

# WHAT HAPPENS AFTER WE DEFUND POLICE?

## A Brief Exploration of Alternatives to Law Enforcement

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In a moment where the country has taken to the streets in outrage over the deaths of Black people at the hands of law enforcement, communities are coming together to imagine and build a new vision of a just, equitable, and safe society for all. In the past few years, state and local governments have made concerted efforts at reforming police departments, such as requiring increased training, body-worn cameras, and instituting more restrictive use of force policies. However, the continued and persistent brutality and violence from a system of law enforcement that is often indifferent to human life suggests that these efforts have not been enough.

In this context, there have been calls to defund police departments and to shift resources (primarily, but not only, money) towards creating and supporting alternatives to law enforcement. As of this writing, the Minneapolis City Council has voted to [disband the Minneapolis Police Department](#) and replace it with a community-led public safety system, and the mayor and superintendents of Portland, OR announced that they would [remove city police officers](#) (also known as school resource officers) from all Portland school districts. The Los Angeles Police Department budget was [reduced by \\$150 million](#), and the New York City Council has proposed [cutting \\$1 billion](#) from the NYPD's budget. [Albuquerque](#) and [San Francisco](#) are moving forward with systems that will dispatch unarmed professionals (non-law enforcement) to deal with issues such as mental health crises, school discipline, neighbor disputes, and substance use issues.

The aim of this document is to supplement discussions around what alternatives to law enforcement could look like as portions of police resources are redirected to other uses. It is certainly not an exhaustive list, but a brief guide to some of the main arguments, issues, and existing efforts aimed at creating alternatives to policing.

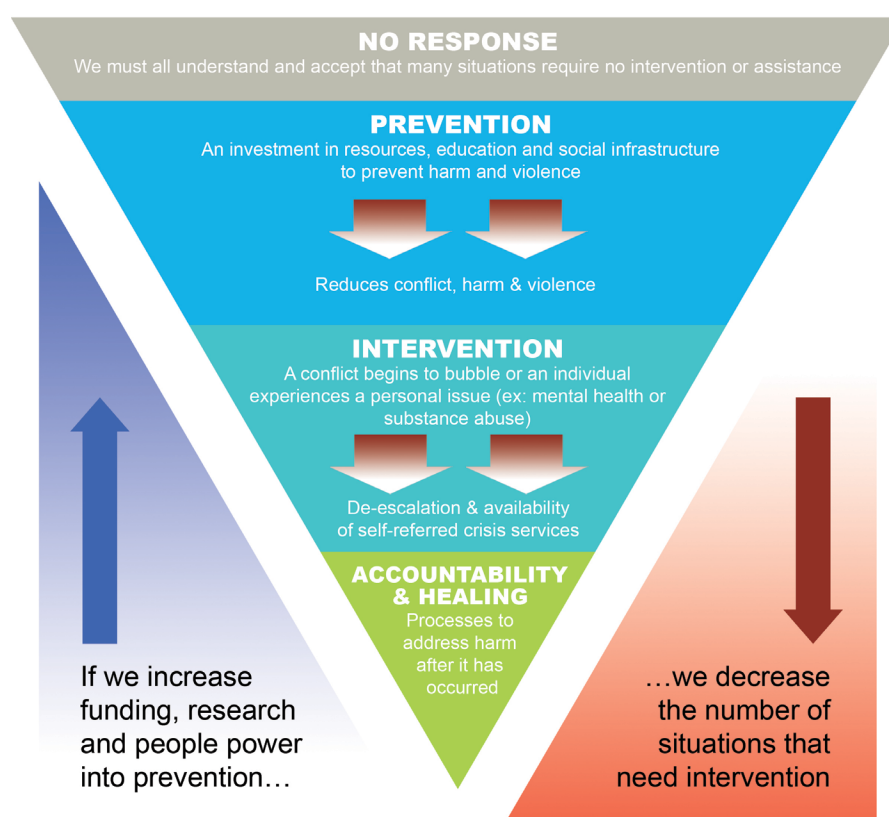


Fig. 1 An Alternative Paradigm for Community Safety

# GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR CREATING ALTERNATIVES TO POLICING

A piecemeal approach to defunding and developing alternatives to police is unlikely to succeed. The programs uplifted here should be considered in the context of the requirement to fundamentally transform and shift the priorities of all of the systems within governments and communities. In order to advance this transformation, the following guiding principles are offered as a place from which jurisdictions must begin in order to ensure sustainable change:



## RE-ALLOCATING RESOURCES

To successfully engage in both prevention work and programs that provide alternatives to police, these efforts must be funded. In 2017, budgets from twelve major American cities and counties, on average, allocated roughly 16 times more to law enforcement spending than to housing and community development programs.<sup>1</sup> Neglecting to sufficiently fund non-enforcement service agencies and other alternatives to police while holding these programs to incredibly high standards is a recipe for failure.



## CENTERING LOCAL COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE AND MAINTAINING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

The people and communities that have been most devastated by the harmful effects of law enforcement must be at the center of creating the alternatives to policing. A one-size fits all solution is not the answer. Every community has its own rich and unique set of traditions that should be the starting point for the development of alternatives.



## USING A PUBLIC HEALTH FRAMEWORK

A public health model embraces the notion that all risk cannot be eliminated. Communities can strive to prevent violence and harm, and also be prepared to address the impacts of violence and harm together when it does occur. Just as creating laws and enforcement mechanisms does not end law violations or violence, none of the examples below will completely solve the problems they are designed to prevent. The perfect cannot be the enemy of the good as localities move forward in the pursuit of creating effective community-based solutions.

**When these guiding principles are adopted and implemented, alternatives to law enforcement can be successfully developed.**

Outlined below are four opportunities for intervention in harm and conflict that are generally relegated to the police. The following existing alternatives are grouped into these four categories with the understanding that many programs respond to more than one type of harm or conflict.

# EXISTING ALTERNATIVES TO POLICING

## 1. NO RESPONSE

Currently, people often function as surveillance agents for police unnecessarily or harmfully. There are countless examples of people intervening, calling 911, pursuing, and even murdering people, primarily people of color, for doing absolutely nothing. In addition to these incidents where people are engaging in everyday behavior, there are many issues people experience involving substance use, houselessness, or mental health that may require no intervention by individuals in order to ensure a community's safety.

It is imperative that every person continue to self-reflect on when and why they call for help, whether it be from law enforcement or otherwise. Communities of color have created resources that help people think through what requires a response and what does not.

### Some examples to assist in this reflection process:

- › [10 Questions to Ask Yourself Before You Call the Police on Black and Brown Bodies](#)
- › [Steps to Ask Yourself Before Calling Police](#)

## 2. PREVENTION

Prevention refers to the creation of a foundation from which everyone can thrive and an equitable distribution of resources so that services are easily accessible. If all people who wanted housing were housed and all people who wanted mental health or substance use treatment could receive it for free and access it as needed, it is likely that there would be a dramatic decrease in the number of calls law enforcement received related to these issues.

### Some successful means of prevention are:

› **VIOLENCE PREVENTION EDUCATION**—Prevention begins with education. The [Safe House Alliance Network](#) in Colorado has developed a social justice-oriented violence prevention curriculum that is offered to all K-12 schools in the Boulder Valley School District. Education programs like these should also be paired with the divestment of funding in school police and the reinvestment of those funds in supportive services like in-school therapists, after-school programs, and college counselors.

› **SUPERVISED INJECTION SITES**—Supervised injection sites provide (1) a hygienic space for people to inject pre-obtained drugs while observed by trained staff; (2) guidance and equipment, like clean needles, to reduce harm; and (3) safe disposal of used equipment. These sites also link people to medical care, social services, and substance use treatment.

› **PEER RESPITES**—Peer respites are voluntary, short-term, or overnight programs that operate 24/7 to provide crisis support to people experiencing behavioral health crises or conditions related to substance use disorders. The providers' goal is to use crisis as an opportunity for growth and healing, and to provide tools for the person staying in the respite that they can use for self-management. Many respites are accessed by people in crisis on their own, or by direct referral from a medical provider, thereby avoiding law enforcement involvement.

**While no supervised injection sites legally operate<sup>2</sup> in the United States, hundreds exist all over the world with great levels of success in reducing ambulance calls<sup>3</sup>, infectious disease transmission<sup>4</sup>, and overdoses<sup>5</sup>.**

**[The Living Room at Turning Point, Skokie, IL](#) is a peer respite that has been shown to reduce trips to the emergency room by alleviating crises, saved the State of Illinois money, and additionally, linked people to longer-term care<sup>6</sup>.**

### 3. INTERVENTION

Over time, police have been introduced into schools, and legal relationships have been created allowing police to intervene in crises involving mental health, substance use, and interpersonal violence. In the United States, it is often thought that the most appropriate intervention in an emergency or immediate crisis is to call 911. Additionally, mandated reporting laws have created forced collaborations between the police and social services providers, medical providers, and teachers. These are two examples, among others, of traditional interventions that communities are reconsidering in light of current calls to defund police.

**The following provide some examples of efforts that exist to meet the immediate needs of a variety of crises without police intervention<sup>7</sup>:**

➤ **HOLLABACK!** is an organization with the goal of ending harassment in all its forms by transforming the culture and building the power of everyday people to create safe and welcoming environments for all. To that end, the organization has created a bystander intervention curriculum and training in the 5 D's: Distract, Delegate, Document, Delay, and Direct. This training empowers people witnessing a variety of possible conflicts, harassment, or other unsafe situations to personally intervene to de-escalate and defuse the issue. Recently, the 5D's were touted by the Durham Beyond Policing Coalition as a model alternative to policing after the Durham, NC chapter of [Black Youth Project 100](#) (BYP100) conducted a bystander intervention training as part of its "She Safe, We Safe" campaign<sup>8</sup>.

➤ **CAHOOTS (Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets)** is a mobile crisis intervention unit based in the Eugene-Springfield Metro area of Oregon, available 24 hours per day, seven days a week, to respond in the field to people experiencing mental health crises, substance use issues, and even provide welfare checks and conflict resolution/dispute mediation. Teams consist of one medic (nurse/EMT) and a crisis worker with several years of experience in behavioral health fields. Programs like CAHOOTS can save jurisdictions money: the annual operating budget for CAHOOTS is about \$2 million, which is a little over 1% of the Eugene Police Department's budget<sup>9</sup>.

➤ **OAKLAND POWER PROJECTS (OPP)** is a project of Critical Resistance in Oakland, California, which has created an alternatives-to-policing healthworkers cohort that empowers communities to step in (when safe) and provide basic support when someone is experiencing a health-related crisis. The trainings include information on overall health and preventative care, as well as how laypeople can respond to opioid overdose prevention and the treatment of acute injuries like stabbing wounds or glass lacerations and injuries from car crashes in order to reduce interactions with law enforcement. OPP has also proposed providing free medical kits and supplies to the community for injuries or everyday use.<sup>10</sup>

➤ **COMMUNITY ALTERNATIVES TO 911 (CAT 911)** builds the skills, peer support and resources needed to maintain cop-free zones across Southern California by providing trainings to build skills in response to addiction, overdose, sexual assault, domestic violence, emergency medical care, inter-neighborhood conflict, mental health intervention, cop watch, and police accountability.



**A few phone apps have been developed in the last few years with the intent of being used as an alternative for people in crisis who do not want to contact law enforcement. Some examples of this technology include [Cell 411](#) and [Buoy](#). Both apps call on users to identify people in their communities that they feel comfortable contacting in times of crisis, and in turn, those people agree to be "on call" to respond if necessary. While these apps are not broadly in use at this time, they present an alternative worth exploring as a tool and an opportunity for furthering some of the crisis response work listed above.<sup>11</sup>**

## 4. ACCOUNTABILITY & HEALING

Currently, the criminal legal system operates in a binary of “victim” and “offender” and focuses solely on whether and what law was broken and what punishment does the person deserve. This is a very narrow way of understanding the impacts of harm and violence in communities. Transformative justice is an alternative political framework and practice that “seeks to respond to violence without creating more violence and/or engaging in harm reduction to lessen the violence.”<sup>12</sup> Creating an alternative for the instances of harm and violence is important for envisioning a future without reliance on the penal system.

People practicing transformative justice around the country are engaging in processes that focus on healing, accountability, and the safety of all involved. These are time intensive processes that require accountability in a way that eliminates the need for punishment. Instead the person who caused harm is asked to acknowledge the harm they caused, apologize for it, and clearly lay out what they will do to ensure this harm does not happen again. The needs of the person harmed are centered as the process moves towards healing for everyone. Community comes together to support the person harmed and the person who caused harm in this process. These ways of intervening acknowledge that harm and violence are complex, their impacts are far-reaching, and everyone is responsible for eliminating the conditions that perpetuate state and interpersonal violence.

### Examples:

› **BROWN UNIVERSITY TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE PRACTITIONER PROGRAM**—based out of Brown University, this program teaches students how to incorporate transformative justice in their student organizations and also to design, coordinate and support formal transformative justice processes in response to interpersonal harm.

› **BAY AREA TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE COLLECTIVE**—this collective engages in accountability processes in response to a range of harms, including serious incidents of harm, without relying on police, prosecutors, or the court system. Participation is entirely voluntary.

› **SPRING UP**—this group is a multimedia artist collective that prevents and responds to gender-based violence with consent education and transformative justice. One of their many offerings is a four-month class on Transformative Justice for Gender Based Violence for local community members to explore responses that do not involve punitive measures.



### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

You might be asking what the alternative is to police when serious crimes occur like murder or sex offenses, and how alternatives like these will prevent crime and protect communities.

**First**, police are reactive. When people call the police, it is generally after something has happened. The existence of police does not necessarily prevent crime, nor does their intervention often create resolutions that encourage true accountability, make victims/survivors whole, or heal communities. **Second**, adopting alternatives like the ones mentioned above should not be delayed to find alternatives to police that completely solve the issues of serious crime when serious crime is a small percentage of all crimes committed. **Third**, innovative programs are currently being utilized, like transformative justice processes, to try to address serious and violent crime without the intervention of the state. Though some of these programs are still works-in-progress, they show that it may be possible to apply transformative justice approaches even in those instances. **Finally**, if the government shifts its focus and invests in prevention strategies like housing, education, and healthcare, it is reasonable to expect that acts of violence would decrease.

This is a unique moment in United States history as a majority of people are thinking hard about the roles of police in the community. Americans have challenged themselves to think creatively, beyond police reform efforts, about how money and resources can be moved away from law enforcement to other areas. The approaches and programs highlighted here are a few of many possibilities for what the future can hold in a world in which public and community safety are reimaged.



## ENDNOTES

- 1 “Law enforcement spending” includes the police department, sheriff medical examiner-coroner department, probation, and corrections. Kate Hamaji et al., *Freedom to Thrive: Reimagining Safety & Security in Our Communities* NEW YORK: CENTER FOR POPULAR DEMOCRACY (2017), <https://populardemocracy.org/sites/default/files/Freedom%20To%20Thrive%2C%20Higher%20Res%20Version.pdf>.
- 2 Alex H. Kral & Peter J. Davidson, *Addressing the Nation’s Opioid Epidemic: Lessons from an Unsanctioned Supervised Injection Site in the U.S.*, *AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PREVENTATIVE MEDICINE* (August 08, 2017), [https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797\(17\)30316-1/fulltext](https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797(17)30316-1/fulltext).
- 3 Jennifer Ng et al., *Does Evidence Support Supervised Injection Sites?*, 63 *CAN. FAM. PHYSICIAN MÉDECIN DE FAMILLE CANADIEN* 11, 866 (2017).
- 4 Eberhard Schatz & Marie Nougier, *Drug Consumption Rooms Evidence and Practice*, *INTERNATIONAL DRUG POLICY CONSORTIUM* (June 2012), [http://fileserv.idpc.net/library/IDPC-Briefing-Paper\\_Drug-consumption-rooms.pdf](http://fileserv.idpc.net/library/IDPC-Briefing-Paper_Drug-consumption-rooms.pdf).
- 5 THE AMA PRESS CTR., *AMA, AMA Wants New Approaches To Combat Synthetic and Injectable Drugs*, *AMA* (June 12, 2017), <https://www.ama-assn.org/press-center/press-releases/ama-wants-new-approaches-combat-synthetic-and-injectable-drugs>.
- 6 One study showed that 93% of guests at the Living Room did not go to the emergency room later for their crisis. At the time of the study, the Living Room also only cost IL \$269 per guest (versus \$2900 on average to go to the ER). Michelle Heyland et al., *The Living Room, a Community Crisis Respite Program: Offering People in Crisis an Alternative to Emergency Departments*, *GLOBAL JOURNAL OF COMMUNITY PHYCOLOGY PRACTICE*, <https://www.gjcpp.org/en/article.php?issue=15&article=74> (last visited June 12, 2020).
- 7 It should be noted that Good Samaritan laws exist in some states to protect bystanders who render aid in emergency situations from civil liability and to encourage bystanders to intervene in emergencies. Since these laws generally vary by state, communities contemplating intervention programs should consider how Good Samaritan laws may need to change to adapt to the types of programs listed here.
- 8 Danielle Purifoy et al., *Durham Beyond Policing Coalition: Proposal for a Community-Led Safety and Wellness Task Force* *DURHAM BEYOND POLICING*, 25-27, <https://durhambeyondpolicing.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Durham-Beyond-Policing-Budget-Proposal-2019-2020.pdf> (Last visited June 15, 2020).
- 9 Anna V. Smith, *There’s Already an Alternative to Calling the Police: A 31-Year-Old Program in Eugene, Oregon, Is A Model in De-Escalating Situations That Could End With Law Enforcement Violence* *HIGH COUNTRY NEWS* (June 11, 2020), <https://www.hcn.org/issues/52.7/public-health-theres-already-an-alternative-to-calling-the-police#:~:text=Mobile%2C%20community%2Dbased%20crisis%20programs,Streets%20—%20in%20Eugene%2C%20Oregon>.
- 10 While projects like OPP highlight that community members can learn these skills, it should be emphasized that these skills should not come at the expense of providing resources to enhance ambulance/EMT response in low-income communities and communities of color, which do not rely on police interaction to access.
- 11 As one example, as part of its medical interventions work, OPP has proposed the development of a digital app or other system to provide users with up-to-date information on health resources in Oakland and basic how-to information on wound care.
- 12 Mia Mingus, *Transformative Justice: A Brief Description* *TRANSFORM HARM*, <https://transformharm.org/transformative-justice-a-brief-description/> (last visited June 15, 2020).