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# Policing

## What Should We Do to Ensure Fair Treatment and Keep Neighborhoods Safe for Everyone?

**IN COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE UNITED STATES, people are rethinking police practices. The goal: to treat all people fairly while still enforcing the law.**

In 2020, the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Rayshard Brooks caused nationwide protests as many people expressed their concerns about the unjust treatment of Black Americans. All three died during encounters with police, and their names joined a lengthy list: Eric Garner in New York City in 2014, Freddie Gray in Baltimore in 2015, Philando Castile in St. Paul and Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge in 2016, to name only a few.

All Americans want to feel safe, both from crime and police misconduct. While the overall crime rate continues to decline, in 2020 alone FBI data showed a 30 percent increase in murders, and gun violence took nearly 20,000 American lives, the most in more than 20 years. Experts point to a range of possible reasons, including economic and psychological stress from the pandemic, a surge in gun purchases, changes in incarceration policies, and possibly changes in policing.

In our society, people know that policing is necessary, but many police chiefs and officers want more accountability and fairness.

Although federal, state, and local lawmakers have taken some steps to review policing policies and reform police departments, crucial decisions still have to be made. Making these decisions will require sustained focus and the involvement of community members, policymakers, and law enforcement professionals.

While some Americans, especially White Americans, have mostly had positive encounters with police, many people of color distrust and fear law enforcement officers because of a long history of violence and discrimination. While experiences and overall expectations may vary, complex questions remain, including:

- What should be the top priority—increasing police accountability, addressing racial bias among officers, or rethinking how police and communities respond to nonviolent, “victimless” disturbances?
- What law enforcement functions should be most valued and enhanced? What aspects should be eliminated or rethought?
- What kinds of unintended consequences might result from the ideas we discuss? Are there risks and trade-offs to keep in mind?
- Are nonviolent crimes really harmless to individuals and communities? What happens if these non-violent acts go unaddressed and unpunished?
- Change takes time. What changes are urgent? Which can be made over time?
- What roles should community members, law enforcement, officeholders, social services, educators, businesses, and others play as we work to enhance and improve policing? What should these groups do differently?

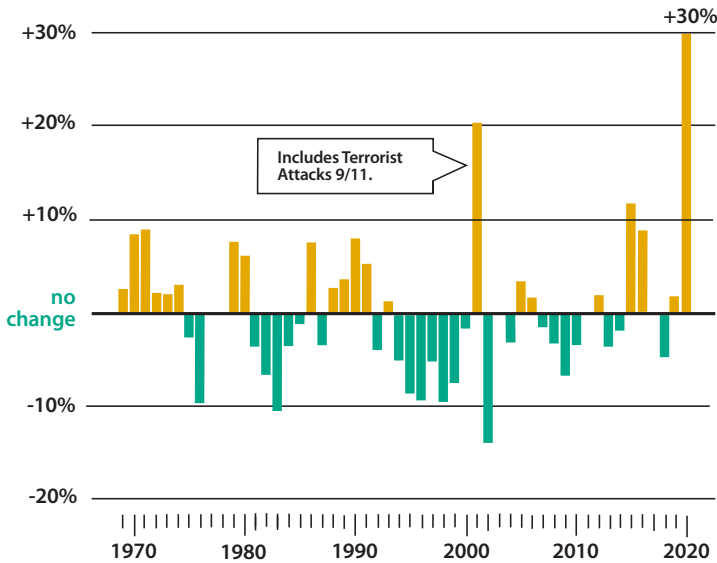
This issue framework presents three broad options for rethinking police practices, each suggesting a different set of reforms and different ways of thinking about how to keep communities safe. As with all ideas for change, some of these actions may involve risks and trade-offs, while others might effectively address the problem. But the ideas outlined here are just a starting point. They are meant to spur deliberation on an issue that increasingly concerns Americans of all ages and all races. Those taking part in these forums can consider the options and actions listed here as well as modify, reject, or add to them.

As with most difficult issues, sound judgments depend on taking the time to consider the facts and listen to people with different experiences and perspectives.

***What should we do to ensure fair treatment and safe neighborhoods in our communities?***

## US Murder Rate Rose by Nearly a Third in 2020

% change in annual US murder rate, per 100,000 people



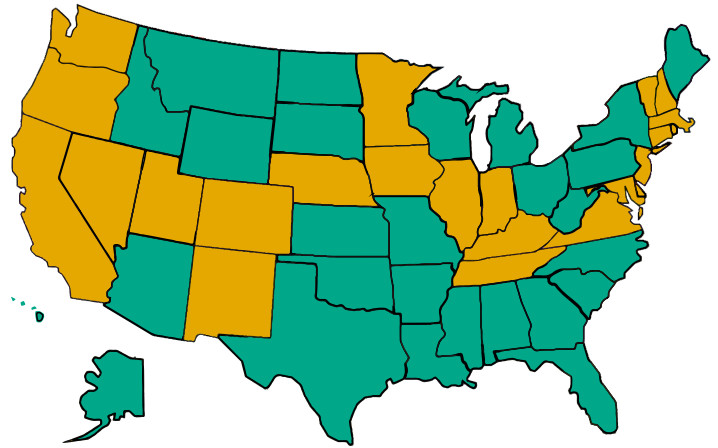
NOTE: 2020 Data is provisional. While the US murder rate rose 30% in 2020, it remained below the levels of earlier decades.

Source: Pew Research Center, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

## Policing Changes in States

States that made policy changes in policing, including banning neck restraints, requiring body cameras, and mandating officers intervene if they see fellow officers using excessive force.

■ Made policy changes in policing since May 2020



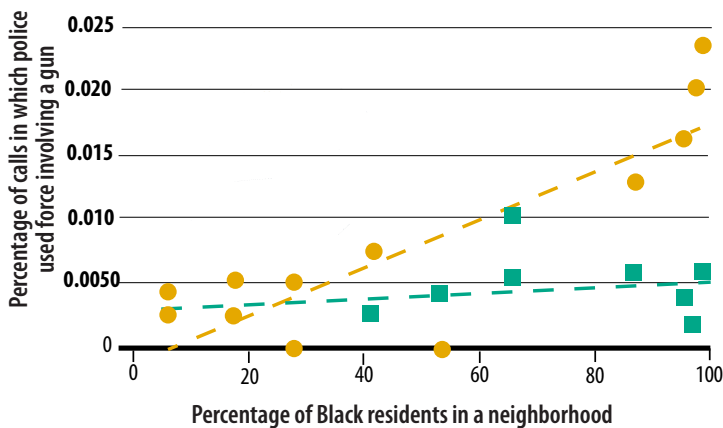
Source: Pew Research Center, National Conference of State Legislatures

## Gun Use by White and Black Officers

White officers more likely to use a gun than Black officers and more likely to do so in predominantly Black neighborhoods.

● White Officers

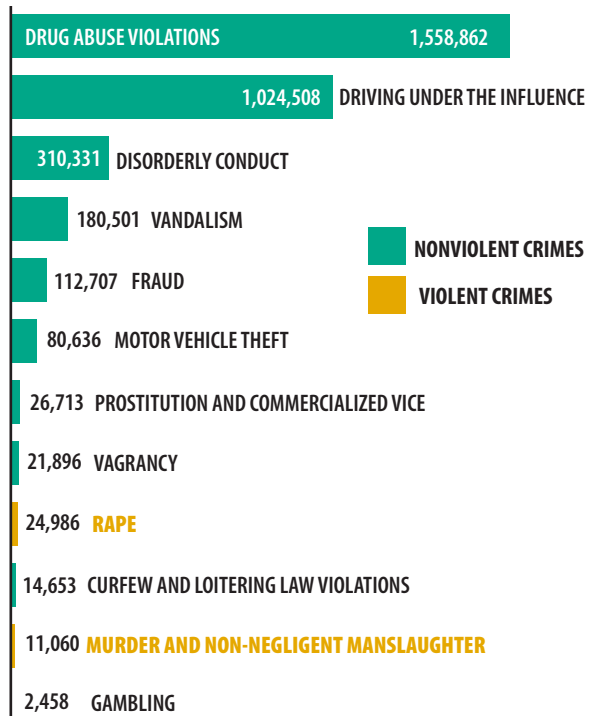
■ Black Officers



Responses to 1.2 million 911 emergency calls show the use of force involving a gun across neighborhoods, according to their racial composition.

Source: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2020. (Mark Hoekstra and Carly Will Sloan, "Does Race Matter for Police Use of Force? Evidence from 911 Calls")

## Arrests for Selected Nonviolent/Violent Crime in the United States



Source: FBI (2019)

## Option One: Make rigorous accountability the top priority

**This option says: We all want to live in law-abiding communities, but to ensure safety and justice for all, we need well-trained, thoughtful, and accountable police officers who do not rely solely on force and intimidation and treat everyone respectfully.** We need to make all officers more answerable for their conduct and hold them to the highest standards. We should rethink the ways in which police officers are hired, trained, supervised, and disciplined. And we need to ensure that officers who are abusive do not continue to police the streets.

### A Primary Drawback

**Very few of us understand the dangers and complications officers face daily, and constant second-guessing and monitoring may lead the police to be less vigilant than we need them to be. We should enforce the accountability measures we have now, but there is no need to keep adding to them.**

Things we might do	Drawbacks
Make police disciplinary records available in a public database so journalists and community members have access to them and officers with repeated complaints won't be hired elsewhere.	Officers who are falsely accused and cleared of charges may have their careers ruined and be publicly and unfairly smeared.
Fire officers who fail to report suspected police misconduct; reward and promote those who do.	This could create an atmosphere of antagonism and snitching among officers who need to trust each other and work together. It could easily be misused for all sorts of reasons.
Create diverse, multiracial, and independent civilian review boards that can investigate complaints from the public and recommend an officer's removal if warranted.	Reviews of police behavior should be conducted by those who understand the job firsthand. Civilian boards can inject too much partisanship and emotion into the process.
Congress should broaden the ability for people to sue individual police officers for physical abuse and mental stress.	This may result in more frivolous lawsuits. Moreover, the threat of being sued could lead to officers being hesitant to act at crucial times.
Require police officers to wear body cameras, turn them on during every encounter with the public, and release the full recordings to the public when there are charges of police misconduct.	Body cameras do not automatically increase police accountability, or reduce the use of force by officers, and people are concerned about increased surveillance and invasions of privacy when sensitive moments are recorded and later made public.
<b>What else? What could we do, especially as a community?</b>	<b>What's the drawback if we do that?</b>

## Option Two: Make ending racial bias the top priority

**This option says: Law enforcement agencies, like other institutions, reflect this country's history of persistent racial discrimination and injustice.** Police violence and bullying, and routine suspicion of certain groups of people, are not confined to a few rogue officers. Law enforcement's traditions and operating assumptions tend to excuse White Americans and penalize those from other backgrounds. If we do not deal with widespread racial discrimination and biased thinking among police officers and the bias embedded in the way they do their jobs, abusive policing will continue.

### A Primary Drawback

**We should fire officers who abuse and mistreat citizens, but we shouldn't assume that most officers are racists. By stereotyping all officers and entire departments, we do a disservice to the officers who treat citizens with respect, support reforms, and work to end misconduct.**

Things we might do	Drawbacks
Overhaul police education programs to make training about bias, or racial prejudice, equally as important as weapons training so officers have the knowledge and skills necessary to successfully engage the communities they serve.	There are no guarantees or solid evidence that diversity, equity, and inclusion trainings change officer behaviors or department culture. Police are not responsible for solving social problems and training should focus on finding and arresting criminals.
Conduct background checks to determine if a potential officer has a history of displaying racial bias.	Racist feelings and discriminatory behaviors are sometimes unconscious or hidden and will not be discovered during a background check.
Require officers to live in the communities they serve so they develop respect for diverse residents and strong ties to all the people they serve.	This will limit the number of people entering policing, and unless we are willing to pay officers more, many won't be able to afford to live in the communities they serve.
Diversify the police force by recruiting and retaining officers of various backgrounds.	A diverse force will not automatically end racial bias or the mistreatment of certain marginalized groups at the hands of police.
Permit the U.S. Justice Department to investigate and take over police departments where there is a pattern of racist practices and racially biased enforcement.	Federal intervention can lead to a loss of local control or community oversight and it can strain the resources of local departments that have to meet court-approved benchmarks for accountability.
<b>What else? What could we do, especially as a community?</b>	<b>What's the drawback if we do that?</b>

## Option Three: Make avoiding violent encounters the top priority

**This option says: We have left it to the police to respond to social problems and have never fully considered whether there are better alternatives.** Studies show that nine out of 10 calls for service are for nonviolent encounters. Police are asked to deal with problems that go beyond what they should be responsible for and what they were trained to do. Many communities lack resources for addressing mental health crises, drug abuse cases, and domestic disputes, so these jobs fall to police. These nonviolent offenses are better addressed by skilled mental health advocates or sometimes members of the community. We should hire more social workers and community services officers to address social ills and nonviolent crime so police can focus on violent crime.

### A Primary Drawback

**Drug abuse, mental health problems, domestic disturbances, and civil infractions often escalate into violence, and, without backup support, the lives of counselors, social workers, and civil enforcement officers are threatened. We must recognize that armed police restore order in chaotic situations and without their presence being felt in neighborhoods many people may become victims of drug and gang violence, spousal abuse, and petty crime.**

Things we might do	Drawbacks
Increase training in de-escalation and teach officers to draw their guns less often.	With so many guns in our communities, this could put police officers and the public at greater risk.
Respond to domestic disturbances with teams of social workers, mental health professionals, and drug counselors who can get involved before situations escalate.	Domestic abuse is violent, and perpetrators should be reported to the authorities and arrested immediately.
Hire more unarmed public safety professionals, like parking enforcement officers or traffic wardens, to enforce traffic laws and other minor violations.	Without police involvement or the threat of arrest, potentially violent or volatile situations can endanger the lives of first responders.
Provide more counseling for law enforcement officers and other first responders to help them handle the pressures of the job.	Counseling is not a cure-all. The people who most need it often do not pursue it.
End arrests and ticketing for marijuana possession and other low-level offenses like prostitution, solicitation, trespassing, and public urination.	Over time this will lead to increased lawlessness and more unsafe public spaces in our communities.
<b>What else? What could we do, especially as a community?</b>	<b>What's the drawback if we do that?</b>

# About This Issue Advisory

PEOPLE IN MANY COMMUNITIES, both in and out of official positions, are rethinking how they approach public safety and policing. Deliberative forums on this issue will not be easy. Remember that the objective of these forums is to begin to work through tensions among security, fairness, and accountability.

In productive deliberation, people examine different options for addressing a difficult public problem. This issue advisory presents three such options and provides an alternative means of moving forward in order to avoid the polarizing rhetoric so common today.

Each option is based on a shared concern and poses a distinct strategy for addressing the problem. Equally important, each option presents the drawbacks or trade-offs inherent in each action.

## Ground Rules

- Focus on the options and actions we can take nationally and in our communities.
- Consider all options fairly.
- Listening is just as important as speaking.
- No one or two individuals should dominate.
- Maintain an open and respectful atmosphere.
- Everyone is encouraged to participate.

## Holding a Deliberative Forum

### 1. Introduction

Review ground rules.  
Introduce the issue.

### 2. Connect to Issue

Ask people to describe how the issue affects them, their families, or friends.

### 3. Consider Each Option

Consider each option one at a time.  
Allow equal time for each.

- What is attractive?
- What about the drawbacks?

### 4. Review and Reflect

Review the conversation as a group.

- What areas of common ground were apparent?
- What tensions and trade-offs were most difficult?
- Who else do we need to hear from?

Founded in 1927, the Kettering Foundation of Dayton, Ohio (with an office in Washington, DC), is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute that studies the public's role in democracy. It provides issue guides and other research for the National Issues Forums. For information about the Kettering Foundation, please visit [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org) or contact the foundation at 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459.



This issue advisory was prepared for the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation. National Issues Forums issue guides are used by civic and educational organizations interested in addressing public issues. These organizations use the books in locally initiated forums convened each year in hundreds of communities. Recent topics have included rebuilding the economy, immigration, health care, and mass shootings. For more information on the National Issues Forums, visit the website: [www.nifi.org](http://www.nifi.org).

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### Community Forum Worksheet

NOW THAT YOU'VE HAD a chance to participate in a forum on this issue, we'd like to know what you're thinking. Anonymous responses will be included in summary reports on the forums and in research to help us better understand how people are thinking about current issues.

For the following two statements, do you strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, or are you unsure about them?

- |   | Strongly Agree                 | Agree                         | Disagree                          | Strongly Disagree        | Not Sure                 |
|---|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Especially with the murder and violent crime rates increasing in cities in the US, we need more police officers on the streets.    | <input type="checkbox"/>       | <input type="checkbox"/>      | <input type="checkbox"/>          | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Most police officers are dedicated public servants; officers like the one who killed George Floyd are the exception, not the rule. | <input type="checkbox"/>       | <input type="checkbox"/>      | <input type="checkbox"/>          | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. In your own community, would you say there should be more, fewer, or about the same number of police officers?                     |                                |                               |                                   |                          |                          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> More   | <input type="checkbox"/> Fewer | <input type="checkbox"/> Same | <input type="checkbox"/> Not sure |                          |                          |

#### Here is a reminder of actions you discussed in your forums:

- a. Hire more unarmed public safety professionals, like parking enforcement officers or traffic wardens, to enforce traffic laws and other minor violations.
- b. Conduct background checks to determine if a potential officer has a history of displaying racial bias.
- c. Respond to domestic disturbances with teams of social workers, mental health professionals, and drug counselors who can get involved before situations escalate.
- d. Congress should broaden the ability for people to sue individual police officers for physical abuse and mental stress.
- e. Make police disciplinary records available in a public database so journalists and the community have access to them and officers with repeated complaints won't be hired elsewhere.
- f. End arrests and ticketing for marijuana possession and other low-level offenses like prostitution, solicitation, trespassing, and public urination.
- g. Fire officers who fail to report suspected police misconduct; reward and promote those who do.
- h. Permit the US Justice Department to investigate and take over police departments where there is a pattern of racist practices or racially biased enforcement.
- i. Require police officers to wear body cameras, turn them on during every encounter with the public, and release the full recordings to the public when there are charges of police misconduct.
- j. Increase training in de-escalation and teach officers to draw their guns less often.
- k. Provide more counseling for law enforcement officers and other first responders to help them handle the pressures of the job.
- l. Overhaul police education programs to make training about racial bias, or racial prejudice, equally as important as weapons training so officers have the knowledge and skills necessary to successfully engage the communities they serve.
- m. Create diverse, multiracial, and independent civilian review boards that can investigate complaints from the public and recommend an officer's removal if warranted.
- n. Diversify the police force by recruiting and retaining officers of various backgrounds.
- o. Require officers to live in the communities they serve so they develop respect for diverse residents and strong ties to all the people they serve.

4. Which THREE actions on the previous page (a-o) do you most strongly SUPPORT or consider most vital?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. Which THREE actions on the previous page (a-o) do you most strongly OPPOSE or consider least vital?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. Are there any actions above you still feel UNSURE about? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. What else could be done at the community, state, or national level to address this problem?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

8. Did you talk about aspects of the issue you hadn't considered before?

Yes

No

If so, please explain. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

9. Were there ideas or proposals that you tended to favor coming into the forum that you now have second thoughts about?

Yes

No

If so, please explain. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

10. Not including this forum, how many National Issues Forums have you attended?

0

1-3

4-6

7 or more

Not sure

11. Are you male or female?  Male  Female  Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

12. How old are you?

17 or younger

18-30

31-45

46-64

65 or older

13. Are you:  African American  Asian American  Hispanic or Latinx  Native American

White/Caucasian  Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

14. In what type of community do you live?  City/Urban  Suburban  Rural

15. What is your zip code? \_\_\_\_\_ What state do you live in? \_\_\_\_\_

16. What issue would you like to see covered in a future forum? \_\_\_\_\_

**Please give this form to the moderator, email to [forumreports@nifi.org](mailto:forumreports@nifi.org), or mail to: National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459. This worksheet is also available online at [www.nifi.org/questionnaires](http://www.nifi.org/questionnaires).**