REIMAGINE SAFETY

A project of the Editorial Board, in conversation with outside voices

PART 1

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

Diana Ejaita for The Washington Post

Opinion by the **Editorial Board**
March 28, 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. Some departments now require police officers to intervene when they witness misconduct — a response to the other officers who watched Mr. Chauvin kneel on the neck of an unarmed man as he begged for his life.

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But the fiercest and potentially most consequential debate is over mounting a more fundamental response to these tragically familiar incidents. The discussion has been dominated by disagreements over the meaning and merit of "defunding the police." Some interpretations of the provocative slogan are concerning, but as we wrote over the summer, the mantra is helpful as shorthand for an essential truth: *We* need to reimagine 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.

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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.

The killing of George Floyd last summer reignited a long-running debate about policing, especially as it operates in Black neighborhoods. That we have had this debate so many times only heightens the urgency to hold a different, better conversation this time. 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.

PART 2

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

Diana Ejaita for The Washington Post

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.

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."

Kenneth Shultz has been homeless for more than nine years and has been charged with trespassing 96 times. As ABC News has reported, Mr. Shultz has spent 1 out of every 3 nights of the past nine years in jail and has more than $40,000 of debt from court costs, fines and fees.

In each of these instances, was law enforcement really the best public safety tool?

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?

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What if instead of facing armed police officers while in the agony of a mental health crisis, Prude's family had been able to call in an unarmed or a

media who was to be trained to de-escalate the situation and could connect him to mental health crisis services?

What if instead of being repeatedly arrested for trespassing, people without homes such as Mr. Shultz were given the medical care they so often need and offered transport to a shelter?

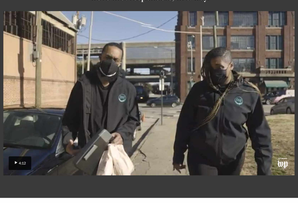
Click or tap on a **yellow underlined passage** to see comments from outside voices.

Brooks, Prude, Mr. Shultz and countless other Americans are failed by a system of public safety that defaults to the police at the expense of developing serious alternatives. 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.

Atlanta's Policing Alternatives & Diversion Initiative (PAD) was born in 2017 out of frustration over the frequency with which police arrest people for crimes of homelessness and poverty, such as public urination. By intervening before arrest, PAD can keep vulnerable community members out of jail for minor offenses and instead offer them support. Today, program participants are referred either by police officers, who can call PAD instead of making an arrest, or by community members, who can call 311 for a non-police, support-driven response.

"We're first responders, in a way."



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 — it could keep Mr. Shultz from another night in jail and possibly prevent death, unnecessary escalations of the sort that killed Brooks and Prude.

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.

[How should we reimagine public safety? Editorial writer Emefa Addo Agaxu answered your questions in a live chat. Read the transcript.]

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.

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Overhauling incident response is not a panacea. The police can't solve complex social problems, but neither can 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.

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Women and girls must be at the center of reimagining safety
Opinion by Andrea James

In Chicago, systemic racism runs deep. Our solutions must evolve.
Opinion by Richard Wallace

PART 3

We can make neighborhoods safer just by changing the physical environment

Diana Ejaita for The Washington Post

You might not guess, walking through the modest Humboldt Park neighborhood on the west side of Chicago, that Cook County and the state of Illinois spent at least $238 million here between 2014 and 2018, according to analysis by the Justice Mapping Center on data gathered by The Circuit.

That money was not spent on improving the neighborhood, but on incarcerating its residents. Humboldt Park is home to several "million dollar blocks," as researcher Eric Cadora first called them — single city blocks where the government has spent at least $1 million locking up residents.

The $238 million does not even include what the city of Chicago spends policing Humboldt Park: its citywide police annual budget is an eye-popping nearly $2 billion. And Humboldt Park is not exceptional — there are million dollar blocks in cities across the country. What does all that money buy? Neighborhoods that still feel unsafe. Communities still struggling to thrive. And residents still cycling in and out of prison.

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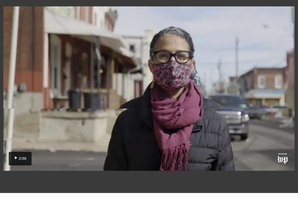
That's what Eugenia South thinks each time she treats a gunshot victim in the Presbyterian Medical Center emergency department in West Philadelphia. At least 2,200 people, mostly Black, were shot in Philadelphia last year. About a quarter of them died. By the time patients reach Dr. South in the emergency room, many have already grappled with food insecurity, unstable housing, crumbling schools and violent crime.

A city that can find billions of dollars to police and incarcerate residents can invest a fraction of that money in making its neighborhoods safer in the first place. An obvious place to start is the physical environment, which Dr. South says is directly tied to community safety.

"Our physical surroundings — including trees and green spaces — are having an impact on our minds, our train of thought, our emotions."



Philadelphia, like many cities, is dotted with abandoned vacant lots — patches of neglect that can provide cover for both planned and spontaneous crimes. For years, the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS) has been working with the city to transform vacant lots into park-like environments.

A vacant lot in Philadelphia was transformed into a park-like environment by the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society.

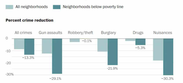
These interventions inspired Philadelphia researchers and community members to directly test the effects of vacant lot revitalization on community safety. As part of a multiyear, randomized experiment in Philadelphia, vacant lots were transformed into neat, grass-covered areas surrounded by low fences. The intervention was cheap — about $1.50 per square foot for the initial makeover and only 15 cents per square foot each year for maintenance.

The results were striking: Over a period of 3 years, gun violence in poor neighborhoods near the restored lots fell by 29.1 percent. Residents reported being less afraid to go outside and significantly increased their use of outdoor spaces for relaxing and socializing.

Vacant lot restoration helped to reduce crime in Philadelphia

All neighborhoods | Neighborhoods below poverty line

Percent crime reduction



Source: "Citywide cluster randomized trial to restore blighted vacant land and its effects on violence, crime, and fear," by Charles C. Branas et al., Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (2018).

Vacant lots aren't the only promising target for environmental intervention. Studies suggest that refurbishing abandoned buildings can also reduce violence. One study on blight remediation strategies in Philadelphia between 1999 and 2013 found that fixing up abandoned buildings reduced firearm violence by 29 percent in and around those buildings.

Researchers aren't certain why something as simple as repairing windows and doors seems to have this effect. A leading hypothesis is that better maintained surroundings prevent people from feeling that they can conduct criminal activity without scrutiny. Whatever the reason, this also appears to be an inexpensive, effective intervention.

This image is New Orleans neighborhood, a month as part of a project run by researchers at Tulane University and community partners, studying how revitalizing blighted buildings and vacant lots impacts community safety and wellbeing.

These studies add compelling data to a long-held hunch that thoughtful design and maintenance can make a neighborhood safer. The results also make neighborhood beautification efforts a high-priority no-brainer. Besides being a sound public safety policy, they are inexpensive, straightforward and beneficial to residents' well-being. By one estimate, each dollar invested in remediating vacant lots and abandoned buildings generates $26 and $333 dollars respectively in savings from prevented firearm violence. Most importantly, these interventions often answer long-standing demands by residents.

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Close attention to physical spaces and blight has echoes of the controversial "broken windows theory" of the 1980s and 1990s, which was used to support the massive expansion of policing in poor neighborhoods. The diagnosis was sensible, but the prescription was faulty — police officers don't repair broken windows. Imagine if federal, state, and local governments committed themselves to rehabilitating neighborhoods with the same zeal they now bring to policing and incarcerating people who live there.

All people deserve to live in clean, well-maintained neighborhoods. And they are safer when they do.

The Justice Mapping Center provided data analysis for this editorial based on data gathered by The Circuit, a Chicago-based collaboration between the nonprofit newsrooms Better Government Association, Injustice Watch and tech consultants DataMade.

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If Black lives really matter, we must invest in Black neighborhoods

Opinion by Eugene C. South

How we are reimagining public safety in Montgomery County

Opinion by Marc Maier and Bernice Mireku-North

More ways to reimagine safety

Letters to the Editor

PART 4

If we really wanted to prevent violence, we'd focus our resources on those at highest risk

Diana Ejaita for The Washington Post

In 2021, the last full year for which the FBI reported data, 16,425 people were murdered in the United States. The country's murder rate far outpaces that of other developed nations. Murder victims in the United States skew young, male and Black. For Black men under the age of 45, homicide is the leading cause of death.

Murder, and the unspeakable trauma it unleashes, animates some of society's hardest intuitions in the criminal justice system. But deadly violence is often misunderstood in ways that fundamentally distort our approach to addressing it.

The fact is that lethal violence, for the most part, isn't random. Most murder victims know their killers. And study after study confirms what community members and police officers know well: Most of the violence is driven by a small number of individuals — mostly disadvantaged young men — who share social bonds.

In Chicago, one study found that more than 40 percent of all firearm homicides happened in a network that contained just 4 percent of the community's population. Another found that in Oakland, Calif., about 0.3 percent of the city's population were behind 60 percent of the city's murders. The interpersonal origins of much of this violence can be hard to grasp from the outside. These are fights that escalate and turn deadly when someone pulls a weapon, when there are long-standing grudges held between groups competing for territory, and when retaliatory killings try to even a morbid score.

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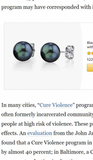
Lethal violence may be senseless, but it certainly isn't random. It happens between people and over issues that are known to many in the wider community. That's why many efforts to reduce — or "interrupt" violence — that make use of trusted relationships and deep local knowledge have been highly effective.

Homicide victims: Black Americans vs. total population

Homicides rate per 100,000 people



Source: Justice Department, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

The approach is simple: equip individuals whose social circumstances put them at elevated risk for violence with the skills and resources they need to avoid, de-escalate and manage violence-prone situations that regularly arise in their lives. These programs sometimes operate in schools, like the Chicago-based "Becoming a Man" program, which provides small-group counseling, skill-building and cognitive behavioral therapy for young men. Randomized controlled trials found that violent-crime arrests declined 45 to 50 percent among program participants, and high school graduation rates increased by 22 to 29 percent.

In Richmond, Calif., the Office of Neighborhood Safety runs an 18-month fellowship that provides intensive support, training and substance abuse treatment to a few dozen residents at highest risk of violence. A 2019 evaluation in the American Journal of Public Health found that the program was associated with a significant reduction in gun violence citywide — 55 percent fewer firearm deaths and hospital visits and 45 percent fewer crimes (though the evaluation found the program may have corresponded with increased non-firearm violence).

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In many cities, "Cure Violence" programs deploy trusted messengers — often formerly incarcerated community members — to reach out to people at high risk of violence. These programs have had some stunning effects. An evaluation from the John Jay College of Criminal Justice found that a Cure Violence program in New York reduced gun injuries by almost 40 percent; in Baltimore, a Cure Violence program saw up to a 44 percent reduction in shootings, according to a report from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. Violence intervention is often highly technical and can be executed poorly, so training and technical assistance are important. The work relies on assets that can't be manufactured overnight — deep community knowledge, trusting relationships and trained interventionists, to name a few.

Sometimes, violence interrupters meet individuals at their most vulnerable — in the hospital. Hospital-based violence interrupters know that gunshot victims recovering from surgery are often angry, in pain and at high risk of planning the kind of retaliation that would continue the cycle of violence. Interventionists can help them cool off, attend to the trauma of being shot, and navigate the bureaucracy they may need to find safe housing and temporary benefits.

Ideally, violence prevention efforts would amount to more than just one-off programs. Rather, cities should invest in violence prevention as part of a broader public health infrastructure that is equipped to reach people at risk wherever they are — in hospitals, in schools, in street outreach programs — integrating efforts across city agencies.

Just as retooling incident response won't solve the social ailments that give rise to crimes of desperation, violence prevention efforts on their own cannot transform violence-burdened neighborhoods into thriving communities with well-functioning public services, strong schools and economic opportunity. But then, neither can policing and incarceration. If we're willing to spend billions of dollars a year to respond to violence after its traumatic wake has already rippled through the community, why not do more to reduce violence in the first place?

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To stop the spike in urban violence, engage those most at risk

Opinion by Thomas Abt

No, crime survivors don't want more prisons. They want a new safety mousetrap.

Opinion by Lynnes Anderson and Robert Rooks

PART 5

We have the proper public safety tools. Now hand them to community leaders.

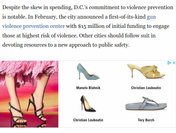
Diana Ejaita for The Washington Post

What could community institutions do better than police if we adequately invested in them?

We have highlighted how coalitions of residents, educators, academics and local officials have pioneered creative, community-based efforts to keep their neighborhoods safe. They have crafted many proven and promising non-policing public safety tools. But nowhere does funding for these approaches come anywhere close to the hundreds of millions — or even billions — of dollars that cities commonly devote to law enforcement.

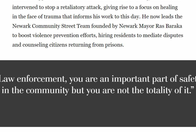
Washington, D.C., is one of the most progressive cities in the country. But in 2021, even after major funding increases for violence prevention initiatives, the city's proposed budget dedicated 30 times more spending to traditional policing than to non-policing violence prevention.

2021 budget comparison in D.C.



Source: D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute.

Despite the slow in spending, D.C.'s commitment to violence prevention is notable. In February, the city announced a first-of-its-kind gun violence prevention center with $15 million of initial funding to engage those at highest risk of violence. Other cities should follow suit in devoting resources to a new approach to public safety.



Crucially, new investments should come with a commitment to empowering community-based institutions to use whichever tools they deem most appropriate to provide for the safety of their neighborhoods. These institutions — existing and incipient — should be made up of community leaders with deep local ties and experience working to keep their communities safe — leaders like Los Angeles-native Aqueela Sherrills, who helped negotiate a peace treaty between the Crips and the Bloods in 1992. When his son was shot and killed in 2004, Mr. Sherrills intervened to stop a retaliatory attack, giving rise to a focus on healing in the face of trauma that informs his work to this day. He now leads the Newark Community Street Team founded by Newark Mayor Ras Baraka to boost violence prevention efforts, hiring residents to mediate disputes and counseling citizens returning from prisons.

> "Law enforcement, you are an important part of safety in the community but you are not the totality of it."

In 2020, the city of Newark spent at least $145 million on policing. Last year, the city allocated 5 percent of its public safety budget — roughly $12 million — for a new Office for Violence Prevention. The majority of the funds will go directly to community-based groups doing anti-violence work.

Offices like this should be established around the country to support a thriving ecosystem of community-based groups that can experiment with and expand anti-violence efforts, such as civilian safety patrols and services for residents traumatized by crime. Community coalitions could expand reentry support for formerly incarcerated individuals — arrange housing and counseling, help find jobs, and get off the lingering prison and court fees that often push parolees to reoffend.

Given money and time, they could hire and train a talented workforce with organizational stability. Results should be monitored, but they might not show up within an election cycle. Political commitment to stick through the bumpy start-up phases that face any new organization is crucial.

There's no one-size-fits-all approach to neighborhood safety. Community leaders will need to wield non-policing public safety tools that are responsive to their respective communities' particular needs. They will also need to figure out their own relationships to law enforcement. Some neighborhood safety coalitions may choose to work with law enforcement on certain issues. Others may prefer to stay separate from police as they build their capacity to implement non-policing tools.

Each community coalition would need to be given space to experiment — and grace when some of their experiments inevitably fail. This will be challenging for the public to watch, but it's how we'll get to what works. And we're no stranger to failures in public safety. When police fail most dismally, they maim and murder civilians, impose second-class citizenship on Black Americans, and attack peaceful protesters.

Whatever failures neighborhood public safety coalitions have, they won't look like that. And just imagine what success could look like.

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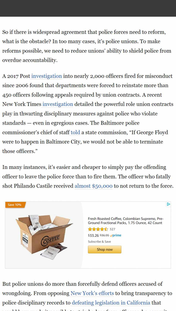
Emergency management governance is our safety net. It's not a good one.
Opinion by Eric Cadora

Money can't buy criminal justice reform. But it can fuel a movement.
Opinion by Chino Cadenhead

PART 6

It will be hard for communities to check police without addressing their unions.



Diana Ejaita for The Washington Post

We have focused on the need to reimagine public safety and invest in non-policing tools. But another step is key in preventing the brutal excesses of policing that brought thousands of outraged Americans to the streets last spring and summer.

When tensions between law enforcement and community residents are beyond repair, the best course of action may be to start from scratch. The city of Camden, N.J., disbanded and reconstituted its police department in 2012. Last month, the mayor of Ithaca, N.Y., proposed disbanding the current police department and absorbing some of its functions into a reimagined city agency in charge of public safety. Such creative, patient efforts at redesigning public institutions may be the ideal way to fulfill community-driven visions of public safety in some places.

In other places, though, communities may prefer to focus their efforts on reforming existing police departments. There's an abundance of badly needed changes that could help rein in the harms of policing, and there is surprising consensus around many of them — from increasing civilian oversight to standardizing use-of-force policies.

Without reforms, the crisis of legitimacy plaguing law enforcement will only get worse, according to Cedric Alexander, who served as the police chief of DeKalb County, Ga., and Rochester, N.Y., and was a member of President Barack Obama's Task Force on 21st Century Policing.

> "Before we can begin to mend any wounds, we have to acknowledge that there was a problem."

So if there is widespread agreement that police forces need to reform, what is the obstacle? In too many cases, it's police unions. To make reforms possible, we need to reduce unions' ability to shield police from overdue accountability.

A 2017 Post investigation into nearly 2,000 officers fired for misconduct since 2006 found that departments were forced to reinstate more than 450 officers following appeals required by union contracts. A recent New York Times investigation detailed the powerful role union contracts play in thwarting disciplinary measures against police who violate standards — even in egregious cases. The Baltimore police commissioner's chief of staff told a state commission, "If George Floyd were to happen in Baltimore City, we would not be able to terminate those officers."

In many instances, it's easier and cheaper to simply pay the offending officer to leave the police force than to fire them. The officer who fatally shot Philando Castile received almost $50,000 to not return to the force.

But police unions do more than forcefully defend officers accused of wrongdoing. From opposing New York's efforts to bring transparency to police disciplinary records to defeating legislation in California that would have made it possible to strip badges from officers who commit serious misconduct, police unions have become powerful and vocal opponents of almost any reforms aimed at increasing accountability and transparency.

If any meaningful reforms are to take root, communities must contend with police unions and their organized hostility toward accountability and reform.

A natural starting point is collective bargaining agreements, which is where police unions get most of their power. The agreements allow public-sector employees to negotiate on standard measures such as pay and working conditions. But they also give police unions enormous leverage to bargain on conditions that can make it nearly impossible to fire or discipline officers. For example, a common stipulation gives officers several days following an incident of misconduct before they can be questioned, which in practice enables sophisticated coverups as officers coordinate stories to justify their use of force. This creates a forbiddingly high bar for dismissal and makes it easier for misconduct-prone officers to stay on the force or to wander from department to department.

Police union contracts, which received relatively little scrutiny in the past, need far more transparency. Some experts have proposed allowing the public to observe negotiations between governments and police unions. Others have suggested allowing police unions to negotiate on pay and hours but not on accountability and transparency measures.

Police unions' demands for procedural job protections are understandable. But the desire to thwart political firings cannot outweigh the need to hold officers accountable for egregious incidents of violence against the citizens they are sworn to protect.

There are no easy ways to curb police unions' sprawling political influence, but at least some of that influence comes from our over-reliance on law enforcement for public safety. Reimagining public safety — investing in new tools for public safety — could help temper the power of police unions and create a political environment more favorable to much-needed reform.

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Which side are you on? That's a question every police officer must answer.
Opinion by Cedric L. Alexander

PART 7

We've been here before. This time, let's try something new.

Diana Ejaita for The Washington Post

"The current criminal justice system … was not designed to eliminate the conditions in which most crime breeds."

This simple observation comes from the final report of the Kerner Commission, convened by President Lyndon B. Johnson to investigate the causes of the racial uprisings that roiled the nation in 1967. It remains true — a half-century later.

One reason is that this insight has never been consistently reflected in federal criminal justice policy. Since the Kerner report, the government has funneled billions into punitive criminal justice policies, flooding local law enforcement with military-grade weapons and incentivizing mass incarceration, instead of seeking "to eliminate the conditions in which most crime breeds."

The Biden administration has an opportunity to back a different approach.

Any new funding for law enforcement should support the transparency and accountability that law enforcement has traditionally evaded. The Justice in Policing Act is a good example of that. Among other things, it would create a federal registry of police misconduct and establish grants for state attorneys general to independently investigate police misconduct.

As communities move beyond police reform to more fundamental change, the federal government can support them by also going further than tinkering at the edges of our discredited status quo. It can support and incentivize states and localities in developing additional tools for public safety. Several recently introduced bills do just this, including the CAHOOTS Act, which helps states create mobile crisis response teams via Medicaid funding, and the Community-Based Response Act, which would support localities in building an additional option besides law enforcement for both emergency and non-emergency response.

More broadly, the Biden administration should seize this moment to shift the definition of public safety policy. Multiple studies suggest that expanding health insurance reduces crime. Therefore, Medicaid expansion isn't only health policy — it's public safety policy. We've known for decades that lead exposure in childhood can increase behavioral problems, an effect that we now know is tied to an increase in violent crime later in life. Replacing lead pipes, then, is more than a public health policy — it, too, is public safety policy. Research suggests that interventions to reduce homelessness can also reduce crime, which makes affordable housing a public safety concern. Expanding our idea of what constitutes public safety policy is a key step in reimagining what really keeps Americans safe.

Several factors might accelerate such a fundamental rethinking: the sustained, multiracial nature of the protests over the spring and summer; the change in presidential administration; and a devastating pandemic that is forcing critical thought about what sort of country we want to rebuild.

At the same time, one factor could imperil the prospects for change: After decades of steady decline, violent crime is on the rise around the country. From Los Angeles to D.C., homicides and other violent crimes are up. It's too soon to say what is causing this, and we may never have a clear picture. Not all crimes are up in the pandemic — property crimes are down in many places, possibly because occupied residences are less attractive for burglary. And violent crime rates are still relatively low overall — trends vary from city to city, but the nationwide homicide rate is nowhere near the highs of the 1990s. Still, whatever the causes, the uptick in violence is concerning.

The country has reacted to past moments of perceived or actual rising crime with punitive criminal justice policies based in fear and lack of imagination. They haven't worked very well. This time, let's do the reverse: Let's use rising crime as a spur to rethink public safety in a way that could make all communities more livable. Let's embrace a new approach to public safety and invest in the tools to deliver it.

At this critical juncture, the nation could fall back into a familiar cycle of mass incarceration and aggressive policing. But there is a better option. Instead of creating more "million-dollar blocks," it's time to "eliminate the conditions in which most crime breeds."

This time, we can do better, and we must.

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