



OPTIONS IN TIME OF CRISIS Diverting Law Enforcement

by

Crime and Public Safety Immersion Team 2021

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Instruction

We learn from an early age to respond to a variety of incidents by contacting the police. Because of this ingrained societal norm, law enforcement has historically responded to a wide range of complex issues, from violence to mental health crises, school discipline, drug abuse, and more.

Not only are officers responding to situations that they lack the training to handle, but too often, these interactions lead to tragic outcomes, especially for Black and Brown individuals, those with mental health issues or physical disabilities, and other underserved populations. Compounding the problem is the enduring legacies of systemic racism, which promote excessive force, racial profiling, and rewards both increased incarceration and harsher punishments.

Journey

Our 9-person immersion team comprised of individuals from various backgrounds, experiences, and areas of expertise arrived at recommendations after careful consideration, conversation and reflection. Together, we engaged in revealing, informative interviews with local leaders in the fields of law enforcement, mental health, social welfare advocacy and law.

Each conversation revealed not only a widening gap between law enforcement. The communities they are committed to serving, but a disturbing and disproportionate impact on Black and Brown communities, who, according to the expert analysis of many of our interviewees, were chronically over-policed and systematically disenfranchised.

We looked critically at data, both local and national, and conducted in-depth research.

Findings

We became aware of and discussed CAHOOTS, the 31-year-old program in Eugene, Oregon which provides mental health focused first response services, answering 17% of the local police's calls, providing diversion from law enforcement, reducing violent interaction with officers and saving the city and county money.

Through this immersion process, we learned that while Black people only make up 48 percent of Richmond's population, they account for 65 percent of all contacts with law enforcement. Further, we discovered that as of 2019, Black people made up about 90 percent of traffic stops for warrant violations, nearly 87 percent of stops for driving without a valid driver's license, 78 percent trespassing, 76 percent of disorderly conduct reports and 71 percent of "suspicious persons".

When considered alongside the deep distrust between law enforcement and the people they serve, and an overall lack of officer accountability, we are witnessing the unfortunate results of marginalized, over-policed communities clashing with an overburdened and disconnected police force.

Our interviews pinpointed the expansive and all-encompassing issues facing Black and Brown communities in the context of law enforcement. The data confirmed this unfortunate reality that pulled from our unique backgrounds, geographic, professional, and racial diversity and the trust we had developed as a team to come to our policy proposal.

Recommendations

To address these widespread, ongoing and seemingly intractable issues, we propose establishing a robust diversion program, based on the CAHOOTS model from Eugene, Oregon, that would redirect calls from police to a separate department for the response. This program results in fewer interactions with law enforcement, better opportunities to connect those in need with essential services and saving taxpayer dollars in the process. We also strongly endorse the institution of a diverse, empowered citizen oversight board to ensure officer accountability and work in concert with the diversion program.

A robust, city-wide diversion program, coupled with an empowered civilian review board, cannot and should not be understood as a panacea. There are deep, ingrained and long-standing racial, social and economic inequities built into the very fiber of our communities that have been present since our nation's founding. No one program will solve these historical wrongs, but we believe our approach represents a start. It is a substantive step in the right direction, built upon a shared faith in future progress, the enduring resilience of our communities and an abiding belief that the arc of the moral universe indeed bends toward justice.

Resources

Interviews

Ezra Bonner, Person with Lived Experience Travis Christian, Chief of Police, City of Petersburg Michael Herring, Former Richmond Commonwealth Attorney Antionette V. Irving, Sheriff, Richmond Jeffrey Katz, Chief of Police, Chesterfield Travis Mines, Person with Lived Experience	Carol Olson, Manager, Project Empower, VCU Megan Rollins, CEO, Boaz and Ruth, Inc. Shannon Rivera, Person with Lived experience Shannon Taylor, Commonwealth Attorney Henrico County
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Online Sources

- <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/criminal-justice/news/2020/07/16/487721/assessing-state-police-reform/>
- <https://www.eugene-or.gov/4508/CAHOOTS>
- <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/>
- https://richmond.com/news/local/crime/richmond-police-data-indicate-racial-disparities-in-contacts-with-public-activists-call-for-change/article_c16e43fa-53f1-5a6f-ba64-b37e3cfce3e6.html
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- <https://vpm.org/news/articles/3470/data-show-disproportionate-contacts-between-richmond-police-and-african>
- <https://whitebirdclinic.org/what-is-cahoots/>