# *Fulfilling the Promise of Public Safety*

## Some Lessons from Recent Research

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# Acknowledgements

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# Executive Summary

*Many American communities are wrestling with how to reform their approach to public safety in the wake of police killings, particularly of Black men. There are many ideas for what the right reforms might be, ranging from minor policy tweaks to wholesale replacement of departments. To help communities as they sort through these ideas, we review real experiences with policing reform, highlighting wherever possible the best scientific evidence on the subject.*

**Starting with the idea that we need a government function that prevents abuse of power and is accountable to the public, we focus on a few select questions:**

1. Could some public safety services be provided by people who aren't police officers?
2. What can we learn from attempts at more ambitious reform?
3. What can we learn from how other countries' public safety systems operate?

We start by looking at specific alternative approaches for providing some public safety services, like "co-responders", "mental health response teams", and "violence interrupters". Many of these alternatives are promising and should be considered by communities looking at reform. But communities should also know that we don't yet have firm scientific evidence of every program's effectiveness. Even where they're working well, these alternatives tend to replace a portion of traditional police activity—but not the majority of it. And implementation matters: good ideas can falter if mismanaged or poorly funded.

We then examine cases where governments attempted deep overhauls of their police forces. Each case has its unique lessons, and we should be cautious about extrapolating too much from any one story. But we do see a few general patterns. Success depends on the quality and availability of alternatives: without ready replacements progress can be slow and reform can be discredited. Due to political and administrative constraints, attempts to "disband" or "abolish" police often end up restructuring them instead. Ultimately, the rhetoric is less important than the specific plans.

Finally, we look at US policing compared with peer countries. US police spending is roughly "middle-of-the-road" (and has remained relatively steady over time). But American police receive less training and kill more people than in other countries. The experience of countries with much larger social service budgets suggests that such spending may reduce the need for police to some degree, but is far from eliminating it. While social services are a key component of public safety provision, we have no evidence that they can solve every public safety problem.

In general, neither policing nor social services are a panacea. Exactly what money and operational time is spent on matters: broad categories of personnel like "police" or "social workers" are less informative than their specific training and tasks.

None of this means that communities should refrain from pursuing reform, even potentially far-reaching reform. The problems with our public safety system are deep and need to be addressed urgently. One of the strengths of the American model of government is the opportunity for local experimentation. But as we embark on those experiments, we should take care not to waste the lessons left to us by other communities who have taken up the challenge before us.

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# *Introduction*

# *Shared Principles for Public Safety*

*In the last few years, hundreds of community groups and local governments have been thinking seriously about how they might improve public safety. Many of these groups have approached our research center, hoping to better understand what science can tell them about how to make effective changes in their communities.*

**Though the groups we talk to come from across the ideological spectrum—and include both people defending and challenging existing institutions—nearly everyone shares a commitment to three crucial values:**

- We all have a right to **safety and security**. People shouldn't have to live their lives afraid of violence, whether it's from a domestic partner, a stranger, or the state itself. A public safety system that doesn't deliver real safety to citizens isn't fit for purpose.

- We all have a right to **fairness and justice**. Any system for creating public safety needs to ensure that everyone is treated equitably. It's not enough for individuals in that system to be unbiased: laws and policies have to structured to avoid biased outcomes and address them when they've already occurred. And when people violate the rights of others, they need to be held to account, no matter who they are.

- We all have a right to **accountability and transparency**. Any public safety system needs to be responsible to the people it seeks to protect, and its decisions should be guided by the communities in which it is based. Meaningful accountability also requires that citizens have access to information about how their government is doing its job.

Though shared in principle, these broad values have not always been upheld in practice. And where our systems have fallen short, the right next steps are often unclear or contested. How should we rebuild trust in our public safety system? How can we ensure that it upholds our shared values? How should existing institutions be organized, or reorganized, to achieve these goals?

Scientific research can help answer these questions. It's not a crystal ball: when something totally new is on the table, research on past programs can't perfectly predict how it will work out. But research can help us learn from experiences we've already had, and explore the costs and benefits of existing systems. Research can highlight effective reforms and show where others have failed. And research can show us where promising ideas have fallen short, identifying barriers to positive change. The results can inform practical proposals to enhance public safety.

**This guide lays out some of what we know across several frameworks.**

1. Examples and evaluations of alternative approaches to public safety, including models integrated with existing police forces and ones that are built in parallel

2. Cases studies and evidence of very ambitious reform efforts, including both historical cases and ones that are just starting

3. How systems of public safety differ in other countries, and what they can teach us about the role of social services in public safety

## A Note on Scientific Methods

In this report we refer to a range of scientific studies that employ a variety of methods. The most powerful studies generally use an experimental (or lottery) approach. This is similar to how new medical treatments are tested, with some patients randomly receiving a treatment and others serving as a control group. If conducted correctly, this provides the strongest evidence for whether one thing—a drug, a law, a policy—is actually causing another—a disease, a drop in police killings, a rise in crime rates. When we note that a study is experimental or randomized, it means we can generally have more confidence in its recommendations or findings.

That said, experimental studies are not always possible or available for all topics. We can't randomize which states pass laws, for example. And in some cases it would be unethical to assign interventions randomly. So we also refer to observational studies. These may be based on statistical analysis of many cases, or in-depth qualitative investigation of one or a few cases. These are also important sources of evidence, but we should be somewhat more cautious in interpreting their findings.

Regardless of the methods used to obtain them, translating findings from one context into another always requires care. Experiments allow us to try out concepts in the real world to see what might work, but they don't necessarily offer prescriptions or recommendations. Just because a reform worked in one place and one time period doesn't always mean it will have the same effect elsewhere. To truly have insights into building better systems, it is often essential to understand why something worked (or did not work) in a particular setting.

# *The Role of Police Within Public Safety*

*Public safety means more than just policing. But a large portion of the public safety systems across the US today rely heavily on police. Many reformers—including some police themselves—would like to reduce that reliance on policing to solve a wide range of community problems.*

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However, before diving into alternatives or changes it is important to understand what research tells us about the costs and benefits of policing. We have encountered fierce critics of the police who say that police provide no benefit at all—or perhaps no benefit except solving crimes that are already committed. We have also encountered police supporters who downplay or dismiss the costs of policing. Both these groups are wrong on the evidence.

We have evidence that police officers can help reduce crime, at least in some contexts. Much of this evidence comes from observing the effect of hiring new officers with funds from the Community-Oriented Policing Services program (Evans and Owens, 2007; Mello, 2019; Weisburst, 2019). These generally find that the increase in officers was associated with a decrease in crime, including serious crimes such as homicides and armed robberies. Some scholars even suggest that US cities would benefit from more officers (Chalfin and McCrary, 2018).

But how officers engage in policing may be just as important—and perhaps more important—as how many. Evidence from Dallas, TX, supports the idea that police can reduce crime, but shows that the benefit of police is undermined when they are pulled away from their normal jobs (Weisburd 2021). The "standard model" of primarily reactive and tactical police strategies (simply adding more officers, deploying them widely and more quickly, arresting more people) appear to have "limited effectiveness". On the other hand, when police employ more strategic and targeted interventions, they can effectively improve safety:

**"What [...] effective strategies have in common is their effort to more tightly specify and focus police activities. In contrast, generalized, aggressive enforcement tactics such as stop-question-frisk used indiscriminately across a city, or broken-windows policing programs that rely on a 'zero tolerance' generalized approach to misdemeanor arrests, do not show evidence of effectiveness."**
—National Academy of Sciences Consensus Study Report on Proactive Policing: Effects on Crime and Communities (2018 – Report Brief p. 3)

We have several examples of strategies effective that appear to be effective. "Hot spots" policing focuses police resources on specific areas where crime and violence are greatly concentrated. Focused deterrence looks to understand the underlying dynamics of violent crime and combines engagement from both law enforcement and social services to deter violent behavior. Community problem-solving identifies neighborhood causes of crime and then applies improvements such as repairs, lighting, and cleanup. A recent report from the National Academy of Sciences provides an excellent overview of the science on these different policing approaches.

That said, policing doesn't necessarily improve safety for everyone. A recent review of the evidence on race and policing found "African Americans experience substantially more contact with police than do whites. African Americans are significantly more likely to be stopped, searched, frisked, and arrested by police than similarly situated whites" (Braga, Brunson, and Druakulich, 2019). Another detailed analysis of crime, victimization, and police killings found that Black Americans were 2.2 times more likely to be shot and killed by the police than white Americans, adjusting for the total size of the country's Black and white population (MacDonald 2021).

That's not to say that policing never helps Black Americans. Adding more officers appears to reduce homicide rates, especially for Black victims. Perhaps unintuitively, adding officers tends to reduce the number of arrests that police make for serious and violent crimes, especially reducing arrests for Black suspects (perhaps because the presence of police prevents serious crimes from occurring). That said, adding more officers also results in disproportionately more arrests of Black people for 'low-level "quality-of-life" offenses' (Chalfin et al. 2021). Police stops can cause lasting psychological harm to young Black and Latino boys (Del Toro et al. 2019).

Given these disparities, it is unsurprising that confidence in the police is lower among Black Americans (19%) than White Americans (56%).  18% of Black Americans, 40% of Latino and Hispanic Americans, and 56% of White Americans said they would be "very confident" that the police in their area would treat them with courtesy and respect (CCJ 2020).

> **"Instead of asking whether we are hiring the right number of police, we can also ask whether policing can become better and more precise — preserving the critical public safety benefits that policing can deliver to disadvantaged communities while minimizing the costs."**
> —**Aaron Chalfin et al., 2021**

Why are Black Americans still so often denied the same kind of smart policing that typically occurs in white communities, where police seem fully capable of discerning between law-abiding citizens and those committing crimes, and between crimes like turnstile-jumping and those that need serious intervention? Even if we ultimately maintain police departments, it's crucial that we rectify these deep inequalities in how communities are policed.

> **"You can be protected and served," [Author and anti-racist scholar Khalil Gibran] Muhammad says."It happens every day in communities across America. It happens all the time in white communities where crime is happening."**
> —**Nikole Hannah-Jones, 2015**

# Should some public safety services be provided by non-officers?

*Modern police are expected to fill a multitude of roles. Officers are often called upon to deal with issues like mental health problems, drug use, and minor traffic violations that aren't always well-suited to traditional armed responses. Many communities have been experimenting with new models for responding to these kinds of specialized challenges, either by deploying other kinds of responders alongside police or having separate teams of alternative responders on hand.*

*Expanding the public safety toolkit to include non-police responses to certain problems may improve citizen happiness and make government more effective. However, there is still much to be learned about how to effectively implement these alternative forms of response.*
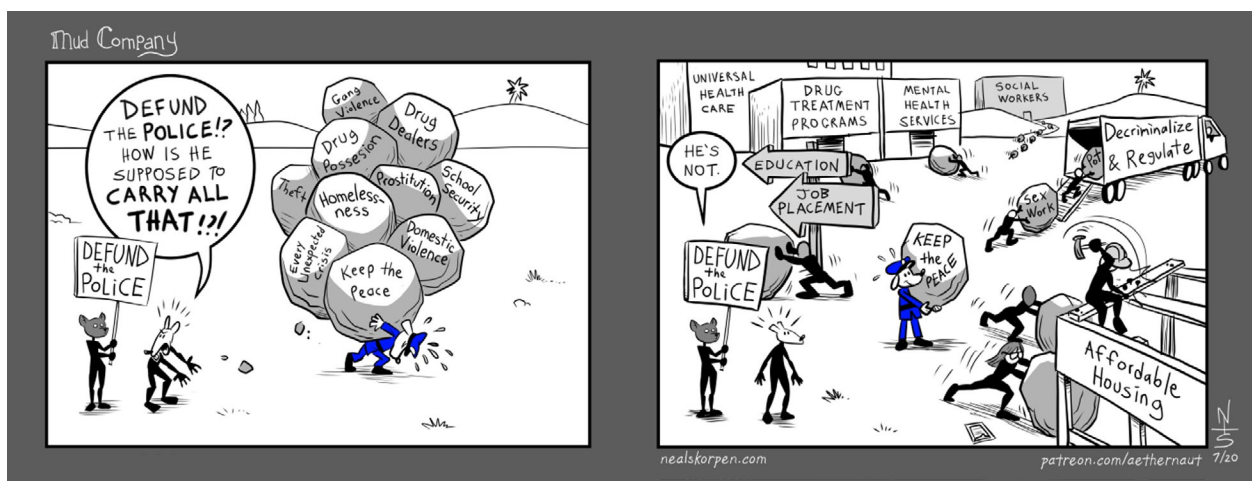


## Integrated Approaches

**Some approaches are designed to work alongside traditional officers, whether riding along on particular deployments or meeting to discuss particular cases. These approaches often focus on people with mental illnesses, who make up an estimated 6–7% of all public contacts by police (Morabito et al. 2018). (Another analysis of computer-aided dispatch (CAD) data of 911 calls for service in nine cities found a much lower estimate of 1.3%, although the CAD data could be undercounting mental health incidents—see Lum et. al. 2021.)**

**"Oftentimes, police officers are sent to situations for which we're not always the best trained or the best equipped. We're just simply the only ones available."**
—Brian Manley, former Chief of Police, Austin, Texas

### Co-Responders

In the **Co-Responder** model, clinicians or specialists in areas like mental health and domestic violence are directly integrated with police. Some co-responders ride alongside police, others are dispatched when needed, and others offer support remotely.

Co-responder programs vary a lot from city to city, and there is little experimental evidence on their effectiveness (Puntis et al. 2018).  But in observational studies, co-response programs appear to reduce arrests (Shapiro et al. 2015), help connect vulnerable community members to social services, avoid unnecessary hospital trips, reduce use of force by police (Blais et al. 2020).

One quasi-experimental study found that mobile co-responders reduced the amount of time officers needed to spend on the scene (Kisely et al. 2010). There have been positive experiences with this model in Baltimore (White and Weisburd 2017), Toronto (Lamanna et al. 2018), and Boston (Morabito et al 2018). In general, however, co-responder programs tend to be limited in scope and size, due in part to the difficulty of recruiting and retaining the required personnel.

## Boston's Co-Response Model

In 2011, the Boston Police Department and the Boston Medical Center's Boston Emergency Service Team (BEST) began a collaboration in which Master's level clinicians ride along with police officers and are available on call for remote consultation.

Substance abuse (10.3%), family disputes (13.7%), suicidal ideation (15.4%), and children's mental health (16.5%) crises are the most common kinds of incidents leading to co-response deployments. Fewer than 1% of deployments lead to arrests: transport to an urgent care center or Emergency Department (44.3%) and following up with a referral (22.3%) are both much more common outcomes (Morabito et al. 2018, p. 1100).

The program has led officers to make more direct referrals to BEST: more than 500 people were referred to BEST in 2017, compared with 25 in the year before the program began. Officers who have participated in the program generally see it as a positive contribution to their work: "Clinicians have de-escalation skills and can put people at ease". But officers also worry about having another person in need of protection in volatile situations.

The main concern has been insufficient resources. Insufficient funding means co-responders can only cover a few areas and shifts at a time. The response time for telephone consultation can be up to an hour, and the lack of a dedicated car for mental health responses means field clinicians often co-respond to non-mental-health calls rather than following up on previous calls that match their expertise.

It has also been difficult to hire and retain clinicians, in part because of shortfalls and inconsistencies in funding. Lack of retention is especially problematic, since it takes time to develop trust between officers and co-responders.

For more on the Boston model's strengths and limitations, see Morabito et al. 2018.

### Case Management

In the **Case Management** model, police officers and civilian specialists meet proactively to plan help for people who are in regular police contact. For example, officers and specialists might discuss someone with a mental health challenge who is about to be released from an inpatient facility and may soon show up in calls for service, so police are better prepared to respond appropriately and divert them to services rather than arresting them.

This model is employed by different cities under different names, but one well-known program it is associated with is the Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) program, which was developed in Seattle, Washington and now operates in 52 places across America. In Seattle, the program appears to have reduced arrests and criminal justice system involvement (Collins, Lonczak, and Clifasefi 2017). Transplanting its success to other contexts may not be straightforward, however: attempts to implement LEAD in New Haven, Connecticut and Albany, New York failed to produce any impacts.

These negative results may indicate implementation is difficult, rather than the program is ineffective, as it is not clear any of these programs really began the case management process. (Joudrey et al. 2020; Worden and McLean 2018).

# Parallel Approaches

**The models above focus on augmenting existing police responses with other types of expertise. There is also a growing interest in models that create new, parallel forms of civilian responders. These groups usually still co-exist with police departments, rather than replacing police entirely.**

### Mental Health Response Teams

One such model is the **Mental Health Response Team**. The oldest and best-known MHRT is the CAHOOTS program (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets) in Eugene, Oregon, a city with a large chronically homeless population. CAHOOTS teams consist of a crisis worker and a medic who deal with problems like mental health disturbances, potential suicides, and other crises that don't necessarily require armed response.

The program is popular among both the public and the police, and 911 callers often request CAHOOTS specifically. The program responds to 17% of the city's emergency calls (this figure is high because they reply to a wide range of calls that emergency responders would not normally tackle), and replaces 5-8% of armed police dispatches. CAHOOTS teams are unarmed and have never killed anyone, and the program appears to save the city money.

Despite its popularity, CAHOOTS does face operational issues. It is difficult to retain enough trained staff to respond quickly at all hours, and there are still few alternative places to bring people in crisis other than the hospital or jail.

Other cities have started following the CAHOOTS model and have developed their own MHRTs. One notable example is Denver, Colorado, which launched its pilot Support Team Assisted Response program (STAR) in 2020 and has released a six-month progress report on the program's data and statistics. While limited to less than one percent of emergency response calls, the program managed 748 cases without resulting in any arrests or requiring assistance from the police. "I think the report itself just confirms how valuable this type of approach is," Denver Police Chief Paul Pazen told the Denver NBC affiliate. "If we can get better outcomes for people in crisis, as well as free up officers to address the very difficult and challenging job they have, it's a win-win all the way around." The report also suggests that the program could be expanded to address 2.8% of emergency calls. Following the report, the program was expanded to more vans, more locations, and wider hours. In early 2022 the City Council voted to expand the program still further from three vans to six.

Denver officials and program staff have emphasized that any success of the pilot has been the result of years of careful planning and research, as well as Denver's decision to fund the program by raising its sales tax. To date, no cities larger than Denver have piloted a similar program.

# How Do Alternative Responders Actually Respond?

Conversations with some of our community partners have highlighted the difficulty of standing up new response programs. Of course, premature criticism can discourage or discredit initial pilot efforts that just need time to fully develop. This report comes from one Massachusetts city that requested to have its name omitted because it was still "working on it."

The city in question had developed two non-police response programs. The first was a team of social workers and outreach specialists who worked in the same building as the police. The second was a full-time response specialist to work out of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), funded by $1 million cut from the police budget.

Residents did not have a direct way to contact the alternative response services. If they were interested in having a non-police response to an issue, they would often contact their city councilor. City councilors would then contact the police, requesting alternative responders.

In one particular incident, multiple residents complained about an "aggressive squeegee guy" set up on a busy corner, and about homeless people camped out in tents in a public park. They petitioned their city councilor, who sent an e-mail to the police department.

The police first tried to route the request to the social workers and outreach specialists in their department. The director of that unit replied, "We don't deal with people in non-clinical situations that could potentially result in violent encounters." The director suggested the police try the response specialist at HHS.

Reaching out to HHS, the police received an even shorter response: "We don't deal with situations like this." In the end, the city's police officers (who were trained in crisis intervention and de-escalation) ended up responding and resolving the situation.

In even the best established alternative response programs (such as CAHOOTS) there are many types of incidents alternative responders feel they cannot handle. Programs like CAHOOTS might replace 10-20% of police calls, but other programs will fail to even reach that number if staff are governed by rules that prevent them from responding, or if staff themselves are unwilling to engage in risky non-clinical situations.

## Violence Interrupters

Inspired by methods in public health, another model employs community members as **"Violence Interrupters"** and outreach workers to help reduce the risk of violence in specific neighborhoods. These workers learn to try to anticipate and prevent shootings in the community, and work to break cycles of retaliation by lowering tensions. They also develop caseloads of at-risk people, and proactively try to change norms around violence.

The model is most associated with the non-profit group Cure Violence. There have been a number of evaluations of Cure Violence but none that have met the highest standards of evidence (Butts et al. 2015). The evidence we do have has shown mixed results: some sites have shown reductions in violent crime and shootings, but others have shown negative results, potentially due to ineffective implementation. Similar programs like Advance Peace in California (Corburn & Fukutome-Lopez, 2020) and civilian dispute mediation efforts in other countries have also shown promising results (Gray et al. 2006).

Whatever the model, research provides very little indication as to whether or how violence interruption programs can play a larger role in public safety systems—most existing examples operate on limited funding with limited scope.

## Civilian Safety Patrols

A few communities have experimented with more extensive civilian alternatives to police patrols. The most notable examples have been in Australian indigenous communities, which have a long history of over-policing. Programs like the Julalikari Night Patrol and the Nyoongar Patrol are run and staffed by indigenous people, and form a first layer of unarmed public safety service provision. Patrols help settle disputes and manage disorder, and only call regular police when someone becomes violent or needs to be arrested.

The available evidence suggests these patrols are probably reducing arrests, but the number of studies of these types of programs is very limited (Gray, Sagant and Shaw, 2006). These programs have also operated in settings that are different from the average US city.

Sociologist Patrick Sharkey believes that although these types of programs are untested in the US, they present a promising opportunity. However, he emphasizes that proving this model effective will require extensive funding and that removing funding from the police while trying to stand up an alternative service could undermine any chance of success.

**"I joined a team led by Annie and Rachel, two extraordinary women who were remarkable to watch in action. I looked on as they tried to calm a shirtless man who was drunk and belligerent in front of a crowded bar. [...] The overarching goal of the patrol teams is to maintain a presence in the public spaces where young people hang out, to search for Aboriginal people who look as if they could use some help, and to give anyone who is causing trouble the chance to cool off or to go home before the police get involved. At times the patrol team's intervention comes with a stern warning, but usually it comes with a warm smile."**

**—Patrick Sharkey, Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs, Princeton University**

It is important to note how different the context of this program is from anything in the US—this program was set up with an indigenous population in Perth, Australia. One of the few US examples of civilian safety patrols is Chicago's Safe Passage Program, which is a very narrowly focused system of civilian guards designed to ensure children have safe routes to school.

## Civilian Traffic Enforcement

Cities like Los Angeles, CA, Philadelphia, PA, and Berkeley, CA, are looking to redefine police responsibilities to eliminate interactions with motorists in non-safety situations. Like many law enforcement activities, traffic stops can exhibit large racial disparities. In Philadelphia, Black residents make up 48% of the city's population but account for nearly 72% of police traffic stops. In Berkeley, Black drivers are 6.5 times more likely to be stopped than white drivers (Buchanan et al. 2016). Even with excellent officer training, each stop has a risk of escalating (as in the case of Daunte Wright, stopped for expired tags and an air freshener hung from the rear-view mirror). **But in the absence of safety concerns, should police be stopping motorists at all?**

In late 2020 the Philadelphia City Council passed legislation, the Driving Equality Act, that would categorize all stops into two categories. "Primary" violations pose an imminent public safety risk, like driving through red lights or driving drunk. The police would continue to enforce these laws. For "secondary" violations which pose no safety risk, police would take down the motorist's license plate and send them a ticket rather than stopping them, thus saving officer time and preventing a situation that could potentially escalate. According to the Council, police have been supportive of the change, as stops also present risk to the officer and have a cost to police-community relations. However, since this change is so new, we do not yet have evidence of its effectiveness.

Fayetteville, NC, a City of 200,000 residents, has at least some suggestive data behind this approach:

**"In 2013, Harold Medlock, the now-retired police chief of Fayetteville, N.C., told his officers to quit stopping cars for expired registrations or equipment violations to focus on speeding, reckless driving and other more dangerous infractions.**

**In 2016, the year he retired, the Fayetteville police made more than 50 percent more stops than in the year before he took over—and mainly for those hazardous infractions. But although the police were stopping more cars, they searched far fewer Black drivers or passengers—a third of the number they had searched in 2012, according to the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation.**

**The same data showed that traffic fatalities, the police use of force and citizen complaints about the police all declined during that time—while predictions of an explosion in gun and drug crimes never came to pass."**

**—"Cities Try to Turn the Tide on Police Traffic Stops", The New York Times**

As large cities like Los Angeles begin setting new rules limiting police stops, many questions about the ideal policy around traffic enforcement remain. For example, some cities such as Berkeley are proposing having an unarmed "Department of Transportation" that enforces non-safety traffic laws, while others such as Philadelphia have done away with minor traffic enforcement by police without replacing it with civilian enforcement.

## Crisis Intervention Training

A common issue with both integrated and parallel response models is the difficulty of providing alternatives that can respond everywhere, at any time of day. In particular, finding and funding sufficiently trained staff for this level of coverage can be a challenge (Morabito et al. 2018, 1097). This might be solved by simply investing more in these programs. But many departments have decided to take a different approach: instead of adding new types of responders, they have chosen to train police officers themselves to be more like social workers or mental health specialists. This training-centric approach has been around for decades but has gained new interest during recent reform discussions.

The most common version of this approach is Crisis Intervention Team training (CIT), sometimes called "the Memphis Model" after the Tennessee city where it gained widespread recognition. There are currently over 2,700 CIT sites across the US. Programs generally focus on volunteers from the police force, and aim to train at least 25% of the force to ensure participants are available on every shift.

CIT typically lasts 40 hours and includes instruction in mental health diagnosis, psychiatric medications, drug abuse and dependence, mental health law, cross-cultural sensitivity, and verbal de-escalation.

Despite the widespread adoption of CIT, there is little experimental evidence on how well it works in promoting safety. A recent review of studies found evidence that CIT provides benefits to officers and results in more people with mental health challenges being diverted to psychiatric facilities instead of jail (Rogers, McNeil & Binder, 2019). We don't yet have evidence on whether CIT reduces arrests, prevents injuries to officers and civilians, or reduces use of force. There are very significant differences in the quality and amount of training delivered in different settings.

Further complicating the issue, CIT training can also be paired with other approaches such as co-response, or officers can receive CIT training without being on the mental health response team, Some departments are now providing CIT training to all of their officers. Advocates for the extensive use of CIT say that results from Miami indicate it is worthy of heavy, sustained investment.

# *What can we learn from attempts at more ambitious reform?*

*For some advocates, the models in the previous section in which some functions are shifted to non-police roles are the right path forward. Others envision deeper overhauls that would substantially reduce or even eliminate police departments. It is hard to scientifically evaluate these more radical proposals because we have few examples to study. There are a few cases that are commonly discussed with reference to defunding, which have some important lessons. Due to the limited evidence base, however, we should be cautious about generalizing too much from any one case.*

## Historical Cases

### Camden, New Jersey

In 2013, Camden, New Jersey disbanded its 140-year-old police department. Prior to the change, the police were widely distrusted and dogged by corruption allegations. After the change, homicides dropped from 67 a year in 2012 to 25 in 2020, and crime fell by half. However, the lessons are more complex than they first appear (Danley 2020).

**The initial disbanding was more of a restructuring than a removal.** The city-level force was replaced with a county-level one that had the same chief and many of the same officers. The new department was less diverse, less likely to live in the city, and initially generated more complaints of excessive force than the old department. The new department was also larger.

Initially the disbanding was opposed by residents who feared losing local control and protested at the lack of community engagement. But activists continued to put pressure on the new department, which adopted new use-of-force policies in 2015 and 2019. Their effect was significant: use of force dropped by 95% following the introduction of the new policies.

> **"What can we take from the real, messy story of Camden's police restructuring? The disbanding of the Camden City Police Department was not a silver bullet. In fact, it was deeply anti-democratic and done with the purpose of increasing enforcement. But local activism subsequently led to new force-reduction policies. Camden is not a story of how disbanding and creating a new force magically fixes policing, it is a story of how community persistence can lead to meaningful change and how force-reduction policies can, in fact, reduce force."**
>
> **—Stephen Danley, Associate Professor of Public Policy and Administration, Rutgers University-Camden**

### Republic of Georgia

In 2004, the eastern European country of Georgia committed to overhauling the country's ineffective, distrusted, and corruption-plagued national police force. One pre-reform survey estimated that police asked for a bribe in 7 out of 10 traffic stops (Gorbi 2000), perhaps in part because officers were paid half

the average national wage and had to buy their own fuel (Devlin). At the time, the country's population of 4 million was about half that of New York City.

The post-revolutionary government of Mikhail Saakashvili tripled the budget of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, fired ¾ of its 40,000 employees, and hired 20,000 new cadets at five times the old police salary (Kharitonov).

**The results have been mixed.** Bribery has gone down (di Puppo 2010), in large part because of the total replacement of the traffic police (Devlin 2010). Decreased street-level corruption led to greatly increased trust and higher ratings for effectiveness among members of the public (di Puppo, p. 2).

However, the swift replacement of the force left little time for training, with new officers initially receiving only 2 weeks of preparation. Even five years after the reform, new officers were being trained for less than 8 weeks (Devlin 2010, p. 10). There was little planning for transitioning fired officers to other work. Amid a tripling of incarceration between 2003 and 2012, the prison system was marred by cases of torture. Despite the success in reducing everyday corruption, police accountability for abuses remained weak:

**"While police no longer harass people for bribes, human rights abuses persist and weak accountability of police structures remains a significant problem [...] Law enforcement in Georgia is still perceived to safeguard government authority before civilians in need of protection."**
—Lili di Puppo, Anti-Corruption Resource Center

Today, Saakashvili defends the record of his government in reforming the police, but notes that he had much stronger public backing for dramatic action than many American cities do now.

## South Africa

The South African government operated under an oppressive white-minority rule (apartheid) until 1994. The South African police were a major pillar of the apartheid government, which was characterized by widespread human-rights abuses and disenfranchisement of Black Africans. Like the government, the police force was largely white.

In 1994, the election of Nelson Mandela's African National Congress ended apartheid and ushered in massive changes to governance, especially in policing. The new government took extensive measures to change the composition of the police force to be more reflective of the country. That change has been successful. In 1995 whites were 11% of the population in South Africa and 36% of the police force (Onishi 2016). By 2020, they were 9% of the population and 9% of the police (South African Police Service 2020).

**However, despite the dramatic change in police demographics, there has also been ample community criticism of the new force.** Adjusting for population, police in South Africa kill roughly three times as many people compared to police in the US (Clarke 2019). There have also been major incidents that have fueled public distrust of the police, such as the killing of 34 striking miners by the national police in Marikana in 2012. According to critics such as Rev. Xola Skosana, a pastor in Khayelitsha (near Cape Town), the police have adopted many of the same oppressive tendencies of the apartheid era, now focused on class rather than race: "We've come full circle" (Onishi 2016).

In addition, there is ample evidence that throughout the country police have been largely replaced by large private security forces, a dynamic that replicates apartheid-era dynamics and inequality:

**"[Private Security] do everything from telling South Africans that their cat is up a tree to showing up armed at a client's doorstep. In South Africa, there's a publicness, a visibility, an obvious taking over of policing duties."**
—Julie Berg, Lecturer, University of Glasgow

# New Cases

**In response to the murder to George Floyd, many American cities have considered more dramatic overhauls of their police systems. These cases are still evolving, so we have little research on them and don't yet know how they'll turn out. But reviewing them may be helpful for seeing tensions that arise during reform.**

**Across these cases, one common theme is that efforts to replace police departments entirely can end up simply restructuring them instead. Restructuring can still involve significant changes and reforms. But it's crucial to track the real changes, not just the rhetoric.**

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### Minneapolis, Minnesota

Another prominent example of a city that decided to make radical changes to its police department is Minneapolis, Minnesota. After George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin in May of 2020, the Minneapolis City Council voted with a veto-proof majority to defund the Minneapolis Police Department (MPD).

An initial City Council proposal to disband the police department and create a new Department of Community Safety and Violence Prevention met with a series of obstacles and bureaucratic delays. As the plan received criticism for being vague and seemed increasingly troubled, many on the City Council abandoned their support. Councilor Andrew Johnson said he had meant the words "in spirit." Even days after the initial pledge, Johnson said, his colleagues were starting to look for ways out of their commitment. "Technically, if we rename the department, we'd end M.P.D.," one councilor reportedly told Johnson.

**After the failure to place the City Council's measure on the ballot, a citizen coalition called Yes 4 Minneapolis sponsored its own ballot initiative to change the city's charter and create a new Department of Public Safety.** The proposal was vague in some of its details, but included licensed (and presumably armed) police officers "if necessary" alongside "a comprehensive range of public health tools (for example: mental health responders, substance abuse specialists, violence interrupters, and prevention specialists)". This would have been overseen by a commissioner appointed by the Mayor but confirmed by the City Council and reporting to both. Splitting authority over the agency's head received criticism from Mayor Jacob Frey, who opposed the measure and argued it would ultimately "dilute accountability".

In November 2021, voters decisively defeated the initiative and re-elected Frey. The city's largest Black neighborhoods all voted heavily against the initiative, while support was greater in white neighborhoods.

Since Floyd's killing, Minneapolis has made other changes to its public safety approach. It banned chokeholds, adopted police de-escalation requirements, and changed the way in which use of force is reported. The city also decided to divert $8 million of its $179 million police budget to violence prevention and mental health response teams, although little of the money ever made it to social services and the police budget has since been restored.

**The size of the Minneapolis police force has shrunk, but primarily because of retirements rather than policy changes.** 200 officers out of a budgeted 888 have "quit, retired or taken extended medical leave," but the newly re-elected mayor intends to replace them.

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### Ithaca, New York

In February of 2021, Mayor Svante Myrick proposed replacing the Ithaca Police Department with a new "Department of Community Solutions and Public Safety". This would blend traditional, armed "Public Safety Workers" with a new set of unarmed "Community Solutions Workers," as well as a mental

health response team built on the CAHOOTS model. Existing officers would have needed to re-apply for their jobs to work in the new epartment.

**"This plan would abolish the police department while not abolishing policing."**
—Svante Myrick, Mayor of Ithaca

In April 2021, after a period of consultation with community groups and law enforcement, Ithaca's city council <u>unanimously approved</u> a modified version of the proposal under which current officers would not need to re-apply to join, and would retain their ranks in the new department.

This new plan has been criticized by some community members for not going far enough. Russell Rickford, a Cornell Professor and local organizer, says the plan will "<u>hijack the defunding demand through a process of rebranding that will not fundamentally reduce the size and scope of policing</u>." The combined salaries for existing officers and new personnel means that, if implemented, it will likely result in <u>more rather than less spending</u> on public safety.

While the Mayor and city council have sketched out the broad outlines of a plan, the city is currently in the process of researching and refining a more specific agenda through a task force. "The work to design and implement the new department will likely take years. And we should not expect that all questions will be answered [in a few months]," Myrick said. "The time investment that we're putting toward this work will help ensure we have the most equitable and thoughtfully developed outcomes for residents."

## Austin, Texas

In August 2020 the Austin City Council <u>voted to reduce its Police Department's budget by more than a third, removing $153 million</u> out of $434 million. Half of the money removed ($77 million) will continue being spent on the same functions, but moved outside the purview of the police. Examples include the dispatch service and the forensics lab. $45 million is not being immediately removed, but classed as part of a "Reimagining Public Safety" fund which will be available to pay for "alternative forms of public safety and community support." A final $32 million will be cut directly, and used to fund social services like housing, COVID-19 response, and violence prevention. These final cuts came from things like <u>reducing recruitment, overtime, and spending on devices</u>.

The budget changes were criticized both by supporters and opponents of the police. The interim police chief said the cuts led to a "<u>crisis</u>" in the department and are responsible for falls in response times. The murder rate increased relative to the previous year, <u>but not out of line with the changes seen in other parts of America</u>. Some community groups believed the cuts were insufficient, and that they merely amounted to an "<u>accounting change</u>".

In the wake of HB 1900, a Texas state law that bars cities from cutting police budgets, the proposed Austin city budget for next year now includes a record $443 million in funding for the police. This will make it difficult to assess what effects the original cuts might have caused had they remained over a longer period.

In 2021, City Council passed a <u>record high</u> budget for the police, although voters also <u>decisively rejected</u> a ballot initiative that would have forced the city to hire even more police, perhaps at the expense of other emergency services.

# *What can we learn from how other countries' public safety systems operate?*

## How Does Policing in Peer Countries Look Different?

**There are no developed countries which have eliminated police. Even countries which have much smaller police forces (like Finland) still have police officers (130 for every 100,000 Finns, compared with 238 for every 100,000 Americans).**

But many countries organize their police differently. Policing in the United States is highly decentralized, with more than 15,000 police departments. Most other developed countries centralize the administration of police to a higher degree. France is one of the most centralized, with only three police forces, all nationally-governed. Locally-governed forces might make it easier to experiment and pursue local changes, but fragmentation can also make it harder to reform the system as a whole.

Accountability is also organized differently in many countries. In the US, police departments are generally allowed to investigate themselves. In many countries, oversight is the responsibility of a national agency that's independent from local forces.

American police receive significantly less training than their counterparts in many European countries. The average police academy program in the U.S. lasts 20 weeks: substantially less than the training provided to officers in some other countries. Irish officers receive more than 100 weeks of training; German officers more than 130; and Norwegian and Finnish officers spend four years in police college (Haberfeld 2003, 2018). Meanwhile, 37 US states allow recruits to work as police officers prior to completing basic training (ICJTR 2021). On average, American recruits receive more than three times more firearm training than de-escalation training. This training deficit is concerning given the potentially high stakes of every police encounter.

One clear difference is in killings by police: the US has significantly more. In 2019, 33.5 people were killed by law enforcement for every 10 million in America (1,099 total). Canada came a distant second, with 9.8 killings per 10 million (36 total). In England and Wales, only 3 people were killed by police in 2019. Some countries go many years without having any police killings. The UK, Ireland, Iceland, New Zealand, and Norway avoid routinely arming their police officers. That said, the United States has far more civilian firearms per citizen than any other country (the US has 120 firearms per every 100 citizens—more than one per person; Canada has about 35 per 100 citizens; England and Wales in the UK have less than 5 per 100 citizens). This context complicates efforts to limit police use of firearms, though reducing police killings remains just as crucial.

## Are We Spending Too Much on Police?

### Spending on Police

It is difficult to know the "right" amount of spending free of context, but internationally the US is about in the middle of its peer countries in terms of police budgets (Cheatham and Maizland, 2021). We spend less than France and the UK, but more than Germany and Japan.

**Overall, American police spending has remained steady as a share of local spending.** Police expenditures have been just under 4% of state and local budgets for the last 40 years. The more significant change has been the increase in spending on prisons and corrections, which has risen by more than 50%. These are average figures, of course, and police spending has risen in some places while falling in others: half of America's fifty largest cities increased their police budgets this year.

## Spending on Social Services

One idea for reform that several activists and community groups have raised is that policing as we know it could be *eliminated* if we spent much more on social programs. The theory is that dealing with social ills could stop problems before they turn into situations that require police and the criminal justice system. It is difficult to rigorously evaluate such a proposition, since it would represent such a large departure from what we can currently observe in the US.

Looking at Nordic countries may provide some sense of what can be achieved with more social spending. These countries, with larger social budgets and smaller police budgets, have lower crime rates and less incarceration. But they still have police forces, some of them nearly as large (proportional to population) as American forces. So while social spending may be able to displace some need for officers, it may not be able to eliminate it entirely. For more, see the callout box below.

# Lessons from the Nordic Countries

International examples, however, can provide at least some sense of how moving in this direction might turn out. The Nordic Countries—Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden—make heavy investments in addressing citizen needs through public social services. Nordic countries spend roughly half their annual economic output on government, compared to about a third in the US. The fraction of the labor force working in the public sector in Norway is 30%, twice the figure for the US. They do this while spending less on police: less than 0.6% of GDP compared with more than 0.8% of GDP in the US.

Nordic countries also differ in their treatment of prisoners. Sentences tend to be shorter, and prisons are relatively comfortable spaces that focus on education and job training. Evidence suggests that unemployed people who go to prison in Norway receive actual rehabilitation and have better post-incarceration outcomes than their non-incarcerated, unemployed fellows.

These choices are matched by excellent criminal justice outcomes: Nordic countries have among the lowest homicide rates in the world, and nearly all the homicides they do have are solved (only around half of homicides are solved in the US). Police in these countries almost never kill anyone. **In one sense, this provides some validation of the idea that more social spending might reduce crime.**

Despite all of this social spending, however, the Nordic countries still have nontrivial police forces. The US has about 238 police officers per 100,000 residents. Denmark, Sweden and Iceland have around 196, Norway has 188, and Finland has 130. And other big European countries have significantly *more* officers than the US: Germany has 336 and France has 429.

If crime is so low and the social safety net is so generous, why do the Nordic countries still have police? The reason is probably that these countries still face some of the same public safety challenges as countries with less social spending—challenges that still require officers. There is still domestic violence in the Nordic countries, for instance, and many Nordic cities still face recurring cycles of violence. Police in Nordic countries are quite different from their US counterparts: they are far more integrated with social services and far less likely to use violence, for example. However, they continue to exist in nontrivial numbers. This suggests that even if the US were to pursue a substantial increase in social spending, its police forces might not be dramatically reduced in size.

### Neither Policing nor Social Services are Perfect Substitutes

Focusing only on whether money is going to police or social services misses the broader question of what those agencies are being deployed to do. The most consistent theme from a poll of experts on the issue is that how the money is spent matters more than how much.

*"We have good evidence that SOME forms of social services can reduce the sorts of crime that drive social harms (violence in particular). But the public conversation right now treats all social services as being equivalent in their violence-prevention impacts, which (together with the inevitable big-city politics) creates questions about what sorts of services would actually get funded in practice."*

*—Jens Ludwig, Director of the Crime Lab at the University of Chicago*

In some situations social services can serve as substitutes for policing, but in other situations the two approaches are complementary. Some of the biggest benefits from social services take a while to materialize, so effective reform may require increasing overall investment, not only moving funds.

**"Some expenditures, such as mental health services and longer school days, would likely have immediate public safety benefits. Other interventions, such as improved housing and early-childhood education, have benefits over longer time horizons. So improved social services are important but not necessarily direct substitutes for public safety spending."**

—Felipe Goncalves, Assistant Professor of Economics at the University of California, Los Angeles, specializing in policing, crime, and education

Experimental evidence emphasizes that policing and social services aren't an either/or proposition—in fact, both could be ineffective if they are not tailored to the needs of the community. A randomized evaluation comparing different strategies to address crime hot spots in Lowell, Massachusetts examined three approaches: (1) increased police presence, focusing on misdemeanor arrests, (2) increased social-service provision, or (3) addressing community problems such as removing vacant buildings or adding lights to dark street corners. The third strategy—where the government determined specific challenges and worked to address them—was the most effective strategy for reducing crime.

# *Conclusion*

*We know that police forces can be effective in reducing homicides and preventing other violent crimes, and can even help reduce incarceration by discouraging crime in the first place. In other words, well-run police can constructively contribute to* **safety and security***.*

*We also know that unarmed and innocent Americans are being killed or injured by police. We know that communities of color experience disproportionate and intrusive stops from officers, and we know these have lasting effects, especially on young people who are unfairly targeted. These acts have compromised the promise of public safety to provide* **justice and fairness***.*

*The persistence of these injustices, the many difficulties in righting them, and the delays faced by the public when trying to gather more information about them, represent failures of* **accountability and transparency***.*

The American Public Safety system is at a crucial juncture. Everyone wants and needs safety and security. And an effective public safety system is especially crucial for people of color who face higher risks of being victims of crime and violence. These communities are in a bind, <u>wanting police officers to patrol their streets</u> and prevent crime but also <u>worrying that they will put themselves at risk if they call the police</u>. Too many Americans are doubly victimized by these fears.

Is it better to address the shortfalls of the current system with more reforms? Or is it better to push for systemic changes? Although these two positions are often placed in opposition, they do not need to be incompatible. It is possible to both win smaller-scale reforms that help citizens and save lives in the near-term, while also intelligently piloting innovations to shift the basic nature of the public safety system. Both of these routes are discussed more in the recommendations below.

# *Recommendations*

## Total replacement may not be a silver bullet

It is both technically and politically difficult to rapidly replace a police department with something wholly new. As a result, we lack enough experience of full replacement to really evaluate how it might work. Given our limited evidence, a degree of caution and care, both in designing new institutions and building coalitions behind them, is merited. That said, having seen some attempts at dramatic reform, we can at least suggest that when the process is rushed replacement efforts can easily be derailed or lose support. This does not mean cities can afford to sit on their hands: the problems in American public safety need to be urgently addressed. But communities considering dramatic changes should also be exploring other more focused changes as well.

## We have room to change how police operate

**When police are not replaced entirely, there a range of ways that their operation can be changed.** We have some evidence that police can effectively be paired with service providers in co-responder models, and that police can help divert people from prosecution and incarceration. There are also opportunities to improve police training: while beyond the scope of this guide, educational programs like active bystander training, de-escalation training, and procedural justice training have all shown promising results.

For one example, a recent randomized evaluation of an intensive procedural justice training for police found that the intervention reduced **both** arrests and crime, and improved resident perceptions of the police.

## We have opportunities to shift some missions to other providers

Besides reforming how police operate, jurisdictions can also consider moving responsibility for certain police activities to other kinds of staff and departments. Police alternatives like Mental Health Response Teams appear popular with the public. Though evidence is still limited, these appear to improve outcomes on some dimensions. They do not fix every issue, however: staffing can be a concern and they may only be able to displace a minority of calls for service. Beyond crisis response, police departments can also cleave off activities like enforcing minor traffic rules to other unarmed departments. This may avoid the risk that cutting budgets without changing missions can leave problems unaddressed. That said, particular moves like shifting traffic enforcement are still not thoroughly researched, and jurisdictions that try this should build monitoring and evaluation into their efforts.

## Research partnerships are valuable

All American jurisdictions need to face up to racial disparities in policing, which requires deepening their understanding of their specific challenges. Citizen groups can play a crucial role in advocating for better action, educating, and pushing depts to be transparent, for example by requesting public records. But departments should also reach out to researchers, who can help gather the unbiased data that both police, policymakers, and voters need in order to make the right decisions to move forward. Without some cities and departments being willing to do this already, much of the evidence we have here would be unavailable. And our knowledge base would be even wider if this happened more often.

## A portfolio approach is worthwhile

We do not know of any single reform proposal that is guaranteed to solve all the problems with American public safety in one stroke. Many of the most promising, well-studied approaches have well-defined but limited scopes. Countries with much more robust social service provision still have police forces 80-85% the size of American forces. The public safety challenge is sufficiently complex that police, politicians, and activists should all consider a portfolio approach involving multiple kinds of responses.

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