

Summary

AFTER FALLING STEADILY FOR DECADES, the rate of violent crime in the United States rose again in 2015 and 2016. Interactions between citizens and police too often end in violence. People are increasingly worried about safety in their communities.

Many Americans are concerned something is going on with violence in communities, law enforcement, and race that is undermining the national ideals of safety and justice for all.

It is unclear what is driving this rise in violence, but bias and distrust on all sides appear to be making the problem worse. Citizens and police need goodwill and cooperation in order to ensure safety and justice. For many people of color, the sense that they are being treated unfairly by law enforcement—and even being targeted by police—is palpable. Others say police officers are being blamed for the actions of a few and that the dangers, stress, and violence law enforcement officers face in their work is underestimated. Still others hold that if ways to defuse potentially violent interactions between citizens and police are not found, we will never be able to create safe communities in which all people can thrive and feel welcomed and comfortable.

How should communities increase safety while at the same time ensuring justice? This issue guide is a framework for citizens to work through these important questions together. It offers three different options for deliberation, each rooted in different, widely shared concerns and different ways of looking at the problem. The resulting conversation may be difficult, as it will necessarily involve tensions between things people hold deeply valuable, such as a collective sense of security, fair treatment for all, and personal freedom. No one option is the “correct” one; each includes drawbacks and trade-offs that we will have to face if we are to make progress on this issue. They are not the only options available. They are presented as a starting point for deliberation.



Option 1:

Enforce the Law Together

Expand policing while strengthening community-police partnerships.

THIS OPTION SAYS THAT OUR TOP PRIORITY should be finding ways for communities and police to work together to stop violence of all kinds. Most Americans want safer streets and communities. Through neighborhood watch programs and community policing, citizens and police should identify sources of violence and work together to stop it.

But—more police officers visible in the community may create the sense that people are living in a police state. Some people may take the law into their own hands.

EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE

Communities can hire and deploy significantly more police officers of diverse races and train them in community policing.

Beef up and expand the use of neighborhood crime watch programs.

Require police officers to live in the communities they serve.

More citizens could fulfill their own obligations to the criminal justice system by reporting crimes and serving as witnesses and jurors.

Train more people in the responsible use and carrying of firearms, and enact more “stand your ground” laws.

What else?

TRADE-OFFS TO CONSIDER

This could create the oppressive feel of a police state.

This might erode community trust and neighbors could end up targeting people based on racial, ethnic, or religious biases.

Some cities might find it harder to attract and hire new officers.

Many people don’t want to participate in a system that they see as biased and unfairly burdensome.

People may act as vigilantes.

What’s the trade-off?

This option proposes that we put more trust in law enforcement and neighborhood watch efforts to ensure safety for all. How can we ensure that police officers will also observe the law? Are we confident that ordinary citizens can handle increased responsibility?

Option 2:

Apply the Law Fairly

Remove injustices, reform inequities, and improve accountability.

THIS OPTION SAYS THAT ONLY BY ADDRESSING injustice and bias in law enforcement and the courts can safety for all be achieved. Currently, the law is not enforced or applied fairly. From dealing with the way people of color are treated on the streets to unequal sentencing in the courts, widespread reforms are needed in order to restore trust and reduce violence.

But—this may make it harder for police officers and judges to do their jobs.

EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE

Limit the use of traffic stops and “stop and frisk” by police officers, and review other practices where racial profiling could come into play.

Cities could invest more resources in schools in communities with higher poverty and crime rates.

Require all law enforcement officers and court officials, including judges, to participate in implicit bias training.

Using body cameras and smartphones, police and community members can document interactions, with videos made publicly available and independent prosecutors appointed to increase accountability.

Reduce rates of arrest for minor drug and other non-violent crimes, especially in communities of color, and address disparities in sentencing for people of color.

What else?

TRADE-OFFS TO CONSIDER

This would be taking away some of the tools police officers use to prevent crime before people are hurt.

This would mean that tax dollars would go to communities where there is greater need, rather than being distributed equally.

This may make it more difficult for officers to make necessary split-second life and death decisions out on the street.

This could put privacy and trust at risk and lead members of the community to continually second-guess the police based on partial evidence. Some police officers may feel themselves targeted by the legal system.

Some criminals would receive less punishment than they currently do. Community members would have to be willing to accept more repeat, nonviolent crimes being committed.

What’s the trade-off?

This option argues that inequity and bias are at the root of much of the violence the nation is experiencing. Can becoming aware of these biases actually change behavior? Is police reform enough to adequately ensure all people feel safe in their communities?

Option 3:

De-escalate and Prevent Violence

Reduce the culture of violence and take direct actions to disrupt conflict.

THIS OPTION SAYS THAT VIOLENCE itself is the most urgent threat and should be directly addressed. We should commit to the de-escalation of violence, by police and in the larger society. The police are often the first responders to mental health, domestic, and drug abuse crises that they are not always trained to handle. We should provide more mental illness and substance abuse treatment so there are fewer such episodes.

But—this might put police officers and citizens in danger more often.

EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE

Community members can disrupt gang activity and stop violence before it occurs.

States and cities can invest in more mental health treatment programs and hospital beds to reduce violence both against and by those with mental illness.

Local governments could sponsor gun buy-back programs to reduce the number of guns in circulation.

Cities could stop allowing police to use military hardware, especially for crowd control.

Train all police officers in de-escalation techniques and enforce stricter use-of-force rules.

What else?

TRADE-OFFS TO CONSIDER

Community members could put themselves and others at risk.

This could result in more people being confined in mental hospitals for long periods.

Those likely to participate in these programs are probably not the ones using guns for illegal purposes.

Police officers might be underequipped or outgunned in the worst situations, such as active shooter incidents.

Police officers' lives—and the lives of bystanders—could be endangered in some situations.

What's the trade-off?

This option says situations often unnecessarily escalate into violent confrontations. Do we expect too much of law enforcement? Is it reasonable to expect that citizen interventions can reduce violence?