



JUSTICE IN MY TOWN

This is what the future of policing could look like

USA TODAY journalists spent months interviewing more than 100 people about how they wanted to see police work changed. This is the future they envision.

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Welcome to the future.

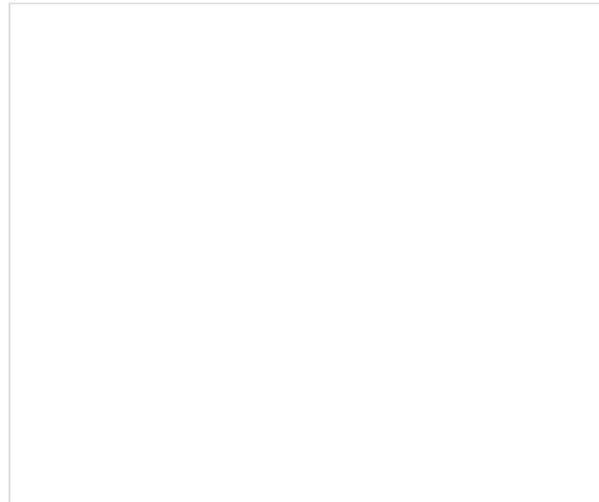
A future where you're driving and feel safe in your vehicle no matter your skin color. A future where a police officer parks on your street not to arrest one of your neighbors but because she is one of your neighbors.

Reporters from the USA TODAY Network spent months interviewing more than 100 people to ask them what the future of police could look like. Our reporters work for newspapers from California to Virginia and from South Dakota to Georgia. They sought out police officers, county sheriffs, activists, academics and lawyers, judges and citizens, sisters of cops and the parents of children slain by police. We asked them what would make a more equitable, effective and safe police force in the future. We listened to their life stories. We looked at the research and data they referenced.

The future community police force in America will involve both the evolution and revolution of ideas. It will grow from decisions made on local, state and national levels. And it will stem from changes in a web of individual perceptions. A few years from now, it may start to look more than a little like this ...

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'It's a beautiful day'

You wake up on an average day in the future. You could live on a rural road or on a street in a small town. You could live in a city of 300,000 or a suburb surrounding a larger city. In other words, you live where most policing happens in our country, outside of the big cities, on our residential streets and the roads that connect them.

As you head to work there's a police officer standing on the sidewalk near your car. You nod and call her by name because you know her.



“Hey, Nikki, good morning.” She waves back. As part of a vast set of community policing reforms implemented over several years, the majority of cops in your community now actually live in your community. In your state, landlords who register to give officers a discounted rent receive special tax breaks. Elsewhere, some municipalities provide officers a rental allowance to live where they work.

Officers also look more like the people they serve. Your minority-majority neighborhood has the first Black patrol-person you can remember in your lifetime. You know her and her parents, who still live here, as well as her brother who lives in the city but comes to visit on holidays. After several years of local agencies hiring to reflect their community’s diversity, the state police have begun doing it as well.

You also know more about Nikki because you can access information about her online, including her disciplinary record. It wasn’t too many years ago that your state reformed

push after “[6-January](#)” to rid the ranks of American police officers of [white supremacists and anti-democratic agitators](#).

Nikki’s not on the beat today because she’s off to her crisis intervention training class, part of her continuing education. She’s in her mid-20s but she’s in just her second year of police work, now that becoming a police officer requires a college education on top of the state’s traditional 12-week course of tactical and procedural training.

You make small talk about the weather, then get in your car. She squints at you and tells you, “Don’t let me catch you speeding, now.”

You both laugh, because police haven’t managed traffic violations for several years. Traffic violations are handled mostly by automated cameras and unarmed civil enforcement agents at intersections and stretches of road that are statistically proven more likely to have crashes.

You think as you drive how citizen deaths at the hands of police have been dropping since police aren’t allowed to initiate vehicle stops for traffic violations — or for any other reason, such as “investigatory stops,” without a warrant. Police lives have been saved, too as a result.

You hum a song to yourself as you hit the highway on-ramp and head to work.

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‘You’re stuck in a moment, and you can’t get out’

Twenty minutes later, you pull into a parking space in the small city where you work. You check your phone and see a text message with a video link: It’s a nice, clear clip of you zooming beneath the highway overpass a few miles back. The clip was taken at a known and posted automated speed checkpoint, where unmanned radar equipment clocked you at 11 miles per hour over the speed limit.

I should have put the car on auto-drive, you think. It would have adjusted for the speed limit. But you were running a little late, and the violation was recorded. For some traffic violations like speeding, enforcement is automated and doesn’t waste police human resources. Your

you choose the latter. No matter what you do, you won't be hauled into court for not paying.

And you'll never have to worry about getting pulled over by a police officer for a minor infraction and worrying if he may be one of the proverbial "bad apples."

It used to be that many cops fired by police forces got their jobs restored, with back pay, in arbitration. Community boards now have the last word on arbitration and other oversight of disciplinary matters, and in less than a decade there seem to be so many fewer bad apples that the theory no longer has many proponents.

Still, you're out over \$100 for speeding. The future can't help you with your own behavior in that moment, captured on video. But you don't have to sit on the side of the highway feeling uncomfortable. You smile ruefully, thinking of Nikki's comment.

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'The sweetest thing'

Being a cop can run in a family, and Nikki's family is no exception. Only Nikki doesn't recognize some of the stories her brother tells her about life as a police officer. John's only five years older but has been in uniform for almost 10 years to Nikki's two.

A decade ago, a 12-week training course out of high school was enough for him to get a badge and a gun in Virginia and start serving in the local county sheriff's office.

By the time Nikki started her training, reforms required her to get a four-year degree with a minor in criminal justice at a state university. In an arrangement similar to an ROTC scholarship, her tuition was paid for by the state as long as she took certification training and accepted a job with a police department in her home state after graduation. Nikki feels she got the better end of that deal. At the university she met people from all over the world, got to choose a major from several options that would help her in law enforcement, and was exposed to other fields of study. She really enjoyed the anthropology classes she took in her junior year.

everyone involved in an uncomfortable position, though. White kids looked at him like he was a nuisance, and Black kids looked at him like he was a traitor.

When data showed that a resource officer's presence in schools correlated to more arrests in those schools and to juvenile behavior being treated as adult criminal behavior, dismantling the resource officer system became part of police reform. John was relieved, but not sure what would come next. He liked working with kids and thought he was gaining the trust of the next generation of citizens, even if the system wasn't perfect.

So even when most officers weren't jumping at the newly created state-mandated neighborhood patrol officer program, John saw it as a chance to make a difference in a landscape where kids weren't a captive audience like they were in school.

On the good side, he met his girlfriend at a function where he talked to community leaders about the new de-escalation techniques that were being taught to police as part of crisis intervention training, which was now mandatory continuing education for all police officers in his city. People in his neighborhood now know what to expect from police, even in a tense situation. He thinks he is treated with respect because of that.

On the bad side, his feet are almost always sore and he's often bored. At least he doesn't carry as much tactical equipment as in his first five years as a cop, when his service revolver, ammunition, club, Taser, body cam and bullet-proof tactical vest and belt weighed about 30 pounds. Now officers are appropriately outfitted for their communities and do not look like invading soldiers.

He sometimes feels the use of body-cam software to determine and revise his beat activities is a little over the top. But it's still lighter than all that gear.

He's also been rooked into serving as a pee-wee basketball referee by one of the city council members. John looks at his watch. There's a tournament tonight.

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'Peace on Earth'

“I’m sick of hearing, again and again, that there’s gonna be peace on earth.” Lyrics from a song older than you are drift from your phone as you watch the high school parking lot fill up and people file into the gym for the basketball tournament, an early spring tradition in town.

You remember just a few years back this lot was a hot spot for buying weed after dark, and as a result became an epicenter for police busts. The scope of police interest widened block by block so that anyone driving anywhere near the high school after dusk had a good chance of being stopped by cops.

When data showed that the police were far more likely to stop Black drivers, public outcry grew. Even though such “investigatory stops” were still allowed in the state under some circumstances, local police decided as a matter of policy to simplify it and not make any such stops of vehicles.

It helped that at the state level possession of small amounts of certain drugs had been dropped to a civil infraction instead of a criminal misdemeanor. That and the legalization of marijuana affected police behavior with regard to investigatory stops anyway, and decimated a profitable and sometimes violent local black market in recreational drugs. Now you can’t remember the last night you drove by the school and saw any action in the lot, police or other. You don’t miss the police blotter mugshots in the local newspapers that turned simple possession into public shaming, either.

For some residents, it’s been a difficult winter and spring. A major area employer closed down and hundreds are out of work. Some of the people who used to be boosters for this tournament, who gave significant money and time to making it a bright spot, are going through suddenly difficult times. A few of them you recognize, filtering in through the open

You've kept your job but it hasn't been easy. Your hours were cut in half because the damage to the local economy has meant less business for the service industry.

At the crowded concessions counter, a man by your shoulder raises his voice. You can smell alcohol on his breath almost before you hear his words. You recognize him. Paul's his name, you think. He's one of the people who's been hard hit by recent events. Single dad, with a daughter having a tough time adjusting, and he's just been laid off. You don't know him that well, but you try to lighten things up complaining with him about the line and the wait. You keep your eye on him as he takes a seat in the bleachers, stepping uneasily to the top row.

Nikki is near the court, talking to her brother who's in uniform — not a police uniform but a black-and-white striped referee shirt. Because you trust her, you tell her you're worried about Paul. She gives you a card. "Call this number if you think he needs help," she says. It's not her business card or another branch of the police. It's the co-responders who deal with mental health, addiction, and other non-criminal calls that used to go to the police.

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Early in the game, Paul starts yelling after a missed traveling call on an opponent playing against his daughter's team. It was pretty bad refereeing, you admit, but you and the families around Paul understand that something's not right.

At halftime you're outside getting some fresh air and hear Paul in his car, arguing on the phone with someone. He sounds alternately angry and desperate. He bangs his fist on the steering wheel hard enough to hit the horn by mistake. In the silence that follows, Paul's sobbing can be heard across the lot. After a minute he gets out of his car, stumbles. A man nearby tries to help him up but he pushes him away and gets back in his car.

friendly gestures.

They're casually dressed in khaki pants and dark short sleeve knit shirts. You notice a police car pulling in quietly, lights off, and parking.

While you can't make out the words, the tone is soft and curious. Not commands, but questions. Paul slowly gets out of the car and leans back against the hood, shoulders slumped. One of the people puts her hand lightly on his shoulder, maintaining eye contact as they talk, then moves her hand to the roof of the car. Her posture is open, non-combative.

"I just want to go see my daughter play," Paul is saying loudly.

Who'll drive his daughter home if he gets arrested? You doubt he could enter his own address into the autodrive app. You've heard all about the alternative units that work with the police but have never seen the non-police responders at work before.

You walk back inside as play resumes, cheering maybe a bit louder for Paul's daughter.

A few minutes later, you notice Paul and one of the co-responders standing just inside the door. After the final buzzer, his daughter runs over and hugs him. "You did good, you did so good," he is saying as you leave the gym.

You see the co-responders walking with Paul back to his car, a van parked next to it. The police cruiser is gone. All conversation is focused on the girl as she recounts the game to them. Paul and his daughter climb in the back of the van, as one responder programs the auto-drive destination in Paul's car.

"Let's go home," she says as she climbs into the van, and it follows Paul's vehicle out of the parking lot and up the road.

You head home yourself, thinking — it isn't peace on Earth, but when will that ever happen? Maybe another future. But for now, there's a way to prevent the type of escalating incidents that used to end with a police officer firing a Taser or gun — without branding a person with a permanent criminal record at a time when he or she needs space, understanding and treatment.

And that's better than it used to be, back here in the present.

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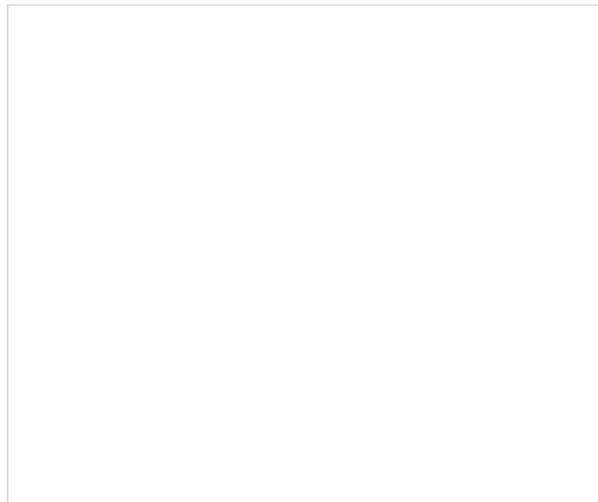
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