

City Council President: 5 key post-Ferguson police reforms

Guest Opinion: U.S. history plays a powerful role in shaping the reactions to police power. But if we understand how we arrived here, Seattle can plan a better future.

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By Tim Burgess

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It has been just over a week since the grand jury made its decision in the Ferguson case, my hope is that we can soon get beyond the conflicting evidence presented to the jurors and focus on the undeniable and powerful subtext that permeates this story. Understanding this subtext holds the key to the change I believe we all want to see. We must also identify specific actions that will contribute to this change or risk losing an opportunity to move forward.

Among African Americans, tension and conflict with the police is deeply rooted in decades of mistrust and weariness over police misconduct, corruption and persistent crime in many neighborhoods. It is a relationship that is profoundly troubled and, as we have seen, all too often leads to tragic consequences.

Tragic for black men and boys who are arrested and imprisoned or killed by police at a disproportionate rate. Tragic for black families who often live in neighborhoods with high rates of crime and who urgently desire effective police services. Tragic for entire cities that must carry the moral and monetary costs of this reality.

How did we get here? And, looking forward, what can we do to change it?

Following the Civil War, the scourge of slavery essentially continued in parts of the American south until World War II through the enforcement of vagrancy and loitering laws that created jail populations to be exploited by unscrupulous companies — one of the largest being U. S. Steel — seeking cheap labor. The police were the enforcers of these policies. (Read "[Slavery by Another Name](#)" by Daniel Blackmon for a detailed accounting of the survival of slavery following the Civil War. You can also watch the [PBS documentary](#) of this story.)

After World War II, the police continued as enforcers of Jim Crow laws and practices designed to suppress African Americans. During the civil rights era, it was the police who “enforced the law” and restored order, often in terribly brutal ways. More recently, we have seen the mass incarceration of young men of color in this country since the late 1970s and continued instances of police misconduct related to use of force and discriminatory policing. (Read "[The New Jim Crow](#)" by Michelle Alexander to learn more about the role municipal and state police have played in the ill-conceived mass incarceration policies that have made America the world’s largest jailer.)

This history carries deep implications for contemporary views about the legitimacy of police actions. One can understand why the legitimacy of the police — their presence *and* their actions — is often questioned.

The legacy of this history only occasionally boils to the surface, revealing its raw power and influence, in high profile events, such as the shooting of Michael Brown on Aug. 9 in Ferguson.

It's also important to understand that the power and influence of this history has become embedded in our structures and institutions of government, business, commerce and culture. For people of color, the barriers to opportunity are real, very real. These barriers have harmed individuals, families, and entire communities. (Read "[Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption](#)" by Bryan Stevenson for a vivid and painful look at contemporary criminal justice practices.)

It's tough for all of us to acknowledge this painful history. We would rather forget it, hoping it would just go away, but the residual effects hang on. We see these effects all around us. A young black man in our country today has a [greater chance](#) of spending time in prison than graduating from college. [Nearly half](#) of the African American children in Seattle Public Schools can't read at grade level in the Third Grade, a powerful predictor they won't graduate from high school. These realities should shock our senses; that they are race based should shame us to action.

The good news is that we can tear the barriers down. We now know that investing early in the lives of our children — especially children of color and those living in poverty — can overcome the barriers. Evidence-based programs that are proven to improve health, reduce criminal behavior, improve education attainment, and boost employment and wage earning power exist and Seattle invests in them. Examples include the [Nurse Family Partnership](#), the [Parent Child Home Program](#), and the recently voter approved [Seattle Preschool Program](#).

We can change policing, too. Here are five specific steps I continue to advocate for that could enhance police-community relationships, especially in the African American community, and lead to more effective, constitutional policing.

- **First, we should fully embrace “problem-oriented policing,”** a major philosophical shift that positions officers as community-based problem solvers rather than just crime responders. It's a fundamentally different approach that is *proactive* rather than *reactive*. It involves every police officer, not just a few assigned to community relations or community police teams. It positions officers as partners with residents working together to solve clearly defined problems.

A police response is one part of the solution to crime, not the only solution. One of the most important cultural reforms needed in policing today is how officers perceive their mission. A police officer who understands her or his role as more than just “catching the bad guys” — as important as that can be — is an officer who is willing to engage in community partnerships and embrace a wide array of crime prevention efforts. A police department that takes a problem-solving approach to policing will win the trust and confidence of the whole city.

- **Second, we should adopt policing strategies that focus on the problem places** spread across the city where crime is concentrated and anchored. About half of all reported crime in Seattle

takes place on fewer than 7 percent of our city blocks. Crime locations are more stable and more easily identified than the thousands of individuals committing crime. The policing of place makes sense in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. The policing of place requires strong outreach and partnerships with the people who live and work in these areas. Done right, with a problem-solving mindset, it can be an effective crime reduction effort that builds trust and legitimacy between the people and the police.

- **Third, while shifting to the policing of place, we should also increase the attention paid to persistent,** high frequency offenders who commit a hugely disproportionate amount of crime. A keen focus on those who cause the most harm in our neighborhoods will receive strong and broad support. And it works. In business, there is the 80-20 rule: 80 percent of a company's business will come from just 20 percent of their customers. The same rule of thumb applies to crime — most crime is caused by a relatively small percentage of those engaged in criminal behavior.
- **Fourth, we should change how we select, train, motivate, supervise, reward and promote our police officers.** Policing today requires extensive knowledge of human psychology and skills in crisis intervention, de-escalation, problem identification and problem-solving. A much greater emphasis needs to be placed on this new skill set at the time officers are hired, as well as in how we manage, reward, and promote them.

Performance evaluations and promotions should be tied to specific outcomes and effectiveness in problem-oriented policing, not simply job tenure. Civil Service promotion testing should measure an officer's ability to embrace and use this new skill set, rather than memorization of facts and procedures. Proven leadership and supervision skills should play a significant role in promotions.

- **Fifth, we should greatly enhance officer training and set specific expectations around de-escalation and discretionary judgment.** Michael Brown may very well be alive today had Officer Darren Wilson paused after the initial encounter in his patrol vehicle and called for emergency back-up rather than getting out of his vehicle and attempting to arrest Brown all by himself. Stopping and reassessing when the adrenaline is surging and an officer feels threatened is one of the most difficult decisions to make, but it can be learned. Seasoned and well-trained police officers understand the authority granted to them and use it extremely carefully.

I joined the Seattle Police Department as an officer during a wave of reform in the early 1970s. I remember my patrol procedures instructor in the police academy, Lieutenant Rusty Campbell, repeating over and over again to "be careful what you catch." He meant that we should use our discretion carefully, don't act like a Lone Ranger, wait for backup, and don't expose ourselves unnecessarily to danger. Campbell was right, of course. Mastering de-escalation skills is essential for officer safety and effective policing.

Implementing these five steps will advance effective and constitutional policing and build strong community understanding and support. But focusing on the future does not mean we should ignore the past. In order to find our way out of our current situation, we also must keep talking about what got us here in the first place.

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