

A Beginner's Guide to Proposition A

By Molly Walsh

On [November 2](#), Austin voters will decide on a proposition that, if passed, will require the city to maintain two police officers for every 1,000 residents.

Proposition A, which originated from a petition backed by the [Save Austin Now PAC](#), seeks to increase Austin Police Department staffing in response to increasingly heated debates about homelessness and homicides in the city.

City Council and an array of local organizations have opposed the proposition, saying it would cost too much and wouldn't necessarily improve crime prevention and deterrence.

What's on the ballot?

Here is how the proposition will appear on the ballot:

Proposition A – Shall a petitioned ordinance be approved to enhance public safety and police oversight, transparency and accountability by adding new chapter 2-16 to establish minimum standards for the police department to ensure effective public safety and protect residents and visitors to Austin, and prescribing minimal requirements for achieving the same, at an estimated cost of \$271.5 million - \$598.8 million over five years?

If Proposition A passes, the City of Austin would allocate the additional APD spending toward retaining, recruitment, training and employment of additional officers. The measure would require APD to maintain a minimum ratio of two officers for every 1,000 Austin residents, while also providing a requirement that officers designate at least 35 percent of their time toward community policing efforts.

The measure would require at least three additional cadet classes to ensure the ratio; 40 hours of continuing education training each year for APD officers; provisions to diversify the police force; and bonuses for officers who speak a second language or who participate in the department's mentoring program.

Why was Proposition A written? How did the proposal come about?

In the months leading up to the election, Proposition A has been widely debated, both by critics and supporters of law enforcement. Proponents say the measure addresses Austin's crime rate, while also tackling a wide spectrum of police reform issues, including officer training and retention and the diversity of the police force.

The proposition is based on a petition authored by the Save Austin Now PAC in response to police funding previously reallocated by the Austin City Council. Matt Mackowiak, a co-founder for Save Austin Now, said the group collaborated with about a dozen law enforcement

organizations and professionals to create a proposition that would address pressing issues facing the police department.

Mackowiak and the Save Austin Now PAC believe Proposition A will help remedy the city's shrinking police force, shorten 911 response times and make the city safer.

"Prop A is not a crazy concept," says Mackowiak. "It's a very balanced, well-reasoned, thoughtful ... data-driven proposal."

Why the two per 1,000 ratio?

APD currently employs [1.7 officers per 1,000 residents](#), lower than a ratio of [1.9 officers](#) in 2019. The Save Austin Now PAC cited that [other major cities](#) across the United States, including New York, Washington, Philadelphia, Houston and Dallas, all have police ratios at or above two officers per 1,000 residents.

Although the two-per-1,000 ratio has become a central focus of the Proposition A debate, opponents of the measure argue the ratio is an outdated standard, dating back to the 1970s.

"There's nothing really magical about 2.0," said Bill Spelman, Emeritus Professor of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin, who is also a member of the [No Way Prop A](#) campaign organized to oppose the proposition. "It was kind of a rough rule of thumb from 40 years ago, which they kind of resurrected and said that's got to be the standard here. It doesn't."

What about the city's homicide rate?

Proponents have cited the city's rising number of homicides in 2021 as evidence for the necessity of a larger police force as a deterrent to violent crime. So far in 2021, the City of Austin has recorded more than [60 homicides](#), compared with [48 last year](#).

Critics of Prop A, including Spelman, say an analysis of the data shows that the number of officers that the city employs does not correlate with the city's homicide rate.

"There is no evidence that having a large number of police officers had any effect on the homicide rate," said Spelman. "It actually went up by more in places with large numbers of officers, than with small numbers of officers. But it was not a statistically significant difference. That suggests to me that what happened didn't care whether we had a lot of cops on the street or not, it just happened. And that happened in about the same way every place."

What could happen if Prop A passes?

Opponents of Prop A believe it would siphon funding from other city employees, safety services and amenities. Carol Guthrie, Business Manager for AFSCME Chapter 1624 said it would pose an extreme financial burden for the city, forcing massive cuts across the city's budget and leading to layoffs of civilian employees, including those represented by AFSCME. Guthrie worries that as the population of the city grows over time, the cost to maintain a two per 1,000 ratio would be more than the city can afford.

“The price tag on this is astronomical,” said Guthrie. “And the community, the residents of Austin will not be able to afford this. Unless they are willing to cut firefighter, cut paramedic, close libraries, close parks. Close, you know, limit of people at the animal shelter. This proposition is so dangerous. And I think that it's going to have arms that we haven't even thought of.”

Supporters of Prop A fear that a police staffing shortage will lead to a more dangerous city. This fear has been compounded by the APD's [recent announcement](#) that officers will not respond to non-emergency calls starting on October 1.

Cleo Petricek, Co-Founder of Save Austin Now PAC became a proponent of Prop A because she is concerned with the safety of officers and citizens as the city's police force has continued to shrink. Petricek is also concerned about the potential consequences for victims as [response times for emergency calls](#) have increased over the past year. Petricek urges opponents of Prop A, including members of the City Council, to consider the victim experience when discussing Prop A and other police funding measures.

“What is an acceptable amount of time for violent crime, priority one call, for police to respond, what is okay for them,” asked Petricek. Ten minutes, twelve minutes, fifteen? If it was their child that was waiting for police, or their family that was in a serious situation, what is acceptable for them right now? Because we're not meeting the 7.5 (minutes) that has always been what we call a safe city standard. What is okay for them?”