


Washington Post: “We need to rethink public safety”

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing March 19, 2021

 *Latest in a series of posts in the wake of the George Floyd murder* 

Gadfly continues to ride his hobbyhorse of the need for more in-depth conversation regarding how we do public safety.

Mayoral candidate Dana Grubb lists Public Safety as one of his platform issues, but Gadfly is not sure exactly what he has in mind. Council candidate Hillary Kwiatek has been bolder, specifically suggesting that there are “new models” that could be of use in “re-imagining public safety.”

I haven’t heard so far of any scheduled pre-election public events where candidates can expand and be pushed to expand on such ideas.

Maybe Gadfly will make public safety one of the Forum topics.

But in the meantime he continues to call attention to **incidents** like the one yesterday that suggest the need of that re-imagining, as well as thought pieces like the following.

[Editorial Board, “Reimagine Safety.” Washington Post, March 16, 2021.](#)

Since the police killing of George Floyd in May 2020 unleashed what may have been the largest protest movement in U.S. history, the nation has been fiercely debating how to respond — to his horrifying death, and to those of Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade and so many other Black Americans at the hands of police.

Some energy has been directed at accountability for specific acts, exemplified by the trial of the man charged in Floyd’s killing, former police officer Derek Chauvin, underway this month.

Some has been directed at reforming police training, discipline and other policies. Several state legislatures have updated use-of-force policies and restricted or banned the use of chokeholds and neck restraints.

But the fiercest and potentially most consequential debate is over mounting a more fundamental response to these tragically familiar incidents.

Today, community activists and law enforcement officers who see eye to eye on precious little agree on this: We rely too much on the police.

Over-reliance on police is preventing us from imagining and investing in other public safety tools — ones that could revitalize the struggling neighborhoods that experience the most crime.

We should think about public safety the way we think about public health. No one would suggest that hospitals alone can keep a population healthy, no matter how well run they might be. A healthy community needs neighborhood clinics, health education, parks, environments free of toxins, government policies that protect the public during health emergencies, and so much more. Health isn't just about hospitals; safety isn't just about police.

Past spasms of outrage over horrific incidents of police violence have faded from mainstream attention largely without giving rise to a fundamentally different framework for supporting safe, healthy communities. If this season's reckoning is to be more fruitful, we must do much more than address police brutality by reforming police unions, training, practices and accountability, though all of that is urgent. For all our sakes, we must break law enforcement's monopoly on public safety.

Simply put: We need new tools.

Rayshard Brooks was killed by a police officer in Atlanta after Wendy's employees called the cops to complain that a man, asleep in his car, was blocking the drive-through lane. . . . What if, instead of the police, the Wendy's staff had been able to call an unarmed community patrol worker — perhaps a neighbor who knew Brooks — to drive him home or to a sober-up station for the night?

Daniel T. Prude died in Rochester, N.Y., after police officers forced him into a hood and then pushed his face to the ground while he was in the throes of a psychotic episode. His brother had called 911, later saying, “I placed a phone call for my brother to get help. Not for my brother to get lynched” What if instead of facing armed police officers while in the agony of a mental breakdown, Prude had been assisted by a crisis worker and a medic who were trained to de-escalate the situation and could connect him to mental health crisis services?

It’s not just that law enforcement is ill-equipped to help people in crisis and that other organizations could do better. In some cases, police cause unnecessary harm. In many cases, communities and law enforcement would support police functions being reassigned to trained civilians.

Incident response is an obvious candidate. Noting that a disturbing number of killings by police originate in a 911 call, jurisdictions around the country are questioning whether an armed police officer is really the best response to most calls for help. Philadelphia, Dallas, Denver and Atlanta are among the growing number of cities experimenting with new, unarmed response teams to better respond to crisis calls, particularly where mental health is involved.

Not all such programs are new. For three decades, Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets (CAHOOTS) in Eugene, Ore., has sent a medic and a crisis worker in response to 911 calls that involve a nonviolent emergency. According to the White Bird Clinic, which runs the program, CAHOOTS costs about **\$2.1 million** a year. Based on the Eugene Police Department’s estimated cost of \$800 per police response, the clinic estimates that CAHOOTS saves the city about \$8.5 million in public safety spending per year.

But beyond saving money, reimagining incident response could give people in crisis the help they need

There will always be emergency calls that warrant a responder who can use force, but they are surprisingly rare. In 2020, calls about violent crime — homicide, rape, robbery and aggravated assault — made up only about 1 percent of police calls for service in many city police departments, including Baltimore, Cincinnati, New Orleans and Seattle.

There will also always be murkier situations in which the presence of someone authorized to use force could prevent harm by de-escalating conflict but might also lethally escalate the situation.

Even then, jurisdictions could experiment with a blended response in which civilians and law enforcement work together. Civilian responders including medics, crisis workers and others with rigorous de-escalation training could try to resolve crises while law enforcement waits nearby, out of sight. If civilian responders aren't able to resolve the situation, they could call for backup. That capability could save lives, but again might be needed in surprisingly few cases: In 2019, out of 24,000 calls the CAHOOTS team received, police backup was requested only 150 times.

Overhauling incident response is not a panacea. The police can't solve complex social problems, but neither can civilian responders. Connecting homeless people with medical or social services is obviously more humane and helpful than arresting them for trespassing, but neither will address the toxic web of abuse, affordable-housing shortages and addiction that contributes to homelessness in the first place. Incident response reform must be just the first step.

Still, cities around the country are realizing that this first step is crucial — that they can offer people help they really need while minimizing the chance that a lethal escalation will make a person's most vulnerable moments their last.