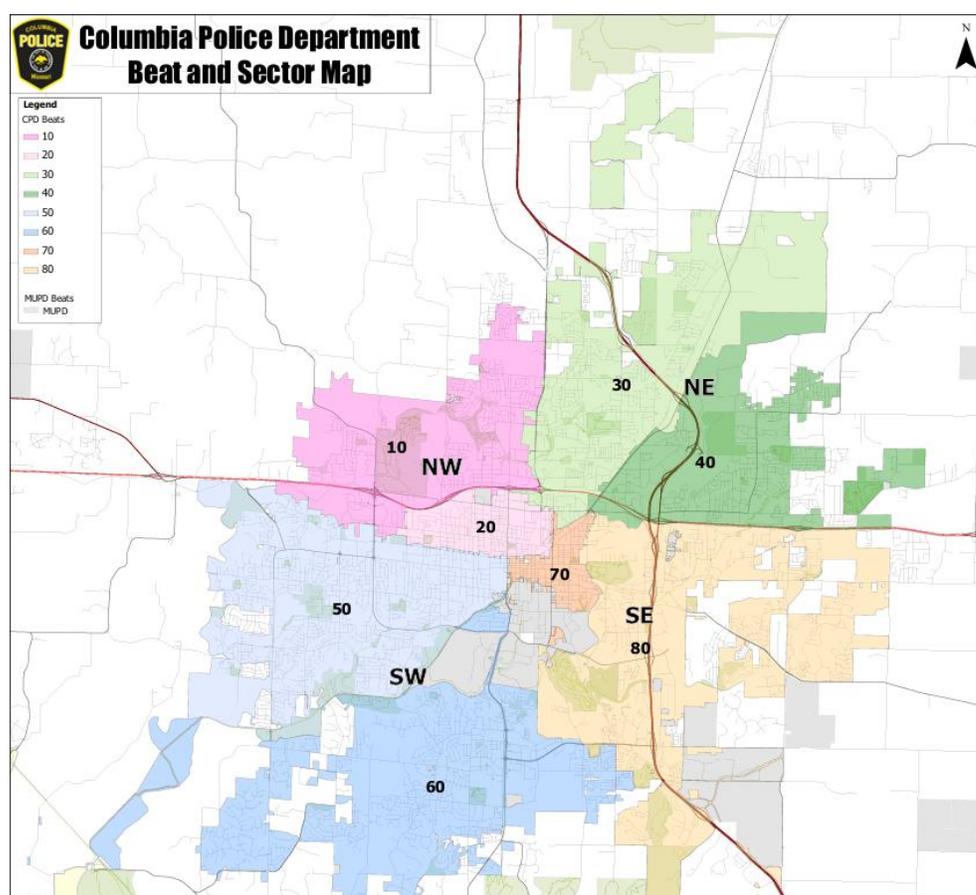
The dashboard also allows users to view crime statistics by beat. Beat 70 encompasses the entirety of downtown Columbia. The following crimes were selected for this analysis due to

their relevance in crimes identified as affecting downtown by Dr. Choi: Murder, Rape, Robbery,

Aggravated Assault, Simple Assault, Burglary, Larceny, Vandalism, Weapon Law Violations,

and Tresspassing. Every crime listed, with the exception of Tresspassing, is considered a 'serious

crime' by the NIBRS (NIBRS, 2023). A summary of notable statistics are shown here:

Reports of: Murder, Rape, Robbery, Aggravated Assault, Simple Assault, Burglary, Larceny,
Vandalism, Weapon Law Violations, and Tresspassing by Beat.

Beat #	Year-to-Date Change	# of reported Crimes in Last 365 Days (as of 12/07/2025)
20	10.2%	629
30	17.6%	689
70*	16.2%	287

Beats 20 experienced a year-to-date increase in crime, and beat 30 experienced a year-to-date

increase in crime greater than that of beat 70. Beats 20 and 30 already had a quantity of crime

that was more than double the total crime in beat 70. In fact, beat 70 has the lowest total amount

of crime of any beat in Columbia. All other beats have experienced a Year-to-Date decrease.

Columbia has experienced a 1.6% decrease overall for these crimes, Year-to-Date as of 12/7/'25.

A visual summary of crime data, by beat is shown below:

With the knowledge that this data is publicly available to all, the next question was advanced to:

Why did city leaders still appease Dr. Choi's initial demands?

Tensions between universities and their surrounding communities are present in nearly

every college town. Locals often become disgruntled as they see their tax dollars create
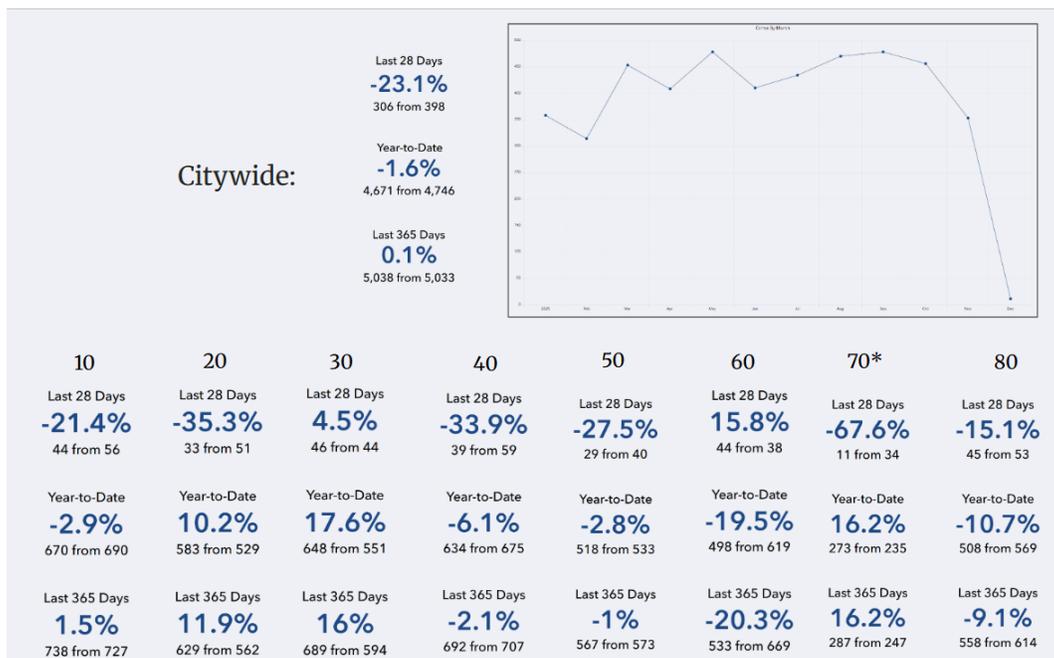
infrastructure and services enjoyed by university affiliates without reciprocated benefits that

impact residents in their daily lives (Glover, 2015). The precarious relationship between

educational institutions and their surrounding communities is colloquially referred to as the

town-gown relationship. This notion only adds to the curiosity surrounding Columbia's leaders'

decision to meet all of Dr. Choi's demands despite a deteriorating relationship between city

officials and the University. Approaching the town-gown relationship from an economic

perspective provides some insight into why city leaders may have acted the way they did, despite

the existence of data that weakens Dr. Choi's claims. Income inequality is common in college

towns, the occupations of residents are typically split in two, professors and hospital workers, and everyone else in lower-paying service jobs (Blake, 2023). The Gini Index is used to measure income inequality in a given area. The 2013-2017 ACS 5-year survey indicated that Columbia had income inequality higher than both the Missouri and National average (Hollis, n.d.). Further, the University of Missouri is responsible for 15% of all employment in Columbia (City of Columbia, 2025b). As a result, Columbia has a massive coalition of higher-earning employees who would all benefit from the interests of the University being protected. When expanding the economic analysis to a statewide view, the University's position as an indispensable asset becomes clearer. In the fiscal year 2024, the University of Missouri-Columbia employed 15,334 people, issued $79.2 million to 139 In-state vendors for construction projects, treated 304,615 patients with $119.9 million in uncompensated care, trained and educated 41,523 first responders, and provided resources to 297,919 farms and related agricultural businesses in Missouri (University of Missouri, 2025). The fiscal year 2021 report estimated that the University of Missouri- Columbia generated $5 billion in economic impact for the state, supported 49,937 full-time and part-time jobs, directly and indirectly, and generated $281.8 million in state and local taxes (UM System, 2021). These impacts are summarized below:

University of Missouri Local and State Impact

University of Missouri Provisions	Impact
# of employees in Columbia	15,334 employees (15% of all workers in Columbia)
State and Local Tax Revenues	$281.8 million
# of Jobs Created (full and part time)	49,937 jobs
Awards for Construction Contracts	$79.2 million
Uncompensated Healthcare	$120 million

UM Extension agribusiness connections	297,919 farms and businesses
Total Economic Impact for MO	$5 billion
First Responders Trained	41,523 first responders

These figures paint a clear picture, it is in the state's best interest, as well as Columbia's, to maintain a favorable relationship with the University. However, this does not provide reason to disregard the safety of the 130,000 residents of Columbia, most of whom do not live downtown. Thus, potential solutions must be evaluated to advocate for the safety of everyone in Columbia.

Following the 'Immediate action items' produced by Dr. Choi and city leaders, the weekend of October 3rd and 4th, 2025, saw an unprecedented police presence in downtown Columbia. The CPD reported a combined detail of 27 law enforcement officers each night downtown.   The weekend of 'proactive' enforcement resulted in 202 traffic stops, 57 criminal citations, and 27 custodial arrests (McNeil, 2025). While effective, this hyper police presence is simply not sustainable. Columbia already allocates more than 50% of the general fund towards public safety and the CPD will be fully staffed following the graduation of the current police academy class (Moyer, 2025). Thus, if law enforcement resources are already operating near their maximum capacities, long term solutions that address the root causes of crime must be explored. The prevalence of homelessness is a significant theme in Dr. Choi's rhetoric. Comments were often anecdotal and crude, lacking substantial evidence to justify his claims. In an interview with KRCG 13, Dr. Choi claimed that during his downtown walkthrough several individuals stated they "were assaulted by homeless individuals in broad daylight and that there were daily encounters of public drunkenness, public urination and drug use" (Slavit, 2025). In Dr. Choi's meeting with the MSA, discussion around crime ultimately arrived at the unhoused population in Columbia. During the meeting, an MSA officer stated that "how we treat the least

of these is a true reflection of our integrity as a campus and community" to which Dr. Choi did not directly respond (MSA, personal communication, December 5, 2025). Even when speaking in an official capacity while presenting information to the Community Improvement District (CID), a board of business leaders and policymakers for businesses along the Business Loop, Choi's narrative remained unchanged. In an email outlining Dr. Choi's talking points for the CID meeting, just three sentences in a 400 word outline titled 'Homeless Crime Statistics' contained any mention of a statistic (M. Choi, personal communication, October 11, 2025). Rather, the talking points were centered on specific instances of crimes committed by homeless individuals and statements such as "These individuals are harassing, assaulting, doing drugs and drinking in public, urinating/defecating in public among other things" (M. Choi, personal communication, October 11, 2025). Associations between unhoused individuals and crime are difficult to decipher. A 1989 study found that unhoused individuals have a higher overall arrest rate than the general population . Most unhoused individuals are arrested for the following crimes: public intoxication, followed by theft/shoplifting, violation of city ordinances, and burglary (Snow et al., 1989). Perhaps the more significant association is the relationship between mental illness and homelessness. The Office of National Drug Control Policy reports that 30% of individuals experiencing chronic homelessness have a serious mental illness, and two-thirds of the chronically homeless population have substance abuse disorder or other chronic illness (SAMHSA, 2025). Data from New York City indicated that mentally ill individuals are 40 times more likely to experience homelessness than the general population and that the rate of crime was 35 times higher in the unhoused mentally ill population as compared to the domiciled mentally ill population (Martell et al., 1995). Data also shows that unhoused individuals are more likely to be victims of crime: The San Diego County District Attorney's Office 2022 data shows

homeless individuals face murder 19 times more often, attempted murder 27 times more often, assault 12 times more often, and sexual assault nine times more often as compared to the general population (Stephan & Woodley, 2022). Homeless crime data is difficult to decipher: unhoused individuals often live in densely populated areas and reports typically don't detail if crimes were against other unhoused individuals within the same community or against strangers. If research is underdeveloped about the association between crime and homelessness, why does Dr. Choi continue to target unhoused individuals in his rhetoric?   Further, if the causes of homelessness are connected to broader issues with how society perceives and treats mental illness, why does the chief executive of a higher education institution elect to make crude comments about homelessness rather than leverage the resources available to him to collaborate with eager city officials to address root causes of crime and homelessness? One could speculate that Dr. Choi targets homeless individuals as they are less able to advocate for themselves, they already suffer from a negative stigma, and the removal of homeless individuals is actionable and optically appealing for stakeholders.

I propose the use of interviews and visually representative programs like Photovoice to personify the stories and daily experiences of individuals living in other high crime areas of Columbia whose voices are absent from the media. I implore Dr. Choi to leverage the educational resources of the university to develop a sustainable plan that addresses the causes of crime in Columbia to create a lasting solution. If homelessness remains a principal concern following objective analysis of the cause of rising crime in Columbia, we must evaluate the resources available to homeless individuals and determine how homelessness can be better addressed as a community. Collaboration between city officials and the University must be restored and fostered if a long-term solution is to be developed.

Dr. Choi recently met with Missouri Governor Mike Kehoe to discuss public safety in Columbia, though city officials were not invited to attend. Following her exclusion from this meeting, Mayor Buffaloe accused Dr. Choi of cherry picking data to push false narratives and undermine local efforts to combat crime (Goodrich, 2025). City councilwoman Vera Elwood stated that "There are things that have been happening for a long time and now there is suddenly an idea that it's only happening because [Dr.Choi] stepped into the conversation. That power is being taken away from our staff and the efforts that they're putting into it"(Moyer, 2025). Council Member Jacque Sample said "We need to find a way to get [Dr. Choi] in our circle and be collaborative, but he's not reciprocating that" (Moyer, 2025). Though Dr. Choi considers downtown an "extension of campus", proper respect must be given to the authority and jurisdiction of city officials (M. Choi, personal communication, October 11, 2025). These local institutions must collaborate and share resources if a sustainable solution is to be reached.

Crime in Columbia is on the rise in certain areas. The nature of Columbia lends the issue of public safety to being a topic of great importance for many actors within the community. Dr. Choi seems to be misusing his influence to unfairly demand law enforcement resources that are needed elsewhere. Homelessness remains a critical issue that ought to be addressed through proactive, rehabilitative resources provided through the University rather than punitive measures enforced by policing. City officials and university representatives must work together if sustainable change is to be made in the Columbia community. Trends in crime are subject to change, and this research should be viewed as a resource for establishing context on crime in Columbia and how crime impacts various members of the community.

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