

**There Could Be Many More Kenoshas Across Wisconsin**

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In August of 2020, the police violence and Black Lives Matter protests that have rocked cities across the country for years came to a head in Kenosha, a small Wisconsin city between Milwaukee and Chicago. On August 23, a Kenosha police officer shot Jacob Blake, a young Black man, seven times in the back as he was trying to enter his car. Coming on the heels of the killing Alvin Cole in nearby Wauwatosa and Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery in other parts of the country, protests quickly spread in the wake of Jacob Blake's killing. In Kenosha, Black Lives Matter protesters clashed with armed, white counter-protesters who claimed to be protecting local businesses. These clashes turned deadly when Kyle Rittenhouse, a white 17-year old from a city across the border in Illinois fired into the crowd, killing two protesters. Black Lives Matter protests and the threat of rightwing, white militias continued and ultimately the National Guard was called in to control the situation.

Kenosha contains the particularly combustible combination of a predominantly white city seeing the influx of significant Black and Latinx communities, a largely liberal city with significant pockets of conservative voters, and a city with declining crime rates and a growing police force. While data shows that property and violent crime has generally decreased in Kenosha since 2012, the police and sheriff's departments, as well as its funding have expanded. These dynamics set the stage for the police violence, protests and violent backlash we see in Kenosha--and they are present in small cities across Wisconsin. If we do not grapple with these realities, we fear we may see many more Kenoshas.

This paper seeks to explore the broader context in Kenosha and illustrate similar patterns in other cities. We draw on data on recent demographic change, crime, policing and politics to show how the situation in Kenosha may not be so different from others around the state. This white paper is a collaborative project of several members of the University of Wisconsin Justice Lab, founded at the beginning of the year by Sociology Professor John Eason, which supports scholarship focused on ending racial, economic, and health disparities across the rural-urban interface. In this paper we draw on our collective research experience which includes a range of studies of policing, punishment and political life in cities.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE IN WISCONSIN'S SMALL CITIES

When the media, politicians and Wisconsin residents think about racial diversity and conflict in our state, many associate it exclusively with Milwaukee and, perhaps, Madison. There is an implicit assumption that the rest of the state is near universally white. But as the recent events in Kenosha demonstrate, that is a misconception that must be rethought. Indeed Kenosha has long had a small, but meaningful Black and Latinx population that has grown to represent a full 25% of the city today. Similar, if not as significant, changes have happened in cities across the state.

It is true that in 1980 only three of Wisconsin's 25 small cities (cities with a population over 20,000 but less than 100,000) were 1% Black (Milwaukee, Madison, Racine, Kenosha, Beloit). Ten cities were at least 1% Latinx and two cities were 1% Asian American. Nearly all of these cities were in Southern Wisconsin near Madison, Milwaukee and the Chicago suburbs.

*Table 1: Racial Demographics of Wisconsin Cities in 1980, U.S. Census*

	<b>Pop. 1980</b>	<b>% Black 1980</b>	<b>% Hisp. 1980</b>	<b>% Asian 1980</b>
<b>Milwaukee</b>	636212	23.10	4.10	0.57
<b>Madison</b>	170616	2.70	1.31	1.58
<b>Green Bay</b>	87899	0.25	0.68	0.43
<b>Racine</b>	85725	14.74	6.42	0.34
<b>Kenosha</b>	77685	3.62	4.00	0.37
<b>West Allis</b>	63982	0.07	0.83	0.43
<b>Appleton</b>	59032	0.08	0.55	0.53
<b>Eau Claire</b>	51509	0.25	0.38	0.45
<b>Wauwatosa</b>	51308	0.67	0.59	0.58
<b>Janesville</b>	51071	0.22	0.71	0.36
<b>Waukesha</b>	50319	0.38	5.13	0.55
<b>Oshkosh</b>	49620	0.59	0.52	0.45
<b>La Crosse</b>	48347	0.29	0.48	0.32
<b>Sheboygan</b>	48085	0.12	1.60	0.28

	Pop. 1980	% Black 1980	% Hisp. 1980	% Asian 1980
<b>Fond Du Lac</b>	35863	0.09	1.26	0.22
<b>Beloit</b>	35207	11.30	1.00	0.69
<b>Brookfield</b>	34035	0.33	0.61	1.43
<b>Manitowoc</b>	32547	0.16	0.91	0.46
<b>Wausau</b>	32426	0.07	0.30	0.20
<b>Greenfield</b>	31467	0.26	1.03	0.51
<b>New Berlin</b>	30529	0.05	0.58	0.77
<b>Superior</b>	29571	0.36	0.36	0.28
<b>Menomonee Falls</b>	27845	0.17	0.45	0.25
<b>Stevens Point</b>	22970	0.38	0.74	0.82
<b>Neenah</b>	22432	0.06	0.67	0.41
<b>West Bend</b>	21484	0.03	0.77	0.17
<b>South Milwaukee</b>	21069	0.07	1.32	0.36

By 2010 every one of Wisconsin's 35 small cities was at least 1% Latinx, all but four were 1% Asian, and all but 7 were 1% Black. While the Milwaukee and Madison areas are certainly still the center of the Black and Latinx community in the state, cities in every region of the state have increasingly diverse populations.

Even in communities where the total number of people of color remains small, demographic changes can be noticeable and fast. Between 2000 and 2010 the Black community (as a percentage of total population) more than doubled in Wausau, Watertown, West Bend, Green Bay, Superior, Janesville, Neenah, West Allis, Greenfield, Sheboygan, and Menomonee Falls. The Latinx community more than doubled in Wausau, Fond Du Lac, West Bend, Janesville, West Allis, De Pere, Greenfield, and Fitchburg. The Asian population doubled in Menomonee Falls, Franklin, and Sun Prairie.

*Table 2: Demographic Change in Wisconsin Cities, 2000 - 2010, U.S. Census*

<b>City Name</b>	<b>Pop. 2010</b>	<b>% Black, 2010</b>	<b>% Hisp, 2010</b>	<b>% Asian 2010</b>	<b>% Black 2000</b>	<b>% Hisp, 2000</b>	<b>% Asian, 2000</b>
Milwaukee	594833	40.0	17.3	3.5	37.3	12.0	2.9
Madison	233209	7.3	6.8	7.4	5.8	4.1	5.8
Green Bay	104057	4.0	15.2	4.2	1.4	7.1	3.8
Kenosha	99218	11.5	17.6	1.7	7.7	10.0	1.0
Racine	78860	22.8	23.1	0.9	20.3	14.0	0.6
Appleton	72623	3.1	5.7	7.4	1.0	2.5	4.6
Waukesha	70718	3.6	12.2	3.6	1.3	8.6	2.2
Oshkosh	66083	4.0	3.2	3.2	2.2	1.7	3.0
Eau Claire	65883	1.1	2.4	5.0	0.7	1.0	3.7
Janesville	63575	2.1	5.4	1.6	1.3	2.6	1.0
West Allis	60411	6.2	12.6	2.8	1.3	3.5	1.3
La Crosse	51320	2.5	2.1	3.9	1.6	1.1	4.7
Sheboygan	49288	3.2	10.2	11.4	0.9	6.0	6.5
Wauwatosa	46396	5.2	3.3	4.3	2.0	1.7	1.9
Fond Du Lac	43021	2.6	7.8	1.6	1.9	2.9	1.5
New Berlin	39584	0.7	2.3	4.5	0.4	1.6	2.3
Wausau	39106	1.2	3.1	12.0	0.5	1.0	11.4
Brookfield	37920	1.2	2.3	10.0	0.8	1.2	3.8
Beloit	36966	12.9	20.0	1.1	15.4	9.1	1.2
Greenfield	36720	4.1	10.2	5.4	1.0	3.9	2.3
Menomonee Falls	35626	3.5	2.8	6.1	1.5	1.2	0.9
Franklin	35451	5.1	5.2	6.4	5.2	2.6	2.1

City Name	Pop. 2010	% Black, 2010	% Hisp, 2010	% Asian 2010	% Black 2000	% Hisp, 2000	% Asian, 2000
Oak Creek	34451	3.7	8.1	6.5	1.8	4.5	2.4
Manitowoc	33736	1.6	5.2	6.4	0.6	2.5	3.8
West Bend	31078	1.6	4.1	0.8	0.3	1.8	0.5
Sun Prairie	29364	8.9	5.2	5.9	3.1	2.7	1.3
Superior	27244	1.8	1.9	1.4	0.7	0.8	0.8
Stevens Point	26711	1.4	4.1	4.7	0.5	1.6	4.8
Mount Pleasant	26197	6.8	8.4	4.1			
Neenah	25501	1.4	4.5	2.0	8.6	6.5	3.2
Fitchburg	25260	10.4	17.2	4.9	0.3	2.0	1.0
Caledonia	24705	2.8	4.3	1.9			
Muskego	24135	0.3	2.3	0.9	0.2	1.3	0.5
Watertown	23861	0.8	7.3	0.8	0.3	4.9	0.6
De Pere	23800	0.9	2.2	1.5	0.5	1.0	0.8
Mequon	23132	2.8	2.0	3.6	2.3	1.2	2.4
South Milwaukee	21156	2.0	8.0	1.1	1.0	4.0	0.7

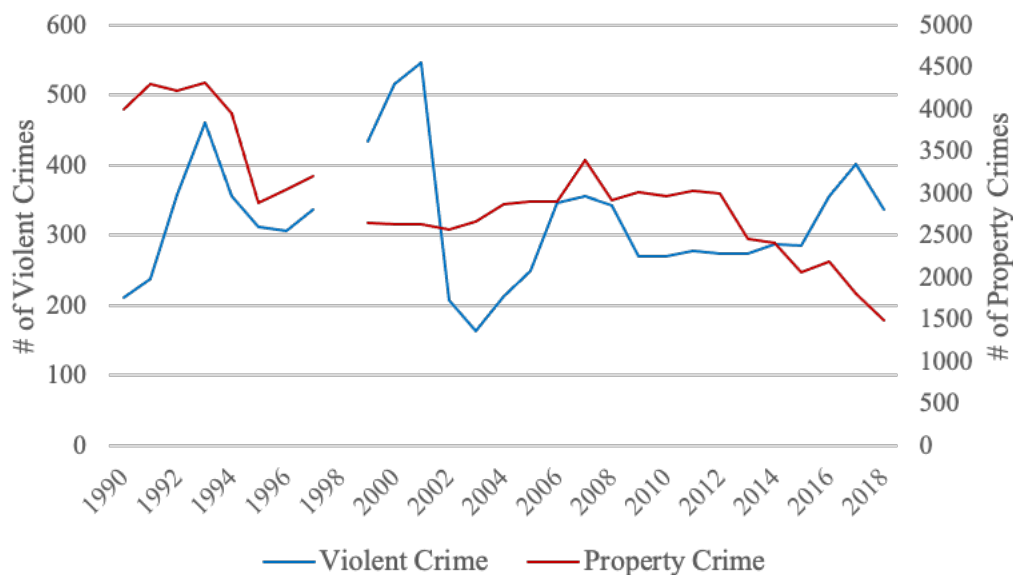
Being 1% Black, Latinx, or Asian may seem like a laughably low bar for a city’s racial diversity— but it would be a mistake to ignore this racial change. Thousands of Black, Latinx, and Asian people live in cities across the state that have historically been, and are often still believed to be, overwhelmingly white. For people of color themselves this may mean scrutiny on the street, entanglement with local law enforcement, and discrimination in housing and employment. For local leaders this poses new challenges for governing multiethnic cities, managing potential racial conflict, and addressing local racial inequality. And this racial change must be recognized when analyzing the political opinions, resentment, and fears of white residents.

The police shootings in Kenosha and Wauwatosa this year may be the most tragic, extreme example of what can happen in historically white cities with a growing Black population, but similar and smaller conflicts are certainly happening across the state. We must pay closer attention to the experiences of even the smallest populations of color in Wisconsin's small cities.

### CRIME AND POLICING IN KENOSHA AND WISCONSIN'S SMALL CITIES

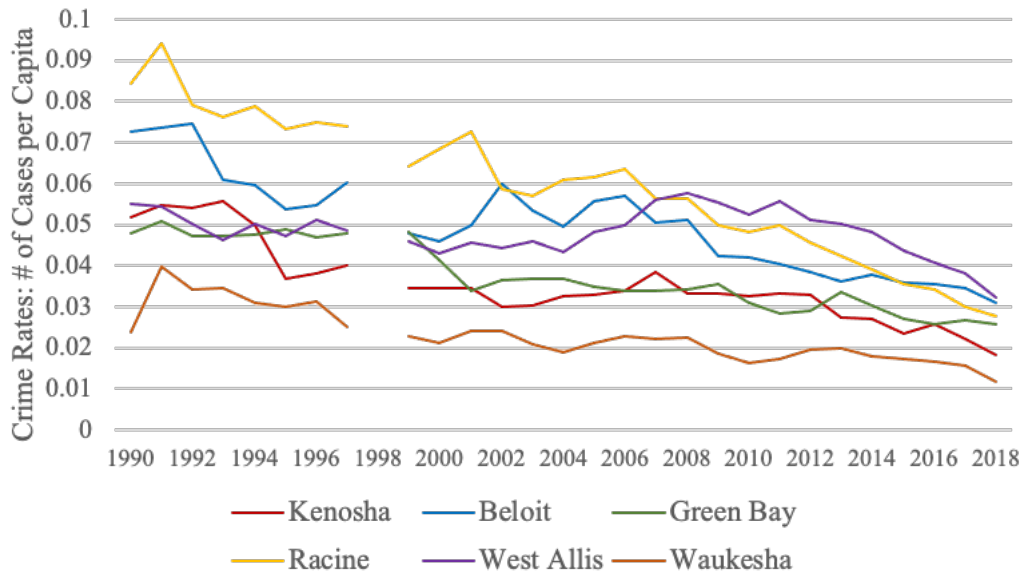
Increased racial diversity in Kenosha and other small cities in Wisconsin has not led to a similar increase in crime. According to our analysis of Uniform Crime Reports from the FBI (see figure below), property crime in Kenosha has declined since 1990. Violent crime rates have been rather volatile during this period but remained below their early 2000s peak for the last several years (the increase in violent crime data from 2014 – 2016 is due to a change in the definition of aggravated assault). Similarly, crime rates have declined in many similar small cities—such as Racine, Beloit and Green Bay—since the 1990s (see figure below).

Figure 1: Number of Important Crimes in the City of Kenosha, 1990-2018



Source: The Uniform Crime Reports system.

Figure 2: Comparison of the City of Kenosha with Comparable Wisconsin Cities, 1990-2018



Source: The Uniform Crime Reports system and the U.S. Census Bureau

Despite these declining crime rates, Kenosha’s police department has continued to grow. From 2007 to 2013 the City of Kenosha Police Department increased by 3.1%, a rate slightly faster than the city’s population growth (2.6%). This at a time when the average city police department in Wisconsin shrank by nearly 15%. Following the same pattern, Kenosha’s city police budget increased by 16.9% while the average Wisconsin city police budget shrank. The Kenosha County Sheriff Department similarly grew from 2007 – 2016 at a much faster rate than the state’s average. Some of this may be due to laudable attempts to diversify the police force. Both departments increased their Black and Latinx police officers at a much faster rate than the average Wisconsin city or county department.

Table 3: The Comparison between KPD and WI Average<sup>1</sup>

	2007		2013	
	Average	KPD	Average	KPD
# of Full-time LEOs	84.6	192	71.4	198

# of All LEOs	86.4	192	74.0	198
% White	96.9%	92.2%	96.3%	89.9%
% Black	1.4%	3.1%	0.6%	2.5%
% Hispanic	0.6%	4.2%	1.0%	6.1%
% Other Races	1.0%	0.5%	1.9%	1.5%
% Unknown Race	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%
Budget <sup>2</sup>	9,591.4	23,028.1	8,698.1	26,920.8

<sup>1</sup> The data of KPD are missing in the 2016 wave, the most recently publicly released one.

<sup>2</sup> The unit of the annual operating budget is thousand dollars.

*Table 4: The Comparison between KSD and WI Average*

	2007		2013		2016	
	Average	KSD	Average	KSD	Average	KSD
# of Full-time LEOs	106.4	103	108.4	113	109.5	120
# of All LEOs	108.2	103	112.9	113	114.1	120
% White	96.3%	97.1%	91.0%	91.2%	96.1%	89.2%
% Black	1.3%	1.0%	0.8%	3.5%	1.6%	3.3%
% Hispanic	0.8%	1.0%	0.7%	5.3%	1.0%	6.7%
% Other Races	1.6%	1.0%	0.3%	0.0%	1.2%	0.8%
% Unknown Race	0.4%	0.0%	7.1%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%
Budget <sup>1</sup>	18,250.6	30,020.6	19,393.0	36,510.4	24,968.0	35,920.5

<sup>1</sup> The unit of the annual operating budget is thousand dollars.

As this analysis shows the residents of Kenosha confront a larger, better-funded police force even as there are fewer crimes prosecuted in the community. The ethnographic research discussed in the following section illustrates how increases in policing can cause significant difficulties for growing Black and Latinx populations in such cities.



## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON CRIME AND PUNISHMENT IN THE MIDWEST

The suspicion Black people face from the police and the fear they express in these cities can be all too real. These findings are part of larger study drawing on 70 interviews with formerly incarcerated individuals and parole agents in the Midwest. Dennis, a 29-year old, Black father to three young children, worries often about being murdered by the police. He told us in November, “I’m afraid that if I get pulled over, that they might come to the car, and just for some reason be scared that day, and any sudden movement they’ll think I’m holding a gun. You protect and serve who? Not me or mine. Not none of us.”

Dennis described an issue confronting small cities across the region. We saw this on full display in Kenosha when Jacob Blake, who is the same age as Dennis, was shot seven times in the back in front of his three children, paralyzing him. What followed was nationwide protests. In Kenosha these protests turned to standoffs with white militia and Kyle Rittenhouse, a 17 year old known Trump and “Blue Lives Matter” advocate strolled past local Kenosha police with his assault rifle after killing two BLM protesters.

Demographic change, of course, neither causes nor justifies violence (by police or anyone else). But it can create a situation where people of color are still treated as suspicious and outsiders even as they represent a significant minority, and where white people react strongly to changes in their community. For example, Leslie, who is a mother of two sons and lives in a small city, described the frustration she felt after her son and his friend, two Black teenagers, were stopped in her son’s car by the police. Leslie and her husband had recently bought and registered the car in their name for their son. “The police pulled them over, talking about, his license plates don’t match his car. No, you pulled him over because you were hoping that you had two black kids and when they rolled down the windows, you would smell weed. That’s so unnecessary.” Leslie often tells other Black people she knows not to drive into largely white, neighboring cities where people of color are in the minority. “They’re looking to stop you for anything,” she said of the police.

## POLITICAL DIVERSITY AND PARTISAN DIVISION IN WISCONSIN’S SMALL CITIES

Conflicts over crime, policing, and racial change in Wisconsin’s small cities take place against the backdrop of larger partisan divisions in these communities. As demonstrated by the significant protests mounted in Kenosha both supporting and opposing the Black

Lives Matter movement, Kenosha and Wisconsin’s small cities contain significant political divisions. Kenosha has historically been a Democratic city with a sizable Republican majority, but Donald Trump made gains in both 2016 and 2020 and came closer to winning the city than any Republican presidential candidate in nearly 30 years.

In a state with photo-finish Presidential contests, votes in Wisconsin’s small cities are bitterly fought for by candidates of both parties. Some small cities—especially Madison’s suburbs and the homes of University of Wisconsin System schools—are consistently very Democratic, while others—especially Milwaukee suburbs—regularly give Republicans 20-30 point margins. But every small city, and indeed nearly every neighborhood in every city, contains significant numbers of both Democrats and Republicans. As our partisan politics grows increasingly contentious, the differences between neighbors in these cities may grow more and more intense.

*Table 5: Presidential Election Results in Wisconsin Small Cities, 2012 - 2020, WI Election Commission*

	<b>2020 Pres.</b>	<b>2016 Pres.</b>	<b>2012 Pres.</b>
<b>Appleton</b>	D + 12.36	D + 5.24	D + 8.44
<b>Beloit</b>	D + 21.25	D + 23.6	D + 38.82
<b>Brookfield</b>	R + 8.47	R + 19.51	R + 36.43
<b>Caledonia</b>	R + 14.52	R + 15.77	R + 11.53
<b>De Pere</b>	R + .03	R + 5.06	R + 2.74
<b>Eau Claire</b>	D + 23	D + 16.84	D + 20.8
<b>Fitchburg</b>	D + 59.23	D + 51.72	D + 51.71
<b>Fond Du Lac</b>	R + 8.22	R + 10.82	D + .61
<b>Franklin</b>	R + 8.22	R + 12.75	R + 18.29
<b>Green Bay</b>	D + 8.3	D + 3.33	D + 14.77
<b>Greenfield</b>	D + 4.35	R + 2.7	R + 3.3
<b>Janesville</b>	D + 18	D + 14.93	D + 25.25
<b>Kenosha</b>	D + 14.15	D + 17.07	D + 28.98
<b>La Crosse</b>	D + 32.59	D + 25.09	D + 32.33

	<b>2020 Pres.</b>	<b>2016 Pres.</b>	<b>2012 Pres.</b>
<b>Manitowoc</b>	R + 8.36	R + 9.52	D + 7.27
<b>Menomonee Falls</b>	R + 11.03	R + 19.61	R + 29.21
<b>Mequon</b>	R + 2.07	R +11.42	R + 31.14
<b>Mount Pleasant</b>	R + 1.13	R + 3.42	R + .89
<b>Muskego</b>	R + 33.84	R + 36.52	R + 39.63
<b>Neenah</b>	D + 6.09	R + .88	D + 6.22
<b>New Berlin</b>	R + 16.71	R + 22.35	R + 30.91
<b>Oak Creek</b>	R + 3.43	R + 7.85	R + 8.53
<b>Oshkosh</b>	D + 8.62	D + 4.22	D + 15.63
<b>Racine</b>	D + 33.37	D + 34.24	D + 43.3
<b>Sheboygan</b>	D + 8.4	D + 7.98	D + 16.84
<b>South Milwaukee</b>	D + 2.62	D + .59	D + 7.83
<b>Stevens Point</b>	D + 28.85	D + 23.17	D + 28.2
<b>Sun Prairie</b>	D + 40.82	D + 30.75	D + 26.74
<b>Superior</b>	D + 21.74	D + 17.59	D + 39.4
<b>Watertown</b>	R + 24.22	R + 26.93	R + 19.26
<b>Waukesha</b>	R + 5.4	R + 10.27	R + 15.47
<b>Wausau</b>	D + 8.08	D + 4.16	D + 11.5
<b>Wauwatosa</b>	D + 34.08	D + 21.86	D + 1.40
<b>West Allis</b>	D +11.04	D +2.99	D + 4.76
<b>West Bend</b>	R + 26.44	R + 29.13	R + 27.25

Trump’s election in 2016 threw political divisions in these cities into stark relief. While Trump underperformed prior Republicans in some of Wisconsin’s most conservative small cities, many others saw big swings toward Trump. In addition to Kenosha, Trump saw double-digit gains over Romney in Green Bay, Racine, Beloit, Janesville, Superior, Oshkosh Fond Du Lac and Manitowoc. Nationally these communities became the center of media attention as people worked to figure out how Democrats had lost so

much ground among white working-class people in the upper-Midwest and why Trump's message resonated so deeply. Locally, these communities became ground-zero for political mobilization and conflict as local Republicans sought to secure their new supporters and local Democrats fought to regain power.

In 2020, both Biden and Trump competed to gain the upper-hand in Wisconsin's small cities. Both candidates visited Kenosha in the wake of the shooting of Jacob Blake, and Trump made a final campaign stop there the day before the election and denounced the so-called "war on police." Beyond Kenosha, Biden campaigned in Manitowoc and Milwaukee; Trump campaigned in Oshkosh, Mosinee and La Crosse (among others). In the end Biden gained ground in nearly every small city in Wisconsin, beating Clinton's performance but rarely matching Obama's margins. He expanded Democratic margins in relatively wealthy suburbs while regaining some support in more working class cities.

But Trump beat his 2016 performance in Kenosha, Racine and Beloit—the three small cities with the highest Black populations. We cannot tell yet from the data whether Trump's attempt to stoke the fears of defunding the police and feed on racial resentment gained him new support among white people in these cities or if he managed to swing Black and Latinx voters to his side. What is clear is that partisan division remains strong in these three cities and in every city across the state.

## CONCLUSION

The country's reckoning with criminal justice reform and racism, brought to the center by events like Kenosha and others, is in the national spotlight. Our data shows that hiring more Latinx and Black police in Kenosha did not in fact improve the culture of the police force, nor relations between citizens and residents of color. This is in part why calls to defund the police, in lieu of other reforms, have gained so much popularity recently. One proposal is that police municipalities are given much smaller, capped budgets, as well as become folded into Departments of Health and Public Safety. There have been some related changes in urban cities and counties. For example, Denver started the [Support Team Assisted Response \(STAR\) program](#) in June that removes police from non-serious emergency calls. Also, Dane County in Wisconsin has recently established a similar [plan](#) for reforms of the criminal justice system. However, smaller cities and counties are slower in such changes. This is telling of slower changes toward racial consciousness in such regions despite racial desegregation. It means that more efforts and support for criminal justice reform and racial consciousness are needed in smaller, non-urban cities and counties.

We must rethink the role of police in supporting the health and safety of communities, as we also expand money to local governments to provide social and economic support to its residents. Additionally, what sometimes becomes lost in the conversation on criminal justice reform, are the real stories of people of color, often young people, who fear for their lives when confronted with racial animosity towards them and suspicion by police and white neighbors. It is time to change this. Any changes in criminal justice policies must also do the work of addressing deep-seated racism in communities subject to significant demographic changes and political divisions.

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