

In Ithaca, perhaps “the most ambitious effort” to re-imagine public safety

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing February 28, 2021

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

Now here’s a proposal for a “radical re-imagining.”

Note that it’s the result of a Community Engagement initiative!

Note the verbal tangle of what to call the proposal!

selections from Wesley Lowery, “The Most Ambitious Effort Yet to Reform Policing May Be Happening In Ithaca, New York.” GQ, February 22, 2021.

It’s been nine months since the George Floyd protests thrust “Defund the Police” and other abolitionist rhetoric into mainstream political discourse, yet the results have been meager so far.

Yet even as mainstream political operatives have declared the concept a political loser—just last week [President Biden reiterated his opposition to defunding](#) during a CNN town hall—a handful of cities have significantly reexamined the role of their police. In Berkeley, Ca., armed officers [no longer](#) conduct traffic stops or respond to mental health and homelessness calls. [Portland ended the deployment of “school resource officers,”](#) long linked to the criminalization of Black and brown youth and the so-called school-to-prison pipeline.

And now, in a proposal announced today, the mayor of Ithaca, NY will attempt the most radical reimagining of policing in the post-George Floyd era so far: abolishing the city’s police department as currently constructed and replacing it with a reimagined city agency.

In a nearly 100-page report obtained by GQ, Mayor Svante Myrick will propose replacing the city’s current 63-officer, \$12.5 million a year

department with a “Department of Community Solutions and Public Safety” which would include armed “public safety workers” and unarmed “community solution workers,” all of whom will report to a civilian director of public safety instead of a police chief.

“IPD currently spends one third of its time responding to calls for service that essentially never lead to arrests,” Myrick writes in the report’s introduction. “Those calls, as well as a majority of patrol activity, can and should be handled by unarmed Community Solution Workers well trained in de-escalation and service delivery. This will allow our new Public Safety Workers to focus on preventing, interrupting and solving serious crime.”

If the proposal is approved, calls for service will be evaluated to determine whether an armed or unarmed respondent is necessary, or another public agency altogether would be best to respond. Mental health calls would be outsourced to a standalone unit of social workers based on the CAHOOTS program [pioneered](#) in Eugene, Oregon. The goal, ultimately, is to have far fewer encounters between citizens and armed government agents.

“Everyone wants the police to perform better when they show up, everybody wants that. What this plan is saying is that we also want the police to show up less—and that’s a radical thing for a city and a mayor to do.” Myrick, 33, told me in an interview Sunday.

Now, he’s investing his political capital in a plan that would remove armed officers from most civilian interactions, which he said should free those who remain to fully investigate and solve serious crimes. “The investigators are going to be focused on the shooting last Tuesday, they will have nothing on their plate except finding that gun, finding that shooter and taking them off the street,” he said. “They won’t be pulled away from that work by a motor vehicle crash on 3rd Street or a welfare check on Madison.”

And the proposal will provide new fodder for the national semantics over policing, even as the plan itself lays bare how undercooked public perceptions are around much of the terminology. Depending on your rhetorical goals, it’s possible to argue that the Ithaca plan would mean the police department is being “abolished,” or policing in the city is being

“reformed” and “reimagined,” or armed government response to public safety is being partially “defunded.” Myrick notes that the new department would likely result in more city money being spent on public safety—while the specifics are yet to be finalized, he envisions the combined staffs of the department’s unarmed and armed workers exceeding the city’s current number of police officers. He admitted he’s yet to decide whether he’ll use the term “abolish” when discussing the proposal: “This plan would abolish the police department while not abolishing policing,” he said.

The proposal is part of a report Ithaca and surrounding Tompkins County intend to send to Governor Andrew Cuomo, who last June signed an executive order requiring local governments to conduct comprehensive reviews of their police departments. With the help of the Center for Policing Equity, officials conducted a community engagement survey, held a series of town halls and public forums, and convened 21 targeted focus groups that included members of law enforcement, the formerly incarcerated and homeless citizens.

According to the report, community members said they often feel disrespected by police during interactions and questioned whether local police officers knew how to properly deescalate situations. As a result, respondents told city officials, they were hesitant to turn to the police for intervention. During the law enforcement focus group, police officers and sheriff’s deputies said they don’t believe the public understands what their jobs entail. They think the department is understaffed and under resourced; and called for better coordination between police and other public service agencies. “Few people who participated in the Reimagining Public Safety trust the process,” the report notes. “Both targeted focus groups and law enforcement think the other needs education. Both respondents from targeted focus groups and law enforcement agree that the lack of trust is a major issue that needs to be addressed.”

“Once you can fully imagine an alternative response agency,” Myrick told me. “It’s hard to defend what exists currently.”