

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Can you buy peace of mind? Some wealthier Minneapolis neighborhoods are trying.
01G90FB49J4HMGVNBCGGVBDEKY

INTERVIEWER: Can you buy peace of mind? Some Minneapolis neighborhoods are trying to do just that. The Minneapolis Police Department's buyback program allows organizations, sports teams, or neighborhoods to buy extra overtime police patrols. But the program has been criticized as inequitable and further stretching the department's resources at a time when some less wealthy neighborhoods, say police, are totally unresponsive.

Michelle Phelps is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Minnesota. She's also working on a book about policing in Minneapolis. Professor, welcome back to *Minnesota Now*. How have you been?

MICHELLE I'm good. Thank you for having me.

PHELPS:

INTERVIEWER: Thanks for being here. Let's see now. The Lowry Hill neighborhood in Minneapolis, through a nonprofit created by the neighborhood's residents, got a contract with the city earlier this year for about \$210,000 in extra police patrols. The Mill District is raising money, about \$30,000, to pay for one additional officer Thursday through Sundays. I'm curious, what got us here?

MICHELLE I mean, I think there's a long answer to that question, but we clearly don't have time for that today. But I think
PHELPS: the short answer is, what got us here is really all of the tumult of summer 2020, including the coronavirus pandemic, and of course, the police murder of George Floyd.

Since then, there has been a really historic dip in the number of MPD officers, alongside an increase in certain types of violent crime in the city. And I think those two facts together have really pushed neighborhoods that have the economic wherewithal to try and figure out how they can enhance the feeling of safety for their residents.

INTERVIEWER: What is to be made of this? The neighborhoods that don't have as many resources say, well, wait a minute. What about us? What about that?

MICHELLE That's right. I mean, there's lots of ways that neighborhoods create unequal environments for their residents,
PHELPS: right? And what is, I think, particularly poignant about this example is that it's funding additional services through the Minneapolis Police Department. So if we think about the police department as fundamentally a form of redistribution of services to city residents, then I think there's something really galling to folks about the idea that you can pay for extra city protection, this thing that is supposed to be guaranteed to all neighborhoods, regardless of their ability to pay.

Now, the legal technicalities is it's not quite right because it's this buyback program and not their regular staffing hours. But I think, certainly, there's a real equity issue here that is created by the unequal ability of some neighborhoods to be able to fund these kinds of services.

INTERVIEWER: On the other side of the coin, though, I can see if private security, say, patrols a neighborhood, the police department has more resources to focus its attention on high crime neighborhoods, right? But this is not where we're talking about. This is through the MPD. And they say this buyback program, which I think has been in place for about 20 years, is another way for the Minneapolis Police to target crime trends and some hotspots. Again, what are the problems with that?

**MICHELLE
PHELPS:**

Right. So, I mean, I think there's two things that's a little bit typical to wrap the brain around. I mean, the first is, that because MPD is at this historic low level of staff, they are running their officers through a tremendous amount of overtime. But at the same time, there's been this real push for police reform and for better standards around officer use of force and officer accountability.

And one of the initiatives under that reform agenda is to cap officer overtime because we know that officers who work those longer shifts and those longer weeks are more prone to commit misconduct while on duty. And so I think one of the questions that city Council and others are asking is, if MPD is stretched to capacity with its current force size, if they're stretching the capacity of their officers' overtime, then why is it that officers have time in their schedules to do this off duty work?

I tried to look up the regulations on this. It wasn't clear to me if the new caps on overtime in MPD policy covered these buyback programs, which are both considered off-duty work, but also officers are in uniform, and they're paid through their MPD-- their funding is routed through the MPD, so it's sort of this in between non-MPD and MPD-funded. And so I think there's a real question about, where are these hours coming from? And are they at the expense of having officers available to do this overtime work in the department or at the expense of officers being well rested?

The only thing I'll say on the other side of the equation, though, is that this is a relatively small number of hours. This is a relatively small amount relative to the funding of the MPD and a relatively small number of the overtime hours that officers are logging. So I don't think it's likely to have these big macro level effects given the scale, but I do think people are right to be wondering, how is there time for this when there seems to be no time for regular duties?

INTERVIEWER:

Mm-hmm. I wonder, though-- and you know this, too, with your research, the UK is using private police to supplement their law enforcement services. This has happened across the US, too. Oakland, California, some neighborhoods are hiring private security to patrol their neighborhoods because of a rise in crime. Do you think that Minneapolis might be going in that direction, using private sources perhaps because the MPD staff is stretched too thin?

**MICHELLE
PHELPS:**

So private security has always existed alongside formal state-run policing systems. And I think, certainly, one of the things that we're seeing in the post-2020 world is a turn towards those alternatives. And sometimes that looks like-- if we think about the phrase "alternatives" rather than private security, we can think about things like the new behavioral crisis response teams as an alternative. We can think about violence interruption work as alternatives to police. We can think about private security.

But we can also think about things like community patrols. And I think what we've seen is a real explosion of interest in all of those different alternative forms, including expanding traditional private security. If you go downtown, for instance, there has long been private security visible in certain commercial spaces in the city. I think, certainly, neighborhoods are turning more to that today in the wake of everything that we've seen since summer of 2020. But it's by no means a new phenomenon.

And I think the idea of turning to alternatives to police is much broader than thinking about just, OK, well, why don't we replace the beat cop with this private security? And because there are so many of these different forms, we really don't have a lot of research yet on which ones are most effective.

And when we say most effective, I think part of the question is, what is the thing you're trying to fix? Do you mean effectiveness in terms of impact on certain kinds of crime rates? Do you mean effectiveness in terms of preventing police contact or preventing police violence? Do you mean effectiveness in terms of addressing some of the deeper issues that lead to police contact or that lead to security issues? I think all of those suggest different answers about which alternatives might be the most successful.

INTERVIEWER: You may have touched on this at the beginning of the conversation just a little bit, do you see any connection between the defund the police movement and this push to install more of these police patrols?

MICHELLE PHELPS: I think what we're seeing-- in summer 2020, the attention was really on police violence, right?

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm.

MICHELLE PHELPS: There were these historic protests, mass mobilization in response to the murder of George Floyd. And so the salience of police violence was really high profile to people in the community. I think we're in a different context now two years later, where victimization in the community, not at the hands of police officers, but at the hands of other residents, is much more salient to folks.

And I don't think that you can draw a clean line between calls to defund the police and the rise and exposure to things like homicide and shootings in the cities, in no small part because Minneapolis didn't, in fact, defund the police in any significant way. We saw reductions in the number of officers, but that wasn't because their funding was radically reduced.

But I think what you can say is that there was sort of a crisis of faith in policing in summer 2020. And that that together with all of the reverberations of the pandemic have had a lot of fall-down consequences, including the rise in certain kinds of victimization and including the decline in the number of MPD officers, but also including the expansion of all of these city-run and privately-run and community-based alternatives to police that I think are just getting started but have the kind of seeds of potential of thinking about a way to get out of this bind of being continually, kind of, ping-ponging between attention on police victimization and attention on community victimization and framing police as the logical solution to that victimization.

INTERVIEWER: In my intro, I mentioned that you're writing this book. And this is a book that's following the political struggle over the Minneapolis Police Department from about, what, 2015 to 2022? When you look at that time frame, what do you see when you look at the way that the Department and the city have changed over that time?

MICHELLE PHELPS: You know, I joke that as a sociologist, there's no question that I can't answer with the answer, yes, no, it depends.

[LAUGHTER]

And I think the answer to the question of, what changed in Minneapolis, that's really at the core of my book project. And the answer is, everything and nothing. I mean, I think the political conversation around who the MPD are and what functions they serve in our community was radically altered in summer 2020. And on the other hand, here we find ourselves again in this conversation of, crime is on the rise in communities, and so therefore the answer is we need more police, so we will pay privately for the police.

And so in some ways, it feels like this conversation, which in the book I call the politics of policing, that we're sort of trapped in this loop, and you can go way farther back than just Jamar Clark in 2015. You can go all the way back to the unrest in 1967 or even farther back in Minneapolis' history to find these examples of these moments where police violence, particularly against Black residents, is particularly salient, and then these moments where the narrative gets flipped again, and we're back trying to build up the force.

And what I'm cautiously optimistic about in Minneapolis is that the seeds that are being planted by these years of mobilization, by these years of conversations and investigations and reforms, is sort of this parallel process of really trying to create some accountability inside of MPD for officer misconduct, and outside of MPD in the court systems, but also trying to think about how do we step outside of this seemingly never endless revolving door of outrage and reform till the next wave of outrage by thinking about how do we create safety and more deeper and long lasting interventions in communities?

INTERVIEWER: Well, when the book comes out, you'll have to be back. Is that OK?

MICHELLE I would love to. Yeah, thank you.

PHELPS:

INTERVIEWER: Excellent. Professor, thanks for your time right now.

MICHELLE Sure thing. Have a good rest of your day.

PHELPS:

INTERVIEWER: You, too. Michelle Phelps is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Minnesota.