

Reimagine Policing is visionary strategy to keep Boulder safe

I am incredibly proud of my chosen profession. Officers act with integrity and bravery in most of the millions of police-community interactions that occur every day. Yet, recurring national tragedies and growing local crime concerns require improved strategic thinking and leadership. Policing must change. This is true for police agencies throughout the United States, and it is true for the Boulder Police Department.

Boulder's public spaces are filled with people needing mental health and drug addiction treatment. While not all would choose to seek treatment, there is not enough support for those who would. And, while businesses and community members continuously call the police to deal with worsening problems, legislative changes and lingering COVID impacts on trials and jail space limit officers' ability to leverage justice system intervention and associated treatment.

All one has to do is look at policing nationally to see the conventional policing approach is failing. Officers respond to calls for service from those who are comfortable calling the police, and police hold the primary (and sometimes sole) responsibility for maintaining public safety. This approach, rightfully so, has been questioned, given that an overreliance on justice system responses to larger social issues can produce unintended consequences, including disproportionate and devastating impacts on communities of color. We fail as leaders when we ask officers to repeatedly respond to the same problems without attempting to address the conditions that place them and other community members in harm's way.

Consider a scenario where RTD drivers are so engrossed in adhering to their time schedules that they zoom past bus stops, leaving behind waiting travelers. While they might reach their destination on time, they overlook their main objective: to transport passengers. Similarly, the core mission of policing is to safeguard the community. However, conventional police strategies emphasize rapid response to service calls, neglecting to identify and tackle underlying crime patterns causing repeat victimization and disparities in justice outcomes.

Boulder's recently released Reimagine Policing Plan is defined by an innovative central strategy, which we call Problem-Solving Policing. The strategy seeks to change the emphasis of policing from reactively responding to calls to reducing the likelihood of a crime from happening in the first place. It works best when combined with a holistic governance approach, or put more simply, when police are not the only city or community resource at the table. The problems that cause harm today are complex, and they require a multi-disciplinary approach, in partnership with community members.

Certainly, there are times when legal consequences are necessary to protect victims and society. Police must continue to step up — and be well-trained — for these circumstances. However, there is incredible power in prioritizing prevention and problem-solving, especially when it is done by partnering with the community. This practice is supported by evidence collected through extensive research and on-the-ground implementation in New Zealand and other democratic societies.

You can read the entire plan here: <https://bldr.fyi/rp-reimagine-policing-plan>. In addition to adopting problem-solving as our primary crime reduction strategy, the plan includes establishing our own police academy (in partnership with CU Boulder), training and technology innovations, measures to increase police accountability and transparency, new neighborhood policing and youth engagement programs, and key metrics to help us determine if our work is making a difference.

Ultimately, the plan must reduce crime and disorder. Society must hold people accountable for violating the law. How we hold people accountable is debatable, but the harm experienced by community members and officers who respond to repeated criminal behavior cannot be ignored. Our plan calls for action to address these harms. Early results are promising. Boulder's pilot problem-solving projects have resulted in significant crime reductions and improved relationships between the police department and the community partners we've worked with.

This blueprint is visionary and a significant departure from conventional police strategic plans. We must recruit and support diverse, healthy and well-trained police professionals to achieve the plan's objectives. Happily, the vision set forth in this plan is attracting educated professionals with forward-thinking perspectives on policing. Like all our officers, our newest recruits want to be part of meaningful change.

Change will occur gradually, but Boulder is well-positioned to set a bold path in service of its values — and serve as an example to others.

Maris Herold is the City of Boulder's chief of police.