

REIMAGINING PUBLIC SAFETY

RPS ISSUE BRIEF SERIES: **Where to Reimagine**

“We’re asking cops to do too much in this country...We are. 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.”

Former Dallas Police Chief, current Chicago Police Superintendent David Brown



To reimagine public safety, we must confront the central problem: we ask the police to do too much, and often to perform tasks for which they are unsuited and untrained.

But what exactly do the police do? For what tasks should we investigate alternative response?

Through conversations with community members and public safety experts, and analysis of publicly available data, we have developed a list of common issues and problems that are currently handled by the police.

Abuse, neglect
Animal control
Burglar alarms
City code violation
Crime scene processing
Data analytics
Disputes, fights
Disturbances
Domestic violence, disputes
Harassment
Investigation, surveillance, intelligence
Juvenile
Loitering, trespass, nuisance, public urination
Lost, found, abandoned property
Major crimes
Medical assistance
Mental health
Missing persons
Noise complaints
Open air drug sales
Parking enforcement
Proactive policing
Public events management
School safety
Sex work
Street outreach, intervention
Substance use
Suspicious persons
Theft, larceny
Traffic enforcement
Traffic-related incidents
Unhoused persons
Vandalism
Welfare checks

The police typically have been the default responder for most of the issues on this list—from property theft and noise complaints to addressing burglar alarms and conducting welfare checks. Yet, in many cases, police are not necessarily the best responder and police presence even may exacerbate an already harmful situation. In such instances, better outcomes can be achieved by alternative responders or by a co-response model that empowers non-police professionals to respond alongside police.

Our Reimagining Public Safety initiative explores how police currently address the issues on this list, the advantages and disadvantages of the present system of default police response, and the potential benefits and risks of different approaches. Some response possibilities or models are applicable to multiple issues areas, while others, such as the response to individuals experiencing mental health issues, may require a more specialized or unique approach.

Overuse of the police benefits no one

Underlying this entire exercise is the demonstrable fact that overuse of the police benefits no one. It can inflict serious harm on individuals and communities, particularly communities of color.

This is no secret to communities and police officers alike. In our national research investigating the public safety perspectives and values of community members and officers, both groups quickly identified the fact that police are ill-equipped to troubleshoot each and every societal ill, especially when related to underlying social issues.

The misalignment between officers' training and what they are often called upon to address – identified by both the recipients and providers of public safety services – can produce a number of harms:

- **Direct Harms.** Police are trained primarily in how to use (or avoid using) force, and in law enforcement. Given those skillsets, it can come as little surprise that where policing occurs, the use of force and of the enforcement power of the state are frequent. Excessive stops, searches, uses of force, arrests, and resultant incarcerations result in physical harm. And sweeping millions of people, disproportionately Black and brown, into the criminal legal system can have a lasting or permanent negative impact on career and life options. Police shoot nearly one thousand people a year, many of them unarmed. Nearly one million people a year experience lesser threats or uses of force. And police arrest roughly twelve million people annually. Some of this may be unavoidable, but surely our societal goal should be to avoid as much of it as possible.
- **Unaddressed Chronic Social Harms.** Because police lack the training to deal with many of these issues, a police-centered response often will fail to address the underlying reasons that led to the call for help in the first place. Police are called, again and again, to handle situations involving domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illness, homelessness, persistent noise complaints, issues with animals, and related problems. Although police may, in some instances, defuse an acute crisis, they lack the training to solve the underlying problems
- **(Mis)trust-Based Harms.** Mistrust of law enforcement in affected communities, predominantly communities of color, results in many people refusing to call or cooperate with the police, fearing negative consequences for themselves, their families, or their neighbors. In this sense, and ironically, the overuse of police in situations for which they are ill-suited results in the underuse of police in situations for which they genuinely are needed.

“I think most of us got into this job to catch the bad guy, to arrest the bad guy, to keep our community safe. And so going to the guy that’s having a mental health episode, standing naked in the street, it’s like, is that person a bad guy? I didn’t get into this job to tackle naked guys for basically causing a disturbance.”

Police Officer, RPS Partner Jurisdiction

“Public Safety is a pie and [police] people have a slice of it, but we need that holistic view. So, we can know who can work in tandem and ask, who has the more specialized skill set for these needs?”

Local Resident, RPS Partner Jurisdiction

Weighing the Costs and Benefits

What we again want to stress, though, is how often the police themselves make the case that they are not the appropriate responders to many of these incidents. Especially at a time when police departments are struggling to recruit sufficient numbers of officers, using police to respond to calls for which they are not the ideal responder makes little sense.

Still, it is not always easy to know which responder is best, or whether a police co-response makes sense. All potential strategies to deal with calls from the public for help have potential (and actual) costs and benefits. Non-police response may avoid the harms of traditional policing and solve problems by addressing social dynamics in a more fair, effective, and equitable way.

But there are many situations in which the response of a government representative with the authority to use a firearm or make an arrest may be beneficial or even essential. When we send an unarmed responder to address a possible emergency, we must undertake a new type of risk analysis – whether there is physical harm the police could help to avoid. This particularly is the case given the dangerous proliferation of firearms throughout society. In addition, it simply is a fact that implicit biases may exist among all potential responders, not just police. Although our overall goal is to encourage and help develop alternative responses for some of the social problems to which we now dispatch the police, we also recognize that officers have a vital role in any comprehensive public safety strategy.

In this initiative, we consider the potential advantages and disadvantages of a wide range of potential responses, from the most traditional to the most innovative, with the ultimate goal of best meeting community needs and promoting true public safety.

Additional Resources

[Disaggregating the Police Function](#)
by Barry Friedman



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