

# “The council and community bear some responsibility as well”

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing, Ochs, Holona, Police August 9, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts responding to the George Floyd killing* 

***The council and community bear some responsibility as well. Quality of life measures and similar policies that target low income communities of color are fundamentally racist. The city should re-evaluate policies that target others in our community and make them vulnerable.***  
***Prof Holona Ochs***

Gadfly, thank you for your ongoing discussion of this topic.

I would like to make a comment on the 5th item on Professor Ochs' helpful list of recommendations. This item refers to “quality of life” policing, which is described in the attached info-graphic [Quality of life policing](#) as the “policing of a number of normally non-criminal activities such as standing, congregating, sleeping, eating and/or drinking in public spaces, as well as minor offenses such as graffiti, public urination, panhandling, littering, and unlicensed street vending.”

Since I know there are a number of people in our city who believe the Bethlehem police can do no wrong and who see no need for any efforts to reconsider how we address public safety, I thought it would be good to recall Mayor Donchez's effort in 2016 to institute one such quality of life measure: a panhandling ordinance. Here is the link to some local press coverage on this effort: [“Bethlehem City Council reviews anti panhandling ordinance.”](#)

While the proposed ordinance was ultimately withdrawn from consideration, the fact that it was proposed reflects a general failure in city government to consider the disproportionate and draconian impact local policies have on poor and vulnerable citizens in our own community, and a tendency to approach those citizens as though they are a problem that needs to be removed from public sight, and even penalized for making others uncomfortable. You will see in the press

coverage that, not surprisingly, the public discussion about the problem with this ordinance focused more on how it would impact local artists, who are deemed acceptable, and good for tourism, even when prompting loitering in public spaces around the wonderful music they play.

As a citizen witnessing this conversation, I was appalled by statements of support for the ordinance from the city and the police chief and the South Side Ambassadors that reflected their general interest in sanitizing the South Side of people who might make parents and tourists feel uncomfortable. Had some wiser voices from outside our city's government not prevailed in this conversation, the ordinance would likely be in place now.

Efforts to pass such an ordinance demonstrate the propensity of our local government and police department — and presumably many citizens — to criminalize and penalize the behavior of vulnerable populations in order to create public spaces that make other populations feel more comfortable. They also reveal why we need to have a conversation about public safety in this city. Specifically, there is a need to understand why people become homeless, what is empirically effective in helping them and others so easily targeted as “criminals,” and why jailing and penalizing people who pose minimal threats to public safety is neither making us safer nor spending our tax dollars effectively. There are many other problems with quality of life policing, but if we could start with understanding these rather obvious problems, that would be progress.

The problems driving the recent social uprising are deep and systemic. I think there are a lot of citizens in this city who don't really understand them at all. Thus it is no surprise why some think there is no need for reform. It would be very helpful if the city government could find ways to get us all on the same page and foster an understanding of the empirical evidence and personal anecdotes driving calls for systemic reform. This probably involves having some public forums, but I hope government officials realize it involves a lot more than that.

Sincerely, Breena Holland

See also: ***“Debtors’ Prisons: Life Inside America’s For-Profit Justice System.”***