

GETTING STARTED

Why Reimagine Public Safety?



Every day, hundreds of thousands of people dial 911 looking for urgent help.

They call because they believe they hear a prowler in their home, or because they have not seen Mr. Jones for a long time and are worried about his safety. They call when a loved one is in crisis, and they have exhausted other options. They call because the neighbors are too loud, or that couple is fighting again, or there is a person in the street who is worrying them, or something needs to be done about the dog that is scaring children on the block.

REIMAGINING PUBLIC SAFETY



Often, we say that people have “called the police.” But this is wrong. They called the number we gave them for emergencies, and we sent the police. The two are not the same.

Sending the police — who are armed, trained to fight crime, and authorized to use force — to these varied calls for help can lead to a number of troubling consequences that should compel all of us to want to reimagine public safety.

The first consequence is the one that gets most of the attention in the news: sometimes, when the police come, bad things happen. Force is used when it could have been avoided. Arrests occur that need not have. People get tased, or shot with a firearm, injured, and even killed. And as is all too well-documented, these things happen disproportionately to people who are Black and Brown, to people who already are vulnerable.

The second consequence gets far less media attention, but also has huge costs to society: the problems that caused people to call for help do not get solved. Yes, a bandage may be applied that quiets the issue for a time. But often the problem re-emerges, only to begin the cycle once again. The unhoused person still has nowhere to go, the survivor of domestic abuse is victimized yet again. Mr. Jones was saved this time before the overdose took him, but maybe not next. And all too often, the victims of government’s decision to under-invest in real solutions also are Black and Brown, less well-off, or vulnerable.

The third consequence, which often is ignored completely, follows from using officers — trained and equipped at great public expense to respond to danger and violence — to address social issues. The training and use of police is expensive, often more than alternative responders cost. And when we use police to address social issues, we take them away from focusing on the critical tasks for which they are trained, such as addressing violent crime.

It does not have to be this way. As a society, we should — and can — do better.

Reimagining public safety begins by recognizing that not every social problem, not every call for help, is best addressed, or even addressed at all, by sending an officer whose primary training is in the use of force and law enforcement. Police have been telling us for years that they are not one-size-fits-all social workers. They themselves constantly make the point that they do not have the training or the capacity to deal with all the problems society dumps on them. In this, their views converge with the many community leaders who — for a long time — have been pointing out the mismatch between social problems and police response, and who have been developing and advocating for alternative, community-based approaches.

Still, if the need to reimagine public safety is apparent, the solution is anything but. There are in fact two huge concerns that led us, and the many committed people who have engaged with this project, to do this work.

First, the work is hard. It is complicated. Solutions are not easy to come by.

To name one problem, police get dragged into all these calls, as they themselves point out, because often they are the only responder available 24 hours a day, all 7 days of the week. Emergencies and calls for help are not confined to regular business hours on the weekdays. To name another, the government lives in silos, but people's actual problems intersect with multiple issues and often require a variety of resources. And yet one more: some people are so accustomed to seeing the police respond that they want an enforcement answer, even if that is not the right answer. Really reimagining public safety requires tackling these tough problems. Our constant worry is that the problems may seem too many and too difficult, so that even people who begin the work will give up on it. That would be a tragedy, because if we stick with it we can make the lives of people — including the police themselves — better.

Second, as hard as the work is, it is easy to be under ambitious.

Most of the attention to this idea of “alternative response” has focused on calls about someone in mental distress. It is very important that these calls finally get the attention they deserve — helping people in crisis is a pressing public health issue, and we have seen too many times what happens when these calls go badly. But numerically, these calls are a very small set of the reasons that people call 911. From noise complaints to domestic strife to welfare checks to animal complaints to false burglar alarms — these, too, are real problems faced by real people, and they too need to be dealt with in a way that may be handled best by a response other than sending a police officer.

Finally, it is not just the calls for help that motivate us — it is a fundamental re-examination of the way we use police in society.

Many people believe the police play a vital role. But you would not send a plumber to fix an electrical wiring problem, and it is clear electricians should not have anything to do with domestic strife. The same is true of police. Among the many questions we take up here are: what is the right role of the police, and what do we ask of them that may be inappropriate?

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One last word before we get down to work. We do not think we have all of the answers, or even (to be honest) a small fraction of them. We believe we have some answers, and some directions in which to go. Even those are tentative and open to correction. That is what we are doing here: asking questions. Reimagining public safety means learning to ask the right questions, then persevering to answer them, in a way that can improve the lives of the many people in need, who have to look somewhere for help.



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