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Seattle protest leaders call for defunding and dismantling police. What would that look like?

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*1 of 9 | Marty Patu-Jackson, front, head of Safe Passage, works to ensure safety in Rainier Beach without police. Team members behind her... (Alan Berner / The Seattle Times) **More***



By

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Seattle Times staff reporter

The Future of Policing: As protesters across the country demand sweeping changes to law enforcement, The Seattle Times begins an examination of what that future could look like and the hurdles ahead. Today, Seattle community leaders offer differing views on reimagining public safety.

When thousands of people marched through the [Seattle's South End](#) in one of the city's largest demonstrations over law enforcement brutality and the death of George Floyd, police had remarkably little presence. That doesn't mean no one was around to keep the peace.

Organizers developed a safety plan that relied on volunteers and community groups long working to reduce crime, help youth and stabilize

neighborhoods outside of the criminal justice system. Marty Patu-Jackson of [Safe Passage](#), a Rainier Beach program with staffers trained in de-escalation, said she and her team surveyed the demonstration area in advance for blind spots, then carefully planned where to position people monitoring by foot, vehicle and bicycle. They had drills, and safety kits that included milk and water to alleviate the effects of tear gas and chemical sprays, should police use them on protesters.

They didn't. The demonstration last Sunday went off without a hint of violence — and to leaders it showed something important. “We can police ourselves,” Patu-Jackson said.

Something has changed in the conversation around police reform amid the protests that have gripped Seattle and the nation for weeks. “Reform” hardly seems the word for it anymore. The revulsion around Floyd’s killing is so strong, the loss of confidence in police so widespread, especially in their ability to root out violent racism, that many protesters are calling for police to be defunded, dismantled or abolished altogether.

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This is not a fringe conversation. In Minneapolis, where an officer pressed his knee to Floyd’s neck for almost nine minutes, the City Council [pledged last week to dismantle](#) the Police Department. Floyd’s killing came, notably, after [years of police reform](#) in Minneapolis that led to implicit-bias training, a new emphasis on community policing and a policy requiring officers to intervene if they see misconduct.

[Court-ordered reforms](#) have played out in Seattle for almost a decade, yet protesters point to police killings here, too, they believe are unjust, as well as others around Washington, like that of [Manuel Ellis](#), who died while being restrained and arrested by Tacoma police officers in March.

But if some people are saying it's time to upend the whole system, what does that mean? Literally getting rid of all law enforcement officers? What would an alternative system look like? Who, exactly, would come at 4 in the morning when murder, rape, robbery or domestic violence is in progress?

The answers vary and, to a large extent, are yet to be determined. Locally as well as nationally, there are many leaders of this movement and their ideas are coalescing.

Nikkita Oliver, a [2017 mayoral candidate](#) who has risen to the fore of Seattle protests, is [among those calling](#) for the city to immediately defund the Seattle Police Department by 50% and keep cutting from there.

"I obviously support an abolitionist agenda," Oliver said. "Police can be obsolete."



Restart gallery

1 of 3 | Community leader and 2017 mayoral candidate Nikkita Oliver, shown this month addressing a crowd at Cal Anderson Park, says “police can be obsolete.” She wants a system that... (Dean Rutz / The Seattle Times) [More](#)

Andrè Taylor, who organized [one of the first protests](#) about Floyd’s death, and whose brother

Che Taylor was killed by Seattle police in 2016, also advocates massive cuts to police spending but said: “I wouldn’t want to be in a country where we didn’t have no law enforcement. That’s crazy.”

Taylor said he wants much more thorough hiring and training, which would move officers away from the mindset he describes as “submit, break down, kill.”

People hear talk of dismantling police and “they freak out,” said Brandy Grant, who has worked on violence prevention and police reform in various ways, including by serving on the city’s [Community Police Commission](#) (CPC).

The Future of Policing: As protesters across the country demand sweeping changes to law enforcement, The Seattle Times examines what that future could look like and the hurdles ahead.

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Speaking for herself and not the commission, she said she's not calling for an end to law enforcement. "We're talking about dismantling the structure, dismantling the things that do not work well, that do not make people feel safe in their communities."

“I have nothing but respect for many police officers,” she added, echoing even some of the sharpest law enforcement critics. She endorses an array of moderate reforms, such as [banning chokeholds](#), as New York state has just done.

Yet, she says, the system as a whole needs to be stripped down and rebuilt so more Black and brown people won’t be lost. She worries about her own Black son, 14 and 6-foot-5, and possibly getting the call that Floyd’s family and many others have gotten.

“What happens now is a really important conversation about what to do instead,” said Lisa Dugaard, executive director of the Public Defender Association and a longtime advocate for criminal justice reform. There are a lot of critics right now, and what’s needed are more “builders,” she said, people who can design a humane, anti-racist system that may or may not include police.

The Seattle Police Department and the Seattle Police Officers Guild did not respond to requests for comment.

Chief Carmen Best — who early on [called Floyd’s death a murder](#) and said that as a Black woman she understands the fear and anger many have in regard to law enforcement — has refrained from condemning its institutions.

“You are my family,” Best said in a [video address to officers](#) Thursday. “I do believe most people in Seattle support the Police Department and its officers even though they may not be the ones posting on social media.”



Protesters march along Rainier Avenue during the “We Want to Live March for Black Lives and To End Violence,” Sunday, June 7, in Seattle, sparked by the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis. (Ken Lambert / The Seattle Times)

Community focused

At the core of this movement is a desire to transfer money, responsibility and authority from law enforcement to the community.

Oliver said many organizations promoting public safety and health already exist on the South End. She ticks off a number, including Safe

Passage, [Community Passageways](#), which offers alternatives to youth incarceration such as mentorship and healing circles, and [Creative Justice](#), which uses art to empower young people and provide another alternative to jail, and where Oliver is a co-director.

Such groups, she said, “are massively underfunded.”

They won’t necessarily respond to a murder, but Oliver said, “murder in our city is currently not something that happens that often. And let’s be frank, it happens mostly in communities that are lacking access to resources.”

[Seattle police statistics](#) show 29 homicides in 2019 out of a total 4,652 violent crimes.

In any case, that’s the wrong question, she said. “We should be asking ourselves what are we going to do to prevent a murder from happening. Why are we building our system’s safety response based on the worst-case scenario ...?”

Dominique Davis, founder and CEO of Community Passageways and an organizer of last Sunday’s South End march, sees a role for police but wants community panels to have at least joint authority over all its aspects: hiring, training, planning patrols, investigating misconduct and discipline.

“I know we have the CPC, but I don’t think they’re given that much power,” Davis said.

The commission provides recommendations on policy, training and accountability, but does not make decisions. Two other bodies of citizen oversight in Seattle — the Office of Police

Accountability and the Office of Inspector General — conduct investigations, make conclusions and look at systematic issues with the process. But the chief decides on discipline.

Davis also said all police officers, not just “community officers,” should be out in neighborhoods engaging with residents in positive ways.

“It’s easy for me to shoot you in the back when you’re running from me if I don’t know who the hell you are and you’re just another Black kid,” Davis said.



Dominique Davis, the CEO and founder of Community Passageways,

advocates for community panels involved in all levels of policing and officers who engage with citizens beyond arresting them. “If you’re... (Greg Gilbert / The Seattle Times) **More**

Safe Passage, part of Boys & Girls Clubs of King County, offers a more direct way of involving citizens in public safety.

It started in 2015, Patu-Jackson recalled. A couple of years before, the Rainier Beach Community Center had closed for renovations and kids got used to hanging out in the parking lot. Fights broke out and spilled across the neighborhood.

The program hired people from the area who had some of the same experiences these young people did, Patu-Jackson said. “Simply go out and meet a bunch of kids,” she remembered telling her staff. “We wanted the kids to get to know who we are.”

Many now do. Her team of seven, known officially as community safety specialists, are called “blue coats” due to the color of their uniforms, or “Be Safe Bros.” Working in teams of two or three, they monitor a swath of Rainier Beach that includes the community center, the library, Rainier Beach High and several other schools with what Patu-Jackson calls a “parental” or “neighborhood” lens.

If they see a tense situation, they’ll “distract and redirect,” she explained. They’ll call kids by their names if possible. If not, they might say: “Hey, what’s your name? What school do you go to?”

If necessary, they’ll separate kids and walk them away in opposite directions, sometimes waiting with them at bus stops or light rail stations. Team members, unarmed, do not rule out calling police, Patu-Jackson said, but have rarely had to.

The [Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion](#) (LEAD) program also shows how it might be possible to lean less on police, according to program leaders.

Replicated throughout the nation, the Seattle- and South King County-based program works with low-level offenders, who are not arrested but offered housing and treatment for mental health and drug and alcohol issues.

Police vet all the cases but it's often case managers, working for nonprofit Evergreen Treatment Services, who go out and find individuals, then assess what steps to take, said Tara Moss and Brandie Flood, who oversee participation in the program by, respectively, the Public Defender Association and Evergreen.

More and more, businesses are calling LEAD directly about someone who is, say, trespassing or shoplifting. Police could be cut out of this system altogether, Moss said, adding the important thing is that "someone responds and responds promptly."

This is less controversial than you might think.

"I think a lot of police chiefs would support if the police were no longer designated the first responder of government to incidents involving mental health, drug and alcohol addiction and homelessness," said Ronal Serpas, a former police chief who teaches at Loyola University New Orleans and the founder of [Law Enforcement Leaders to Reduce Crime & Incarceration](#).

Handling such situations has fallen to the police because they're the only ones funded to do so, but Serpas said, they are "the least equipped, least experienced, least successful in dealing with these very deep questions and issues."

What about serious, violent crimes? Well, that's the sticking point.

Serpas said police ought to respond to them, and huge budget cuts would reduce their ability to do so.

On May 23, [two men were shot and killed](#) in the parking lot of the Rainier Beach Safeway allegedly by an 18-year-old who was arguing with someone else, according to prosecutors. One of the victims, 23, had been mentored by Patu-Jackson's program, she said.

Taking such violence into account, Patu-Jackson said there has to be a transition before dismantling police altogether. But she believes we should be moving in that direction.

On Friday evening, she helped put on an event to turn the Safeway parking lot into a "healing space," given trauma from shootings, law enforcement abuse and institutionalized racism. "It was very peaceful," Patu-Jackson said.

Once again, her Be Safe Bros were there.



Children are brought up to the front as final march plans are gone over at Othello Park, before “We Want to Live March for Black Lives and To End Violence,” begins Sunday, June 7, in Seattle. Speaking... (Ken Lambert / The Seattle Times) **More**

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