Some Issues Raised About Maintaining Public Order When a White Police Officer Kills an Unarmed Black Person

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On May 25, 2020, Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin knelt on George Floyd's neck for over nine minutes until he died. It was not the first time a black man was killed by the police. Minneapolis Police had a reputation for being violent and racist for decades. But it was on video. Anyone who could stomach it could see the life seep out of George Floyd at the hands of Officer Chauvin.



Graffiti across from the Minneapolis Third Precinct building, which was burned during the rioting last year

In the ensuing nights, the Third Precinct burned, two more people were killed, and 700 buildings and 1,500 businesses were either damaged or destroyed, mostly concentrated near the Third Precinct. It was the second-most destructive period of local unrest in the United States, behind the 1992 Los Angeles riots.

Since then, there have been two more police killings in the Twin Cities, one in a first-ring suburbs and a second one in Minneapolis's wealthiest commercial node, Uptown. Both resulted in ongoing rioting, looting and destruction. And there is a broad consensus that it will happen again.

So, what does this mean for a city? Not the easy question about whether not buildings were rebuilt. But how does a city go forward when it becomes the literal face of racism and oppression in the United States? And how does that affect, not just public safety, but the very fabric of a city?

Crime is up across the country, but in Minneapolis, 43 people have been murdered so far, up 100% from last year. This includes three children under the age of 10. One was killed while she played on her trampoline. Shootings are up 153%.

When the decision to abandon the Third Precinct was made, the police officers there called their families and said their last goodbyes, believing they would be killed by the angry mob surrounding the building. They then literally ran for their lives. After that, morale has plummeted, and many officers have left the force. As of May 31st, there were 632 active police officers, down 25% from a year earlier. Undoubtedly, this has contributed to the skyrocketing crime. They planned to have three cadet classes this year to rebuild the Department but were not able to fill the first recruit class so it appears that the shortage of police officers will

continue indefinitely. So far, the City Council has not chosen to supplement the police with the National Guard or the Sheriff.

Because of their fear that the police may harm someone or act in a racist way, the City Council has made policy changes to reduce police interactions. Street-level drug dealing is now a ticket rather than an arrest. This has led to new open-air drug markets. The City Council reduced the reasons cars can be pulled over and severely curtailed high-speed chases. This has led to extensive street racing. As a result, two people have been killed so far, a 14-year-old and a 17-year-old. They decriminalized activities related to homelessness, and dozens of encampments appeared throughout the city. These are predominantly persons with addictions who refuse housing where they cannot actively use drugs. At least five people have died in these encampments. The area where George Floyd was killed is a police no-go zone, so gangs have moved in. Several people have been killed, including someone from the City's violence interrupter team. These are individuals, often ex-gang members, who work on the street to reduce violence.

The City is deeply divided on whether these are good policy choices. On one side are groups who see police and policing as irredeemably racist. Reclaim the Block and MPD150 advocate for a police-free future. They argue that if we invest in housing and education and other anti-poverty programs, we will literally not need police. Reclaim the Block received over $30 million in donations after the riots to pursue this agenda. Other aligned groups talk about extreme "defunding" with social workers, psychologists, traffic enforcement agents and other individuals responding to most calls for help. Armed police would be reserved for only the most violent calls. They argue that radically reducing police is the best way to protect people of color.

On the other side are the "yes, and" groups like Operation Safety Now and the New 612. They believe the soaring crime rate is because of the reduction in policing and that people of color are most likely to be victims of crime. They argue police are necessary to remove criminals from society and provide a deterrent to crime, but reform is needed, especially in accountability. For example, Derek Chauvin had 18 complaints made against him, two of which ended in official letters of reprimand but was not only not fired, but he trained other officers. They argue that robust but reformed policing is the best way to protect people of color.

The defund groups see police as the biggest problem facing people of color while the "yes, and" groups see being the victim of crime the biggest problem facing people of color. Each side sees the other as racist.

The question of which vision will prevail is embodied in a charter amendment on the ballot to remove minimum police staffing levels. This would allow the extreme defunding of the police. The question now is which vision of policing will residents choose and whether those choices will result in a safer city.

The other fundamental question is whether Minneapolis is a city that people still want to live and work in, given the ongoing increased crime and protests. Detroit was the center of riots in 1967, when it was the nation's fourth biggest city in the U.S. But the middle class fled, and it fell into poverty and crime. It is now the 24th largest city. Will Minneapolis also fall, or will it rise stronger?

People continue to purchase homes in Minneapolis. Home prices are up 13.3% as of May 2021, compared to last year, selling for a median price of $332K (Minneapolis Area Realtors). This has been driven primarily by low interest rates and shrinking ownership opportunities. Ownership opportunities are shrinking because 95% of the housing built in the city over the last seven years has been rental and corporations have been buying up single family homes to convert to rental. Volumes are up 17% so it doesn't appear there is a mass sell-off.

Rental housing has struggled to attract people, however. Minneapolis rents dropped 12.4% May 2020 to May 2021 (Zumper). There is a rent control proposal on ballot in the fall, which could radically change the market.

The area around the Third Precinct feels tattered. Big corporations are back but the smaller businesses that make up the fabric of a neighborhood are still missing. The Target store that had been looted and flooded is open again, as is the Cub Foods and Aldi's. The Walgreens is in a trailer, which is an upgrade from the tent they were in after the riots. U.S. Bank is also in a trailer, but they are going to be leaving that location soon. Some restaurants like Town Talk Diner and Nuevo Rodeo are gone for good. Gandhi Mahal's building was burned to the ground, but they have opened elsewhere. Same with Midori's Floating World. A few boarded-up buildings remain, like the auto parts store, and there are large conspicuous empty lots that used to be historic buildings. Graffiti is up substantially.

One of the major post-pandemic questions is whether people will return to downtowns. In Minneapolis, this problem is compounded by the continued issues of crime and safety. Post-pandemic trends are just emerging but as of first quarter 2021, downtown Minneapolis had 11.7% less space rented than in 2020. This includes the City of Minneapolis moving into its newly completed 380,000-square-foot building. This was before Target Corporation announced plans to vacate nearly 1 million square feet of downtown office space, nearly two-thirds of a skyscraper. 3,500 remote workers will be based out of three existing offices downtown. Other businesses have also left downtown or are planning to reduce their footprint, but the scope is not yet known. Reports as of June are that about 30% of people have returned to the downtown. It goes without saying that convention business is down dramatically.

Will people continue to live in downtown? May to May, condominium sale prices in Downtown East are down 16% and prices in Downtown West are down 40%, although this is on a small volume of sales (Minneapolis Area Realtors). There was a rental vacancy rate of 8.4% at the end of 2020 and prices declined.

Are businesses going to stay? As of June 17th, Google Mobility Reports data shows attendance at workplaces is down 26% statewide but down 32% in Minneapolis. (8% lower) Attendance at retail and recreation locations is up 6% statewide but down 7% in Minneapolis. (10% lower) Juut (a hair salon affiliated with Aveda) left both downtown Minneapolis and Uptown, after being in Uptown for 35 years. They said, "It has become more and more evident that Uptown continues to struggle with store closings, civil unrest, crime and street closure. We would be heart-broken if anything happened to our team members or clients. With that at the forefront, we made this difficult decision."

Driving through downtown last Sunday, there were people downtown and the restaurants and bars that were open had patrons but there were a large number of empty storefronts, especially in the Warehouse District (the downtown entertainment area) and around the Convention Center. Attendance at seated restaurants in Minneapolis is down 56% as of June 20th, compared to 11% statewide (OpenTable). This is most likely due to the closure of many restaurants downtown, including such iconic restaurants as Bachelor Farmer and Butcher & the Boar. The Butcher & the Boar posted on the door of their closed building, "Due to COVID-19 and the unrest in Minneapolis we are closing our doors permanently."

In many ways, Minneapolis is faced with a number of Faustian bargains. Rioting and destruction has drawn attention to the racism in our society and brought many changes – none more emblematic than the adoption of Juneteenth as a national holiday. But to achieve these changes, commercial areas were destroyed, and businesses are leaving. For some, it has been worth it. And, given the gains from protesting, there is no incentive for protesters to stop. Or for people who want to address systemic racism to stop them. But when businesses leave, it makes it harder to achieve economic justice. Jobs are the core tool for addressing racial economic disparities and when jobs leave, it is harder to close these gaps.

The City has scaled back policing, both in its policies and in staffing. It has traded fewer potential violent interactions between police and people of color for a higher crime rate overall. For some, this is an acceptable tradeoff. It has made it less safe to live in the City, however, and it is not clear how long people will accept this. They can move just a few miles into the suburbs and avoid the higher crime rate.

There are elections in Minneapolis that will show whether these bargains are acceptable to residents. There are two slates of candidates, one defund, and one yes/and. It is a hard-fought and ugly battle on the ground right now. We won't know which will win until November.

These tradeoffs are not just for Minneapolis. Every major city is having to face these questions. Do you scale back policing to reduce the potential for police violence but accept higher rates of crime? Do you accept riots and destruction because it raises awareness of racism but also have businesses leaving? Will higher levels of crime in large cities shift development to the suburbs? Will people want to continue to live in large cities? No one knows yet what will happen long-term but these issues are not fading away.