

Reimagining Public Safety

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing May 18, 2021

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

Of interest in case we have a meeting to mark the George Floyd anniversary or a Public Safety meeting to do some real overdue thinking about how we do policing.

Washington Post Editorial Board, “Reimagine Safety.” Washington Post, March 16, 2021.

Part 1: Police reform is not enough. We need to rethink public safety.

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. From the proverbial cat stuck in a tree to an armed hostage crisis, police are the first port of call for a dizzying array of dilemmas. In the [words](#) of a former Dallas police chief, “Every societal failure, we put it off on the cops to solve. Not enough mental health funding, let the cops handle it. ... Here in Dallas we got a loose dog problem; let’s have the cops chase loose dogs. Schools fail, let’s give it to the cops. ... That’s too much to ask. Policing was never meant to solve all those problems.”

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.

Part 2: Whom can we call for help? Police should not always be the only option.

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?

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. Our current system wasn't designed consciously to answer the question "What would be the best response to emergencies that flow from homelessness, mental health crises and addiction?" By considering that question more thoughtfully, we can build systems that help where today's systems hurt.

TJ Grayson and James Forman Jr., "Get police out of the business of traffic stops." Washington Post, April 16, 2021.

The past week has given us a familiar set of tragedies. With the death of [Daunte Wright](#) and the brutal harassment of Army [2nd Lt. Caron Nazario](#), we must add the following to the list of actions that can shatter Black lives: having expired tags or temporary plates.

Many of the deaths garnering media attention in recent years resulted from armed police officers enforcing traffic violations, even minor ones. A Minnesota police officer pulled over [Philando Castile](#) for a broken

taillight, then fired seven shots at him. A Texas state trooper stopped [Sandra Bland](#) for not signaling when she changed lanes. Three days later, she was dead in a jail cell. According to a [Washington Post database](#), about 11 percent of all fatal shootings by police in 2015 occurred during traffic stops; Black people accounted for a disproportionate share of those deaths.

The individual officers responsible for these harms must be held accountable. But that won't get to the root of the problem. Often the police are acting in ways that courts have deemed lawful.

So, what to do? One set of solutions looks to reduce the types of violations for which police can stop cars.

But while these approaches are improvements, we endorse a more radical response: Get police out of the business of enforcing traffic laws.

That said, we aren't blind to the risks of this proposal. Traffic enforcement is the most common type of interaction between citizens and police, and it is hard to imagine ending it. But it is time to take some risks, because the status quo is untenable.