

It's time we fundamentally changed how we view policing

BY ANDY KO
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

A wise friend of mine once gave me advice on coping with a paralyzing sense of helplessness. Gordon said, "Find a starting point that seems right to you, settle on a plan and stick with it." He was talking about fly-fishing, but it is advice that has proven its worth over and over again in my professional life.

It is never easy to write about race, violence and justice. I've been

doing it, in one form or another, for most of my professional life. But, the events in Baton Rouge, St. Paul, Dallas – and now Baton Rouge again – are almost overwhelming. My own thinking about racial justice and racial violence began with my mother's attempt to explain the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. to me, her not quite 5-year-old mixed-race son. During my adult years, I continued to have an ever closer ringside seat to observe the continuing legacy of this nation's history of racism and how none of us remains unharmed by its repeating patterns. But I don't remember ever feeling such a personal sense of despair and helplessness as I have felt with each report of the killings over the past two weeks. So, I'm doing it again: looking for a starting point.

A year ago, I wrote about Seattle's Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) program. ("Seattle took the LEAD; Oregon should follow," Street Roots, July 20, 2015.) Back then, this is how I described LEAD:

Launched in 2011, LEAD diverts people arrested for violating drug and prostitution laws to supportive services. ... LEAD participants are diverted immediately (to a services-based program) after they are arrested – or, in some cases, even before they are arrested. ... Many participants are poor and homeless and have long histories of drug dependence. Almost all have multiple past arrests – sometimes by the same officer

offering them LEAD. A large percentage of LEAD participants (in very white Seattle) are people of color.

One year later, Multnomah County has set aside \$800,000 and an additional \$200,000 in private foundation support to establish its own LEAD program. This is the largest initial commitment of public resources for LEAD, which is now underway or being considered in a number of jurisdictions in the U.S. and Canada. My organization, Partnership for Safety and Justice, has led site visits to Seattle attended by Multnomah County law enforcement, including District Attorney Rod Underhill and some of his senior deputies, to observe the LEAD program in action. And, if it hasn't happened already, the Portland Police Bureau will soon send representatives to Seattle to see how their counterparts in the Seattle Police Department work with program participants, community-based caseworkers, prosecuting attorneys, and Seattle's Public Defender Association in implementing LEAD and its "harm reduction" philosophy to not pull individuals into the criminal justice system.

So what does all of this have to do with the shocking killings in recent weeks or America's too long history of violence against people of color, especially African Americans? As I also wrote a year ago, LEAD, like many new ideas, emerged from conflict. For years, public defenders and the ACLU sued the Seattle Police Department over racial disparities in drug arrests – enormous disparities. At that time, the arrest rate of black people in Seattle for the delivery of serious drugs (basically, anything other than marijuana) was 21 times higher than the white arrest rate for the same crime. For years, they fought in court and in the press about why that was; in the end, they agreed to disagree and instead try something different. The plan they settled on was LEAD.

I believe that the horrific violence we have witnessed over the past two weeks – all of it – and over the entire existence of our nation can only end when we are willing to change the system that permits it to happen. Yes, the killing of African Americans by law

enforcement and the targeted killing of police has to be accounted for by the people who commit such acts. But I'm not willing to wait for efforts to end racism to succeed before society commits to a plan that will prevent these tragedies from happening over and over again. I'm too angry, horrified and frustrated – and maybe have become too cynical. I am also sick of this feeling of helplessness. I want something different.

Maybe the communities that have committed to LEAD are showing us a different path by fundamentally changing how they view policing – at least in specific types of cases. Maybe we could build on that by eliminating the presumption that the role of police is to enforce laws by the application of superior force. Maybe we should shift to force minimization, an approach to policing

championed by former Salt Lake City Police Chief Chris Burbank, now Director of Law Enforcement Engagement at the Center for Policing Equity. Or we could adopt "harm-reduction policing," which is advocated by Jim Pugel, former interim Seattle Police Chief and one of the founders of LEAD. And maybe we could eventually take it a step farther. We could reduce the harm caused to individuals and communities by the criminal justice system by eliminating incarceration as the default response to crime. We could limit the use of jail and prison cells to situations where it is necessary, for specified reasons, to prevent additional harm and where a better alternative doesn't exist.

To be completely honest, I still don't know what starting point seems right to me. But, I am sure that what we are doing now is getting people killed – people riding in cars with broken tail lights, people selling CDs on the sidewalk, people in uniforms doing their jobs. And I am sure that I want something different.

"I'm not willing to wait for efforts to end racism to succeed before society commits to a plan that will prevent these tragedies from happening over and over again."

SAFETY and JUSTICE



Andy Ko is the executive director of Partnership for Safety and Justice which advances solutions to crime that ensure justice, equity, accountability, and healing to achieve safe and strong communities.

Did you serve in the **Armed Forces** and are experiencing or at risk of becoming homeless?

Transition Projects

Please call 855.425.5544 or visit 650 NW Irving Street

people's FOOD CO-OP

FARMERS' MARKET WEDNESDAYS 2-7PM

UP TO \$10 MATCH WITH EBT CARD

We're passionate about helping our community access healthy food that they can trust. By shopping at our market, you'll get extra food dollars while supporting local farmers and community.

3029 SE 21st Ave. btwn Powell & Division