

February 19th, 2021

Support for Bill #HB336

My name is Dr. John W. Jackson. I am a Black man and I live in Ellicott City, MD, District 44B. I am also an Assistant Professor of Epidemiology at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. I am writing to express my strong support for Bill 336.

The death of George Floyd last summer brought back my own negative experience with the Baltimore City Police. When I was a young man in 2003, recently graduated from the University of Maryland Baltimore County as a Meyerhoff Scholar with honors, I worked for Johns Hopkins University as a research assistant, directing a community health survey in Southwest Baltimore. I also lived in that neighborhood. It was a highly policed area, with flashing surveillance cameras, and I routinely saw police lining up outside a residence to forcibly enter it. One early Friday evening, before sunset, my friends and I were standing outside my house catching up. I had lived at that house for two months by that point. A squad car pulled up and demanded to know what we were doing there. I calmly told the officer I lived there. The officer demanded to see my identification. I was a bit surprised by this, being from Montgomery County, and handed him my wallet, which he backhanded to the ground. He then repeated his demand for my identification. Shaken, I pulled myself together, picked up my wallet, and handed him my identification. I also went inside to get my lease. While he ran my identification, I struggled to contain the anger, rage, powerlessness and fear I felt. Once it became clear to the officer that there was nothing wrong going on, he wrote me a “contact report.” I told him that he did not have to slap my wallet to the ground. In response, he said that he didn’t see that, and then asked if I had actually seen it, as if it didn’t happen. It was then expressly clear to me that where I lived, the power lay with this officer, and I had little recourse to rectify the disrespect I received. A disrespect that I received for just being a Black man standing outside my own house after a long day of work.

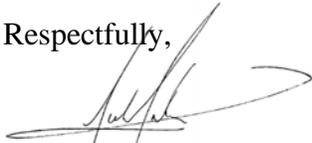
Over the past decade, I have watched countless young black men and women murdered by law enforcement for doing exactly what I did, nothing. I was fortunate. Blessed. Lucky. I often wonder what would have happened if the feelings I held inside had burst open in that moment or if the officer had interpreted my responses to him as aggression and warranting egregious harm and abuse. It is one of the reasons why, when I returned to work at Hopkins after graduate school, that I decided to live outside the jurisdiction of Baltimore City.

While I acknowledge there are concerns about safety on the Hopkins campus, I am not convinced that the creation of an armed police force under the Baltimore City Police Department will improve the safety of all students, staff, faculty, or the community. Regardless of my position and education, because of the color of my skin, I will not feel any safer leaving my office at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health at night, especially in plain clothes, knowing that an armed police force is nearby. My own experience with the Baltimore City Police Department, and the astounding level of corruption that has been exposed within it during the past decade, make me worry not only for myself and those who look like me, but also for the potential damage to the community. I would prefer to see Hopkins and Baltimore City partner with the community to build trust, engagement, responsible development, and address

long-standing social needs. I am sure that as a premier academic institution we can leverage our resources and research to explore effective alternatives to increased arms and policing.

For these reasons, I joined over 6,000 persons affiliated and unaffiliated with Johns Hopkins University in a petition to end the Johns Hopkins Police Force Initiative. Since the petition, the implementation has been paused, the accountability board has been suspended, and there has been no significant progress in implementation. It is not too late to redirect efforts and pursue better solutions. By supporting Bill 336, you have an opportunity to redirect relations between Johns Hopkins University and its community neighbors towards greater trust and collaboration. I urge the committee to support Bill 336.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John W. Jackson', with a large, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

John W. Jackson, ScD
Assistant Professor
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health