

Task Force to Reimagine Policing in Brookline

Executive Summary

February 26, 2021

Abstract

Last summer, Americans filled the streets in cities across the country to protest police violence against African-Americans. The protests raised the question in communities everywhere, including in Brookline: does our police department treat all citizens equally, regardless of their race or ethnicity? And if not, how can we fix it?

Since the summer, and in line with the commitments made when we raised a Black Lives Matter banner outside Town Hall, the Task Force to Reimagine Policing in Brookline has sought answers to these questions. We have found both positive news – that overall the public is satisfied with the police – and alarming news – that Black and Latinx residents of Brookline feel discriminated against and fear being victims of police brutality at levels far higher than white residents.

Through our research, this Task Force has found disturbing patterns in traffic stops, wherein nonwhite motorists are not only disproportionately likely to be stopped but disproportionately likely to be ticketed when they are stopped.

Through our research, the Task Force has found that the Brookline Police is a constant presence in spaces in town where racial minorities are present. Without any public process, the Police Department and School Department agreed to have an armed School Resource Officer (SRO) stationed in Brookline High School. Without any public process or requirement by law, the Walk and Talk unit patrols Brookline's public housing and charges the Brookline Housing Authority for doing so.

Through our research, the Task Force is making several recommendations. Our community needs social services, but it needs them from trained social service professionals, not from police officers. We recommend closing down the SRO and Walk and Talk programs and creating a new social service department.

Where police are needed, we recommend greater oversight, transparency, and accountability. This proposal is grounded in our survey which shows that a super-majority (77%) of Brookline residents believe the Town should have a civilian oversight board with investigative powers.

Background

There is a disturbing history of policing in America. From the days of slave patrols until today, policing has been used to exert control over people of color, immigrants and poor people. This history has been well-chronicled and is critical to understanding the need for reimagining. As a primer, we encourage you to read the New Yorker piece, [The Invention of Police](#).

More proximally, our Task Force was constituted as a direct result of the righteous multiracial, multigenerational uprising demanding greater oversight and accountability of police. This uprising followed the killings by police of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and so many other Black, Latinx and Indigenous people.

Those who have studied inequities in policing understand how even the best-intentioned reforms decade after decade have failed to make policing safe, just and equitable, especially for communities of color. The bottom line is that police reform has failed communities of color and therefore society as a whole. Reform alone has only a marginal impact, at best.

The current need for reimagining is not solely about what happened many years ago or a thousand miles away in Minneapolis or Louisville or Ferguson. This work necessarily focuses on policing right here in Brookline. It is also in response to the many discrimination complaints in Brookline – those that have been formally filed and the many more that have been shared in other ways – including by two of Brookline's own, now former, Black police officers.

We understand that there are many people in this community who have only had good experiences with the Brookline Police Department, but, as one insightful commenter said at one of our public hearings, "Your good experience does not cancel out someone else's bad experience."

There is a certain human tendency to believe that something is not a problem because it has not been a problem for us. The eleven members of our Task Force do believe inequitable policing is a problem in Brookline, and we are not alone.

We are joined by Brookline's Anyaosah family, whose daily peaceful protests along Route 9 brought hundreds of residents to join them and then hundreds more at protests across from the Brookline Police Department.

We are joined by Brookline's Lexi Harriman, hundreds of BHS students, and thousands of residents and neighbors who took to the streets, peacefully, to share their stories of local issues with policing – right here in Brookline – demanding justice and accountability.

For anyone who attended these events and others like the Humanize Black Voices event led by young people on Cypress Field, the evidence is clear – yes, there is a problem here.

In June 2020, Brookline's Select Board in the midst of public outcry made a symbolic gesture, shifting \$166,000 in police overtime to other purposes related to social services. Soon after, Town Meeting rejected more substantive cuts to the police budget, with many citing the need to know more about how those funds could better be spent.

Select Board Member Raul Fernandez had, prior to the Select Board and Town Meeting votes, proposed a reimagining of policing and public safety more broadly. One that would explore, propose, and recommend investing in alternatives to policing, where appropriate.

There were several key tenets embedded in that proposal:

First, that a community holds the power to determine its own approach to community safety, which includes determining if and how police should be part of that approach.

Second, that there are members of our community and those in our neighboring communities for which Brookline's current model is simply not working. That is unacceptable.

Third, that police need to be held to the highest standards and we need clear accountability measures for what happens when officers fail to live up to those standards.

And finally, that this moment is an opportunity to rethink our relationship with police, yes, but also to reconsider how we invest in the long-term wellbeing of residents and neighbors.

Select Board Member Fernandez first shared that proposal publicly on June 3rd. After a contentious Town Meeting season and weeks of debate on the Select Board, the proposal for a Task Force to Reimagine Policing in Brookline, after first being rejected by the Select Board in its current form, later passed unanimously on July 21st.

The Select Board decided to create two bodies that night – a committee focused on reform, chaired by Select Board Chair Bernard Greene, and a task force focused on reimagining our approach to public safety, chaired by Select Board Member Fernandez.

Task Force Charge

The Task Force to Reimagine Policing in Brookline was charged to explore and recommend new approaches to public safety and policing in Brookline, utilizing a data-informed approach to interrogate our current model and provide a distinctly alternative approach to public safety.

The eleven members of the group exceeded the criteria for diversity as outlined in the charge, that at least half would be people from communities disproportionately impacted by policing.

There were six members of color including one Latinx, two Asian, and three Black members, as well as five women, and one transgender member. Immigrants and one Brookline Housing Authority resident were included among our members. As a group, we represented a wide variety of ages, identities, and experiences.

More information on the charge and members can be found in the appendix of the full report.

Process

The Task Force held weekly meetings for six months, from August 28, 2020 to February 26, 2021. These meetings were all publicly noticed and held through Zoom due to the ongoing pandemic and live streamed by Brookline Interactive Group. Recordings of these meetings and our subcommittee meetings are available on our page on the Brookline website.

We arranged ourselves into five subcommittees, including:

- Envisioning / Community Engagement
- Departmental Analysis
- School Resource Officers
- Walk & Talk Unit
- Vulnerable People & People in Crisis

More information on the work of these subcommittees is available in the full report.

We sought community feedback and expert input in a number of ways. One was through a survey in partnership with Tufts University through which we sent invites to 25,000 Brookline residents and received 1,343 responses. We also held seven public hearings where we heard from scores of residents and received comments through email from many more. Task Force members also held numerous conversations with residents, content experts, elected officials, members of the police department, and other key stakeholders.

More details on our approach to community engagement is available in the Envisioning / Community Engagement subcommittee report as well as other subcommittee reports. Also included is the raw survey data as well as our full methodology, findings, and conclusions.

Survey Findings

1. Brookliners generally have positive views of the police force. That said, Black and Latinx residents have had more negative experiences with the Brookline Police and would feel less comfortable than whites and Asians in calling the police if they needed help.
2. Compared to white residents, Black residents are *forty-eight times* more likely to feel discriminated against by police on the basis of race.
3. Respondents across racial groups perceive discrimination on the part of the Brookline Police department against Black and Latinx residents.
4. The majority of Brookline residents do not believe the department effectively holds its officers accountable.
5. There is widespread support for the Town utilizing social service workers rather than the police in scenarios where the risk of physical conflict is low.
6. A super-majority of Brookline residents (over three-quarters) believe the town should have a civilian oversight board with investigative powers.
7. Brookline residents overwhelmingly favor increasing police oversight, transparency, and accountability, while limiting their scope of duties and use of force powers.

Additional Findings

1. There is no comprehensive vision for public safety provided by the Town or information on how Brookline works to ensure that public safety resources are delivered equitably.
2. What are characterized as “collaborative” efforts between the Police Department and other bodies often lack appropriate buy-in from the communities they claim to be collaborating with.
3. The Police Department has not been capturing all field interrogations or vehicle stops in the data presented in its annual reports. Logging those stops is at the discretion of the officer.
4. 86% of motorists stopped in Brookline are not Brookline residents.
5. Based on data provided by the Police Department and an analysis of traffic patterns provided by Brookline’s Transportation Administrator, we found that Black motorists are disproportionately more likely to be stopped by police.

6. Compared to white motorists, motorists of color – especially Asian Americans – are significantly more likely to receive tickets rather than warnings when they are stopped.
7. There are almost no stops where a simple stop (basic speeding, failure to signal) leads to getting a gun or a dangerous person off the streets in Brookline, dispelling one narrative used to support police conducting traffic enforcement.
8. Police units like the School Resource Officer and Walk & Talk units were established without any public process or measurable outcomes.
9. While police have been in Brookline schools dating back to the failed DARE program, an MOU between the Police and School departments was not signed until 2019. That agreement was signed by Police Chief Andrew Lipson and Interim Superintendent Ben Lummis – neither of whom are in those roles today.
10. Prior legislation did not require SROs to be located *within* schools, as is the case at BHS. Legislation passed in the State House at the end of 2020 has now eliminated the requirement for communities to have any School Resource Officers.
11. There has never been an MOU between the Brookline Housing Authority and the Town of Brookline since the founding of the Walk & Talk unit in 1992. This is despite annual \$15,000 payments being made from the BHA to the Police Department over many years,
12. While research shows that Crisis Intervention Team training is an effective program to teach police officers how mental health issues can impact crisis interventions, the impact of CIT training on changing police behaviors is largely unknown.
13. While there are community-based resources focused on mental health in Brookline, none of them focus on pre-crisis services, which comprehensively address underlying inequities.

Additional findings are continued in our subcommittee reports.

Recommendations

Our recommendations envision a more innovative, forward-thinking Brookline. One focused on community-driven processes which are both respectful and supportive of low-income people and communities of color. One which increases police oversight, transparency, and accountability while limiting their scope of duties. One which shifts precious and limited resources away from programs that merely address the symptoms of inequities to investing in those that address the root causes of those inequities. One which affirms its responsibility and takes great pride in working collaboratively toward a just, safe, and equitable community.

Envisioning/Community Engagement

The Task Force recommends that Brookline adopt a community-driven model of engagement, particularly focused on youth and traditionally under-engaged communities, by hosting smaller trust-building conversations and eliminating programs which provide more benefit to the Town than to these communities.

1. Implement a child-centric vision of Public Safety that (beyond Police and Schools) builds on the great work of departments like Recreation and Transportation and directs more funding to youth-centered programs.
2. Launch a website that provides a comprehensive vision for public safety and provides resources for the community.
3. Develop a community-driven model for safety and justice that centers the voices of the communities closest to public safety issues to identify priorities and generate solutions.
4. Eliminate community programs that are or may be perceived as one-way relationships, providing more benefit to Town departments than the community.
5. Rather than relying on public hearings as the primary approach for soliciting input, Brookline's boards should engage in more small group trust-building conversations.

Departmental Analysis

The Task Force recommends reorienting the method by which the Town oversees the Police Department and provides input about current practices and new innovations. Citizen oversight must play a central role. Citizen input and oversight should occur both informally and formally. Based on continued evidence of racial bias in traffic enforcement, we are also recommending the filing of a Home Rule petition to permit traffic enforcement by civilians.

1. The Brookline Police Department should participate in a minimum of six public meetings annually in which residents can ask questions and offer suggestions.
2. The Brookline Select Board should appoint a permanent police oversight committee with the powers to investigate civilian complaints and approve mutual aid agreements, anti-bias training, and other major department policies.
3. The Brookline Police Department should conduct more data collection and analysis and communicate this data to the public. There should be more data collection and transparency about evaluations and promotions in relation to performance and training.

4. The Brookline Police Department mission statement should explicitly include an affirmation of equal treatment of all people, regardless of race or ethnicity. It should include a hyperlink to file a complaint.

5. Brookline should file a Home Rule petition in the state legislature to permit certain limited traffic enforcement functions to be fulfilled by civilians.

School Resource Officers

The Task Force recommends removing School Resource Officers from schools. They are not trained educators and using them in service of educational purposes undermines the pillars of safety and community that are necessary for students to thrive in our schools.

1. The Brookline Select Board or School Committee should remove SROs from schools.
2. If these bodies are determined to keep the SRO positions, it must be after engaging in an authentic reauthorization process prior to the start of the 2021-22 school year.

Walk & Talk

The Task Force recommends eliminating the Walk & Talk Unit. It is a relic of failed policies of the past which overpolice low-income communities, especially communities of color. It spends precious municipal dollars to provide some ancillary services to a handful of residents instead of investing those funds into directly addressing the critical needs of our residents.

1. The Brookline Select Board or BHA Board of Commissioners should eliminate the Walk & Talk Unit.
2. The Brookline Select Board should increase engagement with BHA residents to better understand the challenges they are facing and to collaboratively envision new solutions.
3. Develop a website that provides access to available social services and other resources and centralizes the community's advocacy and visioning work around public safety.

Vulnerable People & People in Crisis

The Task Force recommends that the current model of police as first responders in nonviolent crisis interventions be replaced with a community-based crisis model like the successful CAHOOTS program, which is a decades-old success in Eugene, Oregon. This would add a well-trained civilian component to our crisis response model. This program would be managed through a new social services department that we are currently calling Brookline Forward.

1. The Brookline Select Board should enter into a consulting contract with CAHOOTS to develop a community-based crisis model that works best for Brookline.
2. Implement additional pre-crisis services to assist people in order to prevent crisis, and to support people who might be struggling with isolation, homelessness, mental health issues, and/or substance use.
3. Implement additional follow-up services to support people after a crisis occurs, including family supports, childcare options, housing supports and resources, vocational training, access to medical care, food security, etc.
4. Better publicize existing social services through a centralized Brookline website and a public education campaign.
5. Form a new social services department to coordinate existing Town services, partner with local agencies to enhance collaboration, and develop programs which address long-standing inequities in Brookline. A description of this department is on the next page.

Brookline Forward

The Task Force proposes the creation of a new social service department in Brookline. It will address gaps in our social safety net that are currently being addressed through policing. The focus of this department would be to address the symptoms as well as the root causes of the inequities outlined below. The name Brookline Forward is a placeholder.

Brookline Forward will provide residents with the support they need to thrive. A new, innovative department of the Town of Brookline, Brookline Forward will partner with the Brookline Housing Authority, Public Schools of Brookline, Brookline Senior Center and local social service agencies to deliver timely, critical services, while conducting research, analyzing data, and implementing programs designed to counteract economic, health, and other inequities deeply rooted in racism, sexism, ageism, and other forms of oppression.

Brookline Forward will bring together existing offices under one umbrella including the:

- Office of Diversity, Inclusion & Community Relations;
- Council on Aging; and
- Office of Veterans' Services.

While establishing new offices including:

- Youth & Family Services;
- Community-Based Crisis Response;
- Immigrant & Refugee Services; and
- Economic Equity.

Brookline Forward will also provide staff support for the:

- Domestic Violence Roundtable;
- Commission for Women;
- Brookline Commission on Disability; and
- a new council on LGBTQIA+ Inclusion.

Brookline Forward will also partner with other Town departments as necessary to meet community needs. This includes working with Health & Human Services to develop a mental health incident response team, with the Building and Fire Departments to ensure residents are living in safe housing, and with the Police Department on diversion efforts for youth.

Brookline Forward will be funded by municipal dollars, including funds shifted from the Police Department, as well as local, state, and federal grants.

In addition to existing personnel, new staff at inception may include one administrative and three professional staff members as well as a new Commissioner to lead the department.

[Click Here for the entire Final Report of the Task Force to Reimagine Policing in Brookline](#)