



**REIMAGINING
PUBLIC
SAFETY:
SECOND
CONVENING
REPORT**

JANUARY 2021

INTRODUCTION¹

On January 22, 2021, the Justice Collaboratory at Yale Law School and the Policing Project at New York University School of Law hosted the second virtual convening in a series to reimagine public safety in the United States. Our goal was to better understand how police view their public safety function and reimagining public safety, benefits of and hurdles to implementing alternative approaches, the role of other stakeholders in achieving public safety, and recommendations for how to improve outcomes on the ground.

For three hours, the working group discussed obstacles, necessary changes, and components of a path to achieving a just and holistic vision of public safety. This convening followed a similar conversation with advocates, community leaders, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers that took place in October 2020. Our convening operated under a modified Chatham House Rule. As a result, we do not attribute any particular viewpoints in this report to any particular individual. Furthermore, this report reflects our overall discussion rather than any full consensus on the part of participants.

The Justice Collaboratory and the Policing Project recognize that many of the challenges highlighted in this summary are familiar, which is why our conversation was geared toward identifying both solutions and processes for implementing change and, importantly, identifying hurdles and ways to overcome them. Our work here is one contribution in a space where many are working. We hope that this summary of police perspectives will help practitioners and communities in their efforts to meet this moment; it will inform our own work moving forward.

WHAT DOES DEFUND/RPS MEAN?

The first hour of discussion focused on understanding police perspectives on the ‘defund the police’ movement that emerged nationwide last summer. Responses were varied. Some highlighted challenges stemming from the lack of uniform definitions or policy platforms, while others saw the movement as raising awareness and expressing broader frustration with police treatment of communities of color and failed reform efforts of the past. Consensus emerged around many of the same points that community advocates and national activists identified during the October 2020 convening.

Police have become a panacea for a range of social issues they are ill-equipped to handle; this mismatch can lead to tension, mistrust, and disproportionate and excessive uses of force or arrests. To reduce harm, participants agreed that the current demands on policing must change. Shifting responsibilities to other social services agencies and improving training would benefit officers and communities alike. Others pointed out that given the pandemic-induced economic downturn, many police departments will have no choice but to determine how to maintain

¹ Written by Benjamin Heller and Lauren Spiegel

service with a smaller budget. All agreed that communities need to engage in an exercise to define public safety for themselves and determine what aspects of public safety services should be assigned to police, or to others, rather than assuming from the beginning that law enforcement officers will be the primary stewards of community safety.

Underpinning the entire discussion was an acknowledgment that police, and all government stakeholders, must confront issues of systemic racism that affect both institutional- and individual-level responses on a daily basis.

WHAT COULD REIMAGINED PUBLIC SAFETY LOOK LIKE?

The second hour consisted of small breakout discussions to reimagine the role of police in public safety. Groups focused on what reimagining could look like in practice and what will be necessary to achieve a reimagined state, both in the short- and medium-term. They urged reformers to move beyond a “checklist” approach to right-sizing the police function. Because systemic biases are prevalent across a range of human service institutions, replacing a police officer with a social worker does not guarantee a reduction in bias or even in the police footprint. An “alternative” responder steeped in the same institutional and cultural biases may unconsciously perceive certain situations as unsafe because of the neighborhood in which they take place or misconceptions about the individuals involved. If these responders request police reinforcement, they may perpetuate the same harms that can come from a police-first response model.

Many participants emphasized throughout the conversation that reimagining public safety must be a community-led and community-centered endeavor. Communities know their own public safety needs better than anyone else; providing them with the space and structure to articulate those needs, and what role police ought to play in addressing those needs, will help ensure that any future public safety apparatus focuses on the right activities and achieves what communities see as authentic justice.

Participants also highlighted repeatedly that elected officials and other government leaders must be at the table for a reimagining effort to succeed. Ultimately, they determine resource allocation and shape most major policy changes and decisions. Although police leaders are important stakeholders, they reiterated that their jobs are shaped by demands not only from mayors and city managers, but from the public as well. Changing the police function may require a realignment of societal expectations 24/7 immediate government response to a range of issues, as well as the use of coercive state authority.

Participants recognized that a true reinvention of public safety in the U.S. will take decades to achieve, but they urged immediate action and cautioned against purely theoretical approaches. There was broad enthusiasm amongst police leaders and other stakeholders to participate in reform and reimagining efforts. Given the pressing demand for harm reduction and the medium- and long-term requirements of a reimagined system, we present highlights from the conversation

with the understanding that some of these items are relatively straightforward, while others may take years.

1. **Reduce immediate harms:** There is an urgent need to determine how the police footprint can be reduced today, not just years into the future. Simultaneously, the quality of police services must be improved through better training.
2. **Advocate for reforms with a range of elected and government officials:** Ultimately where most policy and budgetary power sits is not with police leadership but with city leaders including mayors and city councilmembers.
3. **Address systemic racism:** Systemic racism is present in many government agencies, not just policing, but institutions and fields included in the “alternative” response discussion. If this issue is not directly confronted, it will undermine reform efforts and obstruct advances in public safety for communities.
4. **Empower communities to define public safety and how it is achieved:** It is critical that policing agencies, elected officials, and others create meaningful forums for communities to shape what public safety looks like going forward. This does not mean token community engagements, but a realignment and centering of community voices at every step of a reimagining process. A broader set of stakeholders need to be involved as well, including social service providers, first responders, school officials, and community-based organizations.
5. **Delineate the role of police:** There is agreement that police are asked to do too much, but there has not been a systematic examination of what they should do in a reimagined system. Their role needs to be clearly defined so that new training, recruitment, and other efforts are goal-aligned.
6. **Create national standards for police:** The level of education and training provided to officers is at odds with the responsibilities they are assigned. Policing services need to be professionalized in more meaningful ways, including certification. Lawyers, doctors, and teachers have standards and consequences for violating them; policing has no such infrastructure. A national body could assemble input from communities, police officers, other first responders, and experts to set minimum requirements and certification standards for law enforcement across the country. Training requirements and educational curricula should be based on properly ensuring officers can meet these requirements.
7. **Identify funding mechanisms:** There are funding needs for alternative approaches and efficiency gains to be had by reassigning particular functions to non-sworn civilian responders. Activities such as filing traffic reports, responding to burglar alarms, and filing stolen property reports for cell phone companies take up significant police resources, which could be reassigned to free up time and money to approach other aspects of public safety differently.
8. **Test new ideas:** The support systems that undergird public safety are complex and slow to change. To make meaningful progress, new approaches must be tested and evaluated. These new approaches need to be thoughtful, but ultimately change will only happen by doing. Participants signaled broad interest and willingness to be involved in trying out new approaches.

OBSTACLES TO REIMAGINING PUBLIC SAFETY

Although participants were very supportive of a range of reform efforts and demonstrated continued interest in engaging in such processes, they agreed on the need to address several important obstacles that could undermine efforts to reimagine public safety if ignored.

Some participants questioned whether thinking about the role of police as a starting point misses an opportunity for more comprehensive change. Inherent in the notion of law enforcement is the idea of enforcement, which should be the tool of last resort for maintaining public safety. Rather than starting with defining the specific role of police, it may be prudent to think about what other services communities can put in place regarding prevention, de-escalation, and mediation so that arrest is a tool used only in extreme situations.

Participants highlighted the following four key challenges to reimaging public safety:

1. **Societal expectations about public safety:** Participants observed that many of the challenges to reform are inherent in how society views the role of police in public safety. Legally, law enforcement officers are the only delegates of coercive authority on the street. Much of their power stems from this designation; participants were unsure as to whether members of the public would comply with requests from people who lack official state authority to engage in coercion. Because this authority can be problematic, participants agreed it should not be designated broadly to other or new types of responders but wondered how effective those responders would be without it. A related challenge is the extent to which **officials, business owners, and other community stakeholders continue to rely on the police to resolve non-police issues**. One participant gave an example in which the policing agency in their city announced that it would end enforcement actions against homeless encampments. However, elected officials and business owners have continued to insist on police clearing out these encampments, invalidating the efforts of the policing agency to remove enforcement from the equation.
2. **Willingness of non-police responders to take on policing work:** Some participants cautioned that alternative responders may not be willing or able to navigate high-risk situations without a police presence. Further, most non-police responders currently do not have the capacity to respond to calls for service around-the-clock and may not be interested in implementing such a model of service provision.
3. **Implicit bias extends beyond law enforcement:** Participants had concerns about the fact that implicit bias is not unique to law enforcement officers. Call takers, dispatchers, and non-police responders must address the implicit and explicit biases in their organizations. Otherwise, the status quo may persist in communities of color while new “alternative” responders are dispatched to whiter, more affluent neighborhoods.
4. **Willingness of elected officials to rethink public safety:** Historically, elected officials have been reticent to invest in resources to address underlying needs such as addiction, mental health, healthcare, or education. Instead, they have invested in police.

NEXT STEPS: TURNING IDEAS INTO PRACTICE

This convening, as well as the one that preceded it, are the first of several related initiatives to provide communities and the institutions that serve them with the context and practical tools to navigate the complex process of reimagining public safety in a holistic, effective, and community-driven way. The Policing Project is currently working on a comprehensive framework to guide communities step-by-step through the process of rethinking their public safety systems. In the meantime, convening participants identified several actions to bear in mind as jurisdictions start to focus on delivering change.

1. **Take immediate action:** 2021 should be about implementation and execution. Gone are the days in which we can continue to publish papers and have conversations; now, we need to put our thoughts into action. We need guidelines and national standards, not just theoretical blueprints.
2. **Create a framework and recommendations:** Put together a framework or set of recommendations to share with the field and with the new Administration to determine how best to move forward with conversations about public safety. Creating the structure to support those conversations will enable the Administration to fund them. It also will avoid every jurisdiction across the United States trying to reinvent the wheel on its own.
3. **Create a central repository of best practices:** We need a central repository that can vet and send out research and best practice. The United Kingdom's College of Policing, for example, does this well, as does the United States fire service's National Fire Protection Association or the National Institute of Justice's CrimeSolutions portal.
4. **Include community members:** Community members need to lead the change to ensure that whatever supplants the current system of policing addresses community needs.
5. **Include elected officials:** Municipal decision-makers and those controlling the money need to be in the room.