



The Office of Neighborhood Safety

How Governments Can Support Community-Driven Solutions

By Betsy Pearl | October 15, 2020

In 2020, the United States witnessed a series of high-profile acts of police violence against the Black community, from the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor to the shooting of Jacob Blake. Amid the ensuing nationwide protests, elected officials and the public began to seriously reconsider the role of law enforcement in American society.

Policing has taken on an outsized role in the United States. The number of police officers nationwide has ballooned over the past several decades, yielding only modest impacts on crime rates at best.¹ Law enforcement is increasingly called to respond to a broad swath of issues in society, from resolving noise complaints to reversing overdoses to preventing crime. As the footprint of policing has grown, more and more Americans have been unnecessarily arrested and swept into the criminal justice system. The expansion of policing has had profound consequences for Black communities in particular, who are too often unjustly targeted for arrests, incarceration, and aggressive enforcement tactics.

Now, the debate around the appropriate scope of policing has captured the national attention. The movement to shrink the footprint of the police is gaining steam, building on years of work from grassroots campaigns and local advocates who have called for investments in holistic approaches to public safety. As cities begin to rethink their own approaches, local governments have the opportunity to lay the foundation for community-driven interventions to succeed.

A new Center for American Progress report—“Beyond Policing: Investing in Offices of Neighborhood Safety”—offers a road map for cities to sustainably shift toward a community-driven approach to public safety, starting by establishing a civilian Office of Neighborhood Safety (ONS).² Unlike traditional public safety agencies, an ONS is situated outside the justice system and staffed entirely by civilians. It serves as a hub for nonpunitive public safety solutions, which might include violence interruption, job readiness programs, civilian first responders, transformative mentoring, and others. City officials are uniquely positioned to ensure these community-based interventions receive sustained support by embedding these interventions into the fabric of government, elevating them to the same level of importance as policing.

As cities consider launching their own ONSs, local leaders should account for the following considerations:

- **Engaging credible messengers:** When preparing to launch an ONS, local leaders should consider how they want to engage credible messengers—community members who are able to connect with high-risk individuals based on their shared backgrounds and life experiences. Some cities have hired credible messengers directly into full-time employment with the municipal government, whereas others contract with nonprofit organizations to provide services in neighborhoods across the city. Regardless of model, cities should support the professionalization of credible messengers. Their work is difficult and potentially dangerous, and cities should invest in the professional development and support they need to succeed.
- **Creating flexibility:** City officials should recognize that community-based interventions differ from traditional government programming, and the structure and function of the ONS should reflect these differences. Cities must consider creating flexibility for ONSs to operate outside the regulations that were developed to fit traditional government agencies. For example, an ONS must be permitted to recruit job candidates from outside the civil service sector and to hire employees with criminal records.
- **Promoting accountability:** ONSs should be held accountable for achieving meaningful improvements in public safety. City leadership must set clear and realistic outcomes and goals and then hold ONS leadership accountable for meeting these milestones over the specified period of time. City leaders should work with ONSs to set realistic public safety goals, using the evidence base from other jurisdictions as a guide.
- **Creating a community-driven agenda:** Cities should consider creating a permanent pathway for residents to engage with the ONS and shape the development and implementation of public safety policies. One model for institutionalizing the community's role in policymaking is NeighborhoodStat, an initiative operated by the New York City mayor's Office of Neighborhood Safety. NeighborhoodStat is a joint problem-solving process that empowers residents of high-crime public housing developments to work directly with city agencies to craft a public safety agenda that is grounded in the community's needs.
- **Budgeting for community-based interventions:** Cities should make a sustained investment in their ONS, ideally through the municipal budgeting process. Some jurisdictions have established new taxes to create dedicated revenues streams for community-based interventions. Jurisdictions in which marijuana sales are legal may also consider earmarking a portion of tax revenue to support community safety initiatives. Other options for funding community-based safety interventions include limiting the growth of the police department's budget, or shrinking the department's budget altogether, and redirecting funds toward community safety priorities.

The ONS model represents a powerful tool for institutionalizing community-based interventions. By establishing an ONS, local leaders can take the first step toward shrinking the footprint of policing and making a meaningful investment in public safety beyond policing.

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Endnotes

1 ¹ Oliver Roeder, Lauren-Brooke Eisen, and Julia Bowling, "What Caused the Crime Decline?" (New York: Brennan Center for Justice, 2015), available at https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/2019-08/Report_What_Caused_The_Crime_Decline.pdf.

2 Betsy Pearl, "Beyond Policing: Investing in Offices of Neighborhood Safety" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2020), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/?p=491545>.