

Transformation of the Seattle Police Department:

*Institutional Reform and Innovation
for the Future of Public Safety*

Dr. Antonio M. Oftelie



LEADERSHIP FOR A
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*Dedicated to the family of John T. Williams and the tireless community of Seattle
advocates for police reform, as well as the people of the Seattle Police Department
who went above and beyond to set a new standard for professional policing.*



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This white paper documents the progress and innovation that the Seattle Police Department made while under a federal consent decree. The white paper provides context on how the Department reformed policy and practice to achieve constitutional and lawful policing and transformed its capacity to deliver better public safety services and outcomes over time. The white paper is designed to inform future public policy and institutional reform efforts, as well as help current and aspiring public, private, and community leaders learn about and plan strategies for transformational change.

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Introduction

Recently, officers from a Seattle Police Alternative Response Team arrived on scene to remove an RV and its occupant (John) from a no parking zone. In some ways, the situation seemed ripe for conflict. As a Seattle Police Department (SPD) report detailed, “John has a history of being irate, loud, and hostile during previous encampment cleans.” In addition, the RV was cluttered with belongings that had spilled onto the road and sidewalk, adding to the sense that the interaction could become unwieldy. In fact, when SPD officers first approached John, he began shouting and punching the RV before retreating into the vehicle and refusing to leave. Yet just as officers were weighing whether to obtain a warrant and arrest John, a sergeant who had known this man for a long time began talking to him and de-escalating from outside the van. After an approximately 15-minute conversation, John agreed to collect his belongings and exit the RV, and the sergeant continued speaking with him while his RV was towed and connected John with team members from the Department of Human Services.¹

This true story may surprise you. Indeed, many community members across Seattle, as well as the nation, have been conditioned to assume the worst outcomes in these situations. But the sort of positive outcome described above can be the norm, and, in Seattle, these positive outcomes represent the new standard for serving individuals and creating safe and thriving communities.

But it was not always so. Late on the afternoon of August 30, 2010, an SPD officer stopped his patrol vehicle at an intersection in downtown Seattle.² After exiting his vehicle, he began striding toward John Williams, a Native American woodcarver who had been carrying a piece of wood and a single-bladed pocketknife as he limped across a crosswalk. Almost immediately, and with a gun in his hand, the officer began yelling at the hard-of-hearing Williams, “Hey, hey, hey! Put the knife down. Put the knife down. Put the knife down!”³ The officer then opened fire, killing Williams. “What happened? He didn’t do anything,” a witness said to the officer. “Ma’am,” the officer responded, “he had a knife, and he wouldn’t drop it.”^{4,5}

An intense debate emerged over what occurred that afternoon. The officer insisted that Williams posed a threat.⁶ However, as one SPD official said the day after the event, there were “a lot more questions than answers.” In part because of this uncertainty, several Native American

and other community organizations were harshly critical of SPD’s treatment of Williams (including the Department’s depiction of him as “‘a chronic inebriate’ with a ‘rap sheet’”). Protesters took to the streets and, in one case, broke the window of an unoccupied SPD vehicle. The sense of intense community concern only intensified in the winter of 2011 when the Department’s then-Firearms Review Board unanimously concluded that “the shooting was ‘unjustified and outside of policy, tactics, and training’” but prosecutors decided not to pursue criminal charges against the officer.⁷ The involved officer resigned, but protesters again gathered to speak out against police brutality.⁸

The Williams killing set the occasion for a broader and sustained community discussion about the Seattle Police Department. Amid growing public consternation and demands for federal intervention from notable community groups (including Mothers for Police Accountability, El Centro De La Raza, Asian Counseling and Referral Service, the Coalition for Gender Equity and Social Justice in King County, and Seattle Purpose Dignity Action) for federal intervention, the United States Department Of Justice (“DOJ”) announced in March 2011 that it would conduct a “pattern or practice” investigation of SPD not just into the Williams incident but into the Department’s overall performance and police practices.

The DOJ released the results of its investigation in a December 2011 report that documented substantial unnecessary and excessive use of force, as well as ineffective oversight and training regarding the use of force. DOJ found that when SPD officers used force, it occurred “in an unconstitutional manner nearly 20 percent of the time” and that the internal accountability system needed to be repaired.⁹ The release of the report led to the negotiation of a Consent Decree agreement between DOJ and the City of Seattle that the Court approved on September 21, 2012.¹⁰

At the start of the Seattle Consent Decree in 2012, police use of force, stops, detentions, and other critical police-resident interactions were rarely documented and tracked. For instance, “force often went unreported,” and even when reported, “it was documented on paper and stuffed, unreviewed, in file cabinets.”¹¹ Officers had inferior training and supervision on how to de-escalate volatile interactions or resolve incidents with people experiencing

a mental health crisis. Supervision and discipline was haphazard, which led to inconsistent accountability. The Seattle community had no meaningful, consistent, and reliable access to SPD data or outcomes, and community trust in police was at a nadir.

Fast forward to 2025, and SPD has improved its practices and performance across several critical functions. SPD officers have updated and enhanced policies and practices in numerous areas; expanded knowledge and skills on harm reduction, de-escalation, and crisis intervention; greatly improved data transparency and analytics; and embraced a service-oriented mission and values. The Consent Decree provided a foundation for constitutional and lawful policy and practice, and the environment for learning, innovation, and growth.

The profound improvement in constitutional and lawful policing can be demonstrated through how officers are performing on a day-to-day basis—and the numerous assessments, evaluations, audits, and reviews that have been conducted by multiple federal Monitors, independent accountability entities, and SPD itself. Today, SPD officers and supervisors consistently adhere to improved use of force policies. Officer use of force has declined 44 percent from 2015 to 2024. SPD officers respond to around 10,000 people in crisis per year, and Crisis Intervention Teams have dramatically enhanced interactions and outcomes—with force used in only 1.5 percent of contacts with individuals experiencing crises and improvement in connecting individuals in crisis to supportive human services. When officers stop or detain a person, they regularly articulate the reason for a stop and provide justification for searches. Throughout this change and innovation, and as officers used force less regularly, officer safety also improved. And although the last nearly 13 years has seen ups and downs with respect to reported crime, Seattle’s experience in the years immediately following the implementation of new force policies, procedures, and training in the field was that crime remained flat – indicating that the Decree by itself did not detract from public safety. (See Appendix A.)

For example, a notable accomplishment at the intersection of use of force policy and practice is the improvement in officer mindset and decision-making during complex incidents. Often, when a person must be detained and is verbally or physically resisting, an officer could justifiably use force, but, instead, SPD officers are regularly utilizing de-escalation and communication to resolve these types of situations. Statistically, this is represented by the 44 percent reduction in “Type I Force” (force causing transitory pain such as twisting someone’s arm to put on handcuffs or intentionally pointing a

firearm) and “Type II Force” (force expected to cause physical injury but not substantial bodily harm including tools such as tasers).¹² This change in outcomes indicates that better policies, training, and tools have changed the values, decision-making, and behavior of officers, as well as fostered an organizational culture that values harm reduction and the sanctity of life.

To sustain this progress, a robust and rigorous supervision, discipline, and learning system is in place. SPD has standardized data collection on incidents in which force was used, and a layered system of supervision—including a Force Investigation Team and a Force Review Board—analyzes and learns from incidents, ensures discipline and training when necessary, and refines policy and training for the future. Bolstering the reform and innovation in policing practices is an accountability system comprised of the Office of Inspector General, the Office of Police Accountability, and the Community Police Commission (CPC). The accountability system is designed to not only track and investigate breaches in policy and practice, but also learn from incidents and engage with the community to develop new policies and practices. This helps SPD integrate community voices into its policing services approach.

A rigorous analytics system underpins the SPD’s learning and pursuit of positive outcomes. The Consent Decree supported the use of data and analytics not only to track and understand day-to-day incidents and results, but also improve understanding of community-wide demands and population-level outcomes. The development of SPD’s Data Analytics Platform (DAP) enables the organization to focus not just on timely response, but also on equity, accountability, and quality of policing services. These innovations help SPD to understand where to focus policing and tailor services, better understand and address the root causes of disparate impact, and co-create solutions with the community through micro-community policing plans.

Exceeding the baseline requirements of the Consent Decree, Seattle has leaned into improving the overall mindset and culture of public safety services. The Before the Badge initiative has new officers invest time gaining deeper cultural and social understanding of the communities they will serve. The Active Bystandership for Law Enforcement (ABLE) program helps officers create the social conditions and communication methods that support de-escalation in incidents, hold each other accountable to high-standards, and foster wellbeing throughout the organization. And the Community Assisted Response and Engagement (CARE) was established to respond to and support people

in the community experiencing a non-emergency crisis or behavioral health challenge. While not directly mandated by the Consent Decree, the ongoing improvement at the intersection of policy, practice, and culture shows that Seattle is fostering public safety services that safeguard the rights of all people, advocate for the sanctity of life, and ensure safe and thriving communities.

No institutional reform can be perfect, and SPD is still striving to improve safety outcomes, enhance public-facing methods of providing information on its activities (such as through online data dashboards), refine organizational culture, and engage more deeply with community to design services and build trust. The Seattle community will need to ensure, in the years to come, that the Department and its performance remain aligned with community needs and values.

At the same time, as a testament to the progress made under the Consent Decree by professionals in the public safety system, policing organizations around the nation now come to Seattle to learn from SPD and adopt policies and best practices in crisis response, de-escalation, data and analytics, critical decision-making models, and accountability systems. It is not an exaggeration to say that the City of Seattle and SPD have helped to raise the standard for reform and continuous innovation in public safety services. Ultimately, the Consent Decree was a catalyst for reform and transformation of the SPD and public safety services broadly.

Beyond the value delivered for the residents of Seattle, the policymakers, practitioners, and leaders pursuing innovation can learn from the journey of SPD. This white paper will synthesize the transformation of SPD, and elevate strategies and insights that others can learn and apply.

During the intensive years of work on the consent decree, progress wasn't always a straight line – workstreams were interdependent, experimentation and learning refined goals, and timelines shifted in response to community demands. Yet through retrospective analysis, the progress and results can be synthesized into three overarching periods of time, or phases, in which Seattle, the U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, the U.S. Attorney's Office, the United States District Court for the Western District of Washington and the court-appointed Monitoring Team collaborated on:

1. Designing the Organization for New Outcomes and Value
2. Building the Capacity for Reform and Reinvention
3. Growing an Outcomes-Oriented Organization

Under each phase, critical lessons on building organizational capabilities and evolving cultural attributes are highlighted, as well as the policies, structures, and systems that were foundational to success.

Overview of SPD and the Federal Consent Decree

SPD

Serving an area spanning 143 square miles with a population of approximately 747,300 people, SPD aims, as its mission statement reads, “to prevent crime, enforce the law, and support quality public safety by delivering respectful, professional, and dependable police services.” To that end, the Department—which has a \$457.86 million budget—has 1,200 authorized/funded FTE sworn officers and 631 civilian employees. Their primary duties include operating patrols in all five precincts as well as 59 square miles of waterways; Seattle’s 911 Communication Center for police, fire, and medical emergencies; traffic and parking enforcement; and the SWAT and K9 Unit.¹³ To oversee this work, at the time of the Consent Decree, the Department was led by a Chief of Police who was supported by two deputy chiefs; assistant chiefs focused on specific issues (e.g., investigations); and a leadership team consisting of (among other roles) a COO, Chief of Staff, and General Counsel and Executive Director of Analytics and Research.¹⁴ The civilians on the command staff were all added during the Consent Decree to achieve its goals.

Federal Consent Decree

A federal consent decree is a court-ordered and legally binding settlement agreement that pursues institutional reform. Consent decrees have been utilized since 1994, when Congress passed 34 U.S.C 12601 (previously 42 U.S.C 14141), a law authorizing the United States Attorney General to investigate and litigate cases involving “a pattern or practice of conduct by law enforcement officers” that violate Constitutional or federal rights. The law, part of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, provided the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice with the authority to investigate state or local police departments, known as pattern-or-practice cases. The law also authorizes The U.S. Attorney General to take state and local police departments to court, with the aim of securing a settlement agreement and consent decree that address the institutional failures underlying systemic police misconduct.

Pattern or practice cases and the resulting consent decrees are designed to achieve institutional and organizational reform, innovation, and change. In policing, the remedies associated with these cases are geared toward improving policies and practices to realize sustainable change and drive an approach to public safety that is

effective and constitutional. As part of these agreements an independent monitoring team is activated to assist the agency in reform plans, assess progress and address barriers to implementation, provide technical assistance to the city and agency, and advise the court in implementation and enforcement.

The express goal of the Seattle Consent Decree was to “ensur[e] that police services are delivered to the people of Seattle in a manner that fully complies with the Constitution and laws of the United States, effectively ensures public and officer safety, and promotes public confidence.”¹⁵

The remedies in the Consent Decree were designed to turn SPD into a learning organization committed to identifying bad outcomes and self-correcting when they occurred. It was not designed to, nor did it promise, a police department that would never see personnel make mistakes or fall short of performance expectations. As the federal Monitoring Team described, “even if a human organization could somehow attain perfection, the Consent Decree does not require a perfect police department”¹⁶ but, instead, one that maintains high-quality policies, training, and performance expectations and holds officers accountable in those instances where they do not meet them. Similarly, the Decree did not address everything related to policing or public safety in Seattle. Instead, it focused on Use of Force, where the DOJ had concluded that SPD had engaged in a pattern or practice of unconstitutional policing, and on Stops, Detentions, and Bias-Free Policing, where, although DOJ did not reach a specific finding, the investigation noted serious concerns.

Further, the requirements in the Consent Decree were developed to guide SPD to a performance “baseline” or “foundation” consistent with Constitutional and lawful policing—with the “goal of ensuring that police services are delivered to the people of Seattle in a manner that fully complies with the Constitution and laws of the United States, effectively ensures public and officer safety, and promotes public confidence in the Seattle Police Department... and its officers.” The specific steps that the Decree outlined were included to help address the Department’s deficiencies and bring it up to acceptable practices consistent with the law.

In this way, the Consent Decree was consistent with the vision of the Seattle community to form SPD into an effective, transparent, accountable, trusted and legitimate

policing services organization. Practically, achieving the vision of the community and satisfying the requirements of the Consent Decree required deep change to the policies, practices, and performance of SPD in the areas of: Use of force; Stops and detentions; Crisis intervention; Bias-free policing; Supervision; and Accountability

Initially, the Mayor Mike McGinn preferred an out-of-court settlement. Amid protracted negotiations with DOJ, he flew to Washington, D.C. where a senior official for the Civil Rights Division at DOJ, provided, as one official recalled, “a little tour of people on the wrong side of history on civil rights enforcement. So the example of Bull Connor. ...It was very useful.” Ultimately, the release of DOJ’s report led to the negotiation of a Consent Decree agreement between DOJ and the City of Seattle that the court approved on September 21, 2012.”¹⁷

A federal Monitor was appointed in April 2013. The initial 12 to 18 months of the Decree—a period in which the Department had three different police chiefs—saw some progress, but there were challenges when it came to realizing more significant outcomes. The appointment of Kathleen O’Toole as SPD Chief in June 2014 ushered in a period of rapid progress and measurable change,

with the federal Monitoring Team finding SPD in compliance with the Decree’s requirements relating to Use of Force and stops, detentions, and bias-free policing by June 2017. O’Toole departed at the end of 2017, and in January 2018 the court found Seattle in “full and effective compliance” with the terms of the Consent Decree.”¹⁸ Until 2020, the focus was on SPD maintaining its progress and demonstrating “sustained compliance” as expressly required by the Decree. Protests in Seattle in the Summer of 2020, and issues with SPD’s use of force during demonstrations and protests, set the occasion for the Court to require further refinements to the Department’s crowd management policies and practices. In July 2025, the City of Seattle asked the Court to terminate remaining obligations under the Decree.

This 13-year time period above can generally be divided into three phases of progress: Designing the Organization for New Outcomes and Value; Building the Capacity for Reform and Reinvention; and Growing an Outcomes-Oriented Organization. The following sections describe the major advances in these phases.

Phase One:

Designing the Organization for New Outcomes and Value

In the first phase of reform, the Consent Decree called for numerous changes. First, SPD was expected to transform its approach for the Use of Force, including developing and implementing new policies and officer training. Second, SPD would significantly alter its policies and trainings for stops and detentions and bias-free policing. Third, SPD would introduce reforms for Crisis Intervention, including establishing a new policy, trainings, and oversight and coordination structures. Fourth, in addition to initiating reforms in these specific areas, there would be a broader emphasis on creating or improving structures that would facilitate supervision, collaboration, and improved performance. This included the Use of Force Review Board as well as the Office of Professional Accountability (which was subsequently renamed to the Office of Police Accountability).¹⁹

As the reform work of the Consent Decree started, SPD experienced extensive turmoil involving its leadership. In fact, in a span from Spring 2013 to Spring 2014, the Department had three different chiefs in just over a year.²⁰ In June 2014, Kathleen O'Toole was sworn in to lead the department and guide implementation of the Consent Decree. A former Boston Police Commissioner and Massachusetts Public Safety Secretary, O'Toole was a leader who possessed an affinity for transforming organizations in trouble. She had recently returned to the United States following a six-year stint in Ireland where she had overseen an effort to reform policing. In addition, she had helped to reform policing as a member of the Patten Commission in Northern Ireland in the 1990s and served as the Joint Compliance Expert for the Consent Decree in East Haven, CT.²¹ She saw herself as a "change driver." What's more, she was drawn to SPD in part because she considered the agency a "gem in the rough."

Nevertheless, when O'Toole became SPD's new Chief, she discovered a whole host of challenges. At a meeting with precinct captains, she inquired about the department's crime performance, and the precinct captains replied, "Oh, pretty good, we think." In practice, SPD did not have the capacity to track, analyze, and report community crime trends and outcome measures. This echoed an observation from the Monitoring Team, which wrote in its First Semiannual Report about significant shortfalls involving (among other areas) data stored in silos, inadequate data collection, and poor record keeping. "Failure to correct

these problems," the Monitoring Team concluded, "will substantially, if not fatally, prevent the SPD from reaching full and effective compliance."²²

To help SPD develop the capacity for a new baseline of analytics and decision making, O'Toole built a command team that brought together a wide array of perspectives. Specifically, the group ended up consisting of half internal and half external candidates, including some officials from outside law enforcement altogether. One insider was a longtime SPD officer who was deeply committed to change. As for outsiders, SPD recruited senior officials from the New York City Police Department and the City Attorney's Office, as well as an executive from Amazon to serve as SPD's CIO. The message was clear: SPD was ready to innovate and willing to work with non-traditional hires and creative structures and roles to do so. The wide array of perspectives and experiences on the command team reflected the recognition that it was important to bring together people with a range of views and create synergy among them. Timothy Mygatt, who helped oversee the Consent Decree as a former Deputy Chief in the Special Litigation Section of the Civil Rights Division at DOJ, observed: "To create a culture of excellence, Kathy elevated different people who did not have the standard skillsets of a police department or the standard path within the police department."²³

At the same time, O'Toole demoted several officials who did not succeed in the competitive process for assistant chief. Some of those demoted took the news in stride and continued as valuable team players in the rank of captain. Others, who, according to Chief O'Toole, were either "not showing up" or not being productive when they did show up, were reassigned to an office away from police headquarters on the fifty-third floor of the Seattle Municipal Tower. It became known as "Area 53" where they would be responsible for certain projects but would not have the same authority and cachet and could not inhibit the broader reform process. O'Toole reflected, "Nobody was paying much attention to the naysayers anyway, but finally I said, 'You know what? I just don't want them out there poisoning the environment.'" Eventually, some of these officials changed their tune and returned to productive positions in the department. Nonetheless, O'Toole had sent a powerful message about the importance of change.

DESIGNING THE ORGANIZATION FOR

New Outcomes and Value

Concepts in Action

During the first phase, or “first years” of transformation, the overarching aim is to serve the community better – more effectively, efficiently, and with a deep understanding of the community’s needs.

This requires leadership to foster an organizational environment that is conducive to policy reform and learning new approaches for ensuring public safety while upholding constitutional and lawful practices. A key to achieving this is redesigning organizational capabilities, including platforms for sharing policies and practices; mechanisms for integrating community feedback; units for community engagement and services; partnerships with providers for restorative services and community resilience; and systems for collecting, analyzing, and sharing critical data and insights. Additionally, developing cultural competencies, like commitment to training and professionalism and prioritizing community input, is crucial.

During this first phase of transformation, advancements in policies and practices can often be made with incremental shifts in culture. For instance, community feedback might lead to new training programs or changes in service priorities. By developing new capabilities, fostering strong internal and external communication, and empowering personnel to acquire knowledge and skills, the organization can propel innovation and reinvention.

Leadership Imperatives

- ① **Galvanize Engagement and Support:** Commit to 360-degree collaboration to ensure that the vision and strategy for change is driven by the entire organization, government partners, and community.
- ② **Plan a Path Forward:** Map current organizational capabilities and cultural competencies and assess what needs to be newly built and fostered and over what duration of time.
- ③ **Make Sense of Innovation and Change:** Connect policy and practice innovation directly to the outcomes and impact desired in the future and help employees gain skills and see their new role in the future.

Led by this multifaceted leadership team, SPD and the federal Monitoring Team began—in partnership with other Seattle stakeholders including the Decree-established CPC discussed in greater detail below—implementing a host of changes. One of their main focuses was designing policies to help the organization move toward the reforms for Constitutional and lawful policing. This included new policies governing the use-of-force, stops and detentions, bias-free policing, crisis intervention, and performance mentoring. These policies were valuable in part because they helped to reinforce key tenets or high-level concepts undergirding SPD's work. For instance, the "Use of Force" policy began by underscoring that "Every member of the Seattle Police Department is Committed to Upholding the Constitution and Laws of the United States...." Similarly, the Stops and Detention policy sharpened the distinction between a "social contact" ("where a person is free to leave") and a "Terry stop" ("where a person is not free to leave"). What's more, the policies complemented these high-level ideas with granular guidance and requirements. A case in point involved the "Use of Force" policy, which detailed policies for a number of specific tools (e.g., firearms, beanbag shotgun, and canine deployment). Taken together, the creation of the final policies—which reflected numerous substantive recommendations and feedback from community organizations, the CPC, and individual residents submitted during public comment periods—helped to generate momentum. As the Court observed in April 2014, "[E]very one of them—each and every one of them—is a meaningful improvement and step in the right direction."²⁴

To help ensure that the new policies took hold, SPD designed and implemented new trainings involving the use of force, bias-free policing, stops and detentions, and crisis intervention, as well as training for force investigators and reviewers. These were valuable in part because they were providing officers concrete tools to be more effective. By April 30, 2014, "nearly all patrol and other relevant forces" had participated in an "interim use of force training" that included five e-learning modules and one day of in-person training. Beyond the specific aspects of each program, the manner in which the trainings were created was both emblematic of and contributing to the increased sophistication of SPD's approach. Recognizing that it would take time to implement holistic trainings but grasping the sense of urgency, SPD created interim trainings for use of force, bias-free policing, and stops and detentions while simultaneously developing comprehensive programs. This reflected a growing ability to think and progress toward short- and medium-term objectives simultaneously.

Similarly, in designing the trainings, SPD collaborated with outside experts and "appropriately challenged old assumptions and embraced new approaches to creating comprehensive training plans."²⁵ Thus, the significance of the trainings lay in not just the initiatives themselves but also how they were starting to seed new ways of thinking and working within the Department.

SPD complemented the new policies and trainings with the establishment of structures, systems, and processes to produce more effective oversight. This included the creation or introduction of significant reforms to the Use of Force Review Board, Firearms Review Board, Force Investigation Team, Crisis Intervention Committee, and Office of Professional Accountability (OPA). These structural changes were valuable in part because they provided enforcement mechanisms for the new policies and in general enhanced the Department's effectiveness. For instance, the newly created Force Investigation Team would focus on "serious use of force incidents," helping to ensure that reviews of those events were conducted thoroughly. Similarly, OPA was developing a manual to codify key aspects of its process and established a procedure where the OPA Director "certifies a 'sustained' finding on a complaint before the Chief conducts a review and determines discipline..." The changes were helping to enhance the integrity and independence of OPA's work and in the process contributed to SPD's growth.^{26, 27}

Beyond their specific functions, reforms involving structures, systems, and processes were important because SPD was developing what the Monitoring team described as "structures of critical self-analysis." This referred to "those entities, groups, and organizations that will help SPD to evaluate itself critically, to develop and refine policies and training, and to solve problems after the Consent Decree dissolves." A case in point was the Crisis Intervention Committee ("CIC")—"an interagency, volunteer, advisory committee composed...of...mental and behavioral health experts, providers, clinicians, community advocates, academics, other law enforcement agencies, command-level members of SPD, and of the judiciary." The CIC was developing SPD's Crisis Intervention policy, and at one meeting, several hospitals expressed qualms about "a form for emergent detentions that SPD was using." The CIC served "as a 'problem-solving' forum by giving a space for a collaborative and constructive dialogue between the Seattle community's mental health providers and its police department."²⁸ This was emblematic of how SPD was not just developing structures to design, implement, and enforce policies but also building capabilities that would help it get out of silos and solve problems more effectively.

In parallel to seeding new ways of thinking and helping to catalyze the design of new polices, SPD prioritized engaging the organization, community, and other key stakeholders. Early on in her tenure, O'Toole conducted a listening tour that brought her in contact with community leaders, political officials, and her rank-and-file staff. The chief had to find a way, as she told *The Seattle Times*, to get everyone—the DOJ, the community, and her staff—to “row in the same direction” and make Seattle a safer place. She framed these conversations with two main points—how to “enhance” public trust in SPD and how to implement the Consent Decree. However, she also made a point of listening to what her team had to say and considering the issues they raised. This was in part because, after conducting similar listening tours in her previous posts, she had come to realize that “the people who...have the best answers to challenges are those who work and live on the frontlines.” What’s more, following her meeting with the precinct captains and other interactions that betrayed the department’s “lethargy,” she grasped that she needed to undertake a larger effort to jumpstart the organization. “The hard-working officers in that organization felt they were being painted with a broad brush and [were] really demoralized,” explained O'Toole. She believed that people across the organization would only buy in if she created an environment of “mutual respect [in which] everybody’s voices are heard.” “I learned very early in my career,” O'Toole reflected, “that the adversarial approach doesn’t work, that we really do need to engage both internally and externally, we do need to listen.”

The listening tour paralleled a broader effort to engage the community. Much of this outreach occurred thanks to the efforts of SPD, which established “micro-community or neighborhood policing plans” in every precinct and designated officers to focus on particular topics (e.g., LGBTQ issues or youth engagement). The CPC—which “was mandated under the Consent Decree to provide community input on needed reforms”—also played an integral role in strengthening connections with the public. The organization—which included leaders from (among other spaces) civil rights, business, and both SPD unions—established workgroups that collaborated with SPD, DOJ, and the Monitor to provide policy recommendations on topics like bias-free policing and stops and detentions.²⁹

At the same time, the Monitoring Team and DOJ conducted outreach that helped to rebuild trust in SPD. By serving as intermediaries during the Consent Decree process, they could make sure community voices were heard and serve as trusted voices back to the community about SPD’s progress as it was achieved. This occurred in

part thanks to town hall-style community forums to which the Monitoring Team invited dozens of organizations, ranging from The African-American Community Advisory Council to The Council on American-Islamic Relations of Washington State to the Seattle Human Rights Commission.³⁰ Additionally, the Monitoring Team commissioned public opinion surveys that helped to gauge progress and identify areas for improvement. In an assessment released in January 2016, the Monitoring Team reported that over the course of the Consent Decree, there had been significant increases in the percentage of community members who approve of SPD as well as noteworthy decreases in the percentage who disapprove. This included upticks in support among key demographics (e.g., an increase in approval by 11 percent among Latinos and three percent among Asian Americans). Nevertheless, there was significant room for improvement, particularly when it came to connecting with “isolated communities.” This referred to “those who are isolated from government organizations and systems; who do not attend meetings; or who are often involved in police contacts on the street and feel disrespected or victimized by the police.” For these groups, which included (among others) portions of the African-American and Native American communities, there was a sense, as the Monitor wrote, “that little has changed over the past few years with respect to officers gaining the trust of portions of these isolated communities.” The Monitor elaborated:

...[W]e heard from some that harassment and disrespect are still viewed as a common occurrence; that officers show a lack of cultural understanding; and, perhaps most importantly, that there is no mechanism in place for these isolated communities to voice their concerns or see the SPD attempt to address them.³¹

Addressing these concerns and more broadly continuing to build community trust were imperative because restoring confidence was one of the Consent Decree’s core objectives. As Judge Robart emphasized in April 2014: “[Unity] and community is what . . . we seek to achieve here, where the police are not viewed as ‘them,’ they are viewed as ‘us.’ If we can accomplish that by these changes, then I believe that we will have a police department that Seattle can be justifiably proud of.”³²

Amid this broader community engagement effort, a pivotal stakeholder was the police unions.³³ In its First Semiannual Report in April 2013, the Monitoring Team criticized the unions for having “failed to play a constructive role in word and deed.” To some extent,

union opposition reflected uncertainty about what was involved in the Consent Decree. As the Monitoring Team elaborated at the time, “A part of the SPD, mostly but not exclusively within the union-organized ranks, remains ‘dug in’ and continues to resist the force and implications of the Settlement Agreement. Part of this may be because the Settlement Agreement has not been adequately explained...” As an illustration of this confusion, the Monitoring Team noted that, at several roll calls, they—the independent agent of the Court helping to verify that SPD and the City were doing what they had promised under the Decree—had been inaccurately described as being part of DOJ.³⁴ As the early stages of the Decree progressed, the unions’ resistance increasingly appeared to reflect fears that under new policies officers would not have sufficient means to ensure their safety. In 2014, over 100 Seattle police officers filed a federal lawsuit “alleging that new use-of-force policies...unreasonably restrict their right to protect themselves and others from apparent harm and danger.” As *The Seattle Times* reported, the officers brought this suit, which was quickly dismissed, “on their own, without an attorney, or by approval by their union, the Seattle Police Officers Guild.”³⁵ These explanations notwithstanding, this internal dynamic represented a significant obstacle. To that end, in its First Semiannual Report, the Monitoring Team reiterated a message from the court that “...the road ahead is toward full and effective compliance with the Settlement Agreement.” “It is hoped,” they added, “that the unions will join in that effort.”³⁶

Consequently, another key facet of reform was preparing and evolving the organizational culture. To that end, SPD took a series of steps to signal a new direction for the agency. This included reissuing the department’s mission statement, which read, “The mission of the Seattle Police Department is to prevent crime, enforce the law, and support quality public safety by delivering respectful, professional and dependable police services.”³⁷ In support of this mission, the department had four priorities: increasing public trust (which would emerge from reform

and implementation of the Settlement Agreement), enhancing pride and professionalism, curtailing crime and disorder, and establishing better business practices. The department also made several symbolic changes to rebrand the organization and signal increased professionalism. This included issuing new uniforms (which were more comfortable than the previous uniforms) and vehicles. Finally, leadership tried to foster an atmosphere of psychological safety, including by applauding officers in disciplinary hearings who acknowledged their mistakes, which in turn led to learning and further improvements in policy and practice.

A final important aspect of this phase for visioning the future of public safety outcomes was the beginning of SPD’s analytics journey. This included the creation of a new SeaStat program to ensure the Department was tracking crime accurately. Similar to Compstat programs used in other parts of the country (e.g., New York and Los Angeles), SeaStat provided a way for SPD to have meetings every two weeks with staff from across the Department and other stakeholders to develop and refine strategies to address crime hotspots based on real-time data.³⁸ The development of this tool paralleled a broader process through which SPD was becoming more sophisticated. But it took time. The organization was largely relying on descriptive reports so that the Department could interface with key stakeholders, such as the monitor. Within the department, they were also moving at a pace where they could “learn something new every month.”³⁹ But even if the analytical tools remained relatively basic and the pace of learning and change was fairly slow, it represented positive momentum and a significant step forward.

Throughout this initial phase, O’Toole’s leadership was instrumental to helping SPD shift the environment and build capacity to move forward. She articulated a clear vision, communicated directly, and exhibited a willingness to take action. “She’s probably the strongest police chief leader that I’ve seen,” Judge Robart reflected. “And that’s what you needed.”⁴⁰

Phase Two:

Building the Capacity for Reform and Reinvention

After SPD began to set a vision for the future of public safety outcomes, it shifted to a subsequent phase of reform more focused on scaling and growing organizational capacity and results. In phase one, many of the feedback loops (e.g., the Use of Force Review Board) had been created that led to the refinements that SPD implemented in this second phase, so that there was ongoing correction and improvement. This progress occurred in a number of areas. First, there was an emphasis on introducing modifications involving the use of force, including refining relevant policies and augmenting training. Second, SPD would improve its approaches to stops and detentions and bias-free policing; this would also entail minor policy adjustments and additional training. Third, SPD was expected to continue to hone its capacity for Crisis Intervention, with a focus on policy adjustments, training, and data collection and analysis.⁴¹ Fourth, in addition to making reforms in these specific areas, there would be a broader effort to bolster structures that enhanced supervision, collaboration, and performance. Chief among them were the Force Review Board, the OPA, the CPC, and Office of Inspector General (OIG).

One of SPD's strategies to pursue these priorities was modifying the policies it had introduced in the first phase of reform. These refinements, based on real-world dynamics and evidence from the field, were valuable in part because they improved morale for officers (who felt heard in the process) and eliminated unnecessary process or confusing guidance; they also led to tangible improvements in the policies themselves. For example, some updates to the use-of-force policy helped to address confusion about when officers could use less-lethal instruments. Similarly, a minor alteration to SPD's stop and detentions policy "involved removal of ambiguous language concerning completed misdemeanors as the foundation for a stop and clarifications on how civil infractions should be handled." These policy updates stood out because of not only the content of the enhancements but also the collaborative, data-driven manner in which they were created. For instance, as the Monitoring Team described in its "Fifth Semiannual Report," the proposed changes to use-of-force policy were "evidence-based" and a byproduct of input from community groups and SPD officers. Or, to cite another

example, the modifications to SPD's bias-free policing and stops and detentions policies drew on discussions involving SPD, the community, DOJ, the City of Seattle, and the Monitor.⁴² That SPD was making modifications based on statistical data and a multi-stakeholder dialogue was emblematic of its development into a more sophisticated and community-driven organization.

In parallel to introducing these policy shifts, SPD bolstered its commitment to training. This included having officers participate in the more comprehensive trainings for use of force, bias-free policing, and stops and detentions that had been under development in phase one. (O'Toole attended many trainings herself, including live-fire and role-playing exercises where she crawled through mud and kicked in doors side by side with other officers. She recalled, "People often remarked, 'Wow, we haven't seen a chief at training in 30 years we've been on the job.'") To complement these programs, SPD introduced additional targeted trainings in these areas. Examples included instruction on tactical de-escalation skills, "Integrated Tactics" training that "built on the tactical de-escalation skills," and advanced instruction for CIT-Certified officers on "issues related to traumatic brain injury and veteran concerns (such as post-traumatic stress disorder)." These trainings facilitated improved performance and aided progress toward compliance with the Consent Decree. SPD also embraced more expansive training programs that went beyond the focuses of the Consent Decree; this included a three-day leadership development initiative that was new for SPD and emblematic of how training was not just an opportunity to reinforce policy changes but also cultivate new capabilities. Additionally, the manner in which the trainings were implemented embodied how SPD had become a more effective organization. Many of the trainings were led by SPD's Education and Training Section, which, according to the Monitoring Team, "ha[d] become one of the Department's most promising drivers of systemic change."⁴³ Taken together, this all contributed to a broader mindset shift. "The whole tenor of training changed," Mygatt elaborated, "so that eventually you started to have now a cadre of officers coming through who were like, 'This is the way it's been done. This is what's good for us. This is why we should do it.'"

BUILDING THE CAPACITY FOR

Reform and Reinvention

Concepts in Action

The second phase, or “middle years” of transformation, focuses on scaling and integrating policies and practices that uphold constitutional and lawful policing. Leaders must balance introducing new approaches with a rate of change that allows teams to let go of old practices and learn new ones.

Key organizational changes will include scaling policies that seek to improve safety responses while reducing harm and disparate impact, establishing structures and systems to engage community in co-creation of policy and services, and enhancing communication and transparency. This shift may lead to expanding services and working closely with other disciplines to better understand and respond to underlying community needs. The organizational culture will shift accordingly to support employee wellbeing, understand and empathize with the historical impact of policing on marginalized communities, prioritize service, and strengthen the focus on team-based and community collaboration.

Though challenging, these changes on the second frontier can empower employees by making them feel heard and confident in their ability to address complex challenges and promote community wellbeing. Together, these new organizational and cultural capabilities will improve safety outcomes and pave the way for even greater transformation.

Leadership Imperatives

① Pace Implementation and Scale:

Plan for ebbs and flows in the evolution of new practices, systems, and technologies and engage employees in development that will authentically and sustainably ensure progress.

② Harmonize Capabilities and Culture:

Align new skills, methods, and equipment with new cultural attributes that support novel way of working, collaborating, and measuring success.

③ Prioritize Wellbeing of People and Teams:

Sustain the overall transformation by acknowledging the stress of long-term change and ensuring the psychological, emotional, and physical wellbeing of employees at all level of the organization.

Additionally, SPD strengthened its supervisory structures. Most notably, in 2017, the Seattle City Council passed legislation creating “a three-part, civilian-led police accountability system...” It consisted of 1) the CPC, which was made permanent and had its scope expanded by the legislation; 2) OPA, which was primarily focused on investigating misconduct allegations at SPD and received additional powers; and 3) OIG, which was established as an independent oversight body for SPD.⁴⁴ Together, these three bodies were designed to function as what Lisa Judge, who became Inspector General in 2018, characterized as a “three-legged stool of accountability...”⁴⁵ That Seattle had succeeded in creating this multi-pronged structure was emblematic of how SPD—and the broader ecosystem surrounding law enforcement and public safety in the city—was becoming more sophisticated in its operations and capacity for collaboration and innovation. “This is breaking new ground nationally and it is a very exciting experiment,” Samuel Walker, an emeritus professor of criminal justice at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, told *The Seattle Times*. “There is no comparison.”⁴⁶

Even as the accountability system took root, there continued to be challenges. A case in point involved the Seattle Police Officer’s Guild resisting accountability in collective bargaining. In fact, as *The Seattle Times* noted in 2021, one of the reasons that SPD remained in the Consent Decree was that Judge Robart expressed concern over the “forced rehiring” in 2018 of an officer who had “punched an intoxicated and handcuffed young woman in the face, fracturing bones.” The Judge highlighted that the officer—whom O’Toole had terminated—had been rehired because “the city had bargained away substantial reforms of the discipline and appeals process” that had been part of the 2017 Accountability Ordinance. Importantly, the City eventually successfully argued that the arbitration decision that had forced the officer’s rehire “was against public policy and therefore unenforceable.” Nevertheless, the union’s resistance to accountability measures represented a significant obstacle to enforcing “back-end accountability” and more broadly fostering a culture of procedural justice and accountability.⁴⁷

Another key facet of this period was the development of a more sophisticated approach to data in which SPD began using analytics to solve problems. As a concrete measure of this, the department accelerated its previous mantra that it would “learn something new every month” to “learn something new every week.”

To create this cycle of learning, SPD has invested heavily in its analytical and data capabilities and developed systems to integrate these tools across the department.

This includes establishing a performance analytics and research group that features six full-time research scientists and data analysts who respond to officer inquiries and oversee research agreements with institutions around the country. SPD also partnered with Accenture to build a data analytics platform and records management system to situate its data in one place and create a user-friendly interface that allows department personnel to engage with new information. The aim was to connect SPD’s different systems and give commanders an interface through which they could experiment, leverage their curiosity, and ideally glean actionable insights. “We tell our commanders,” explained Brian Maxey, formerly SPD’s COO, “Be data curious. Here’s a dashboard, play with it, and see what you can see.”

The data analytics platform stood out in part because it enhanced accountability and efficiency by establishing “new systems of oversight, risk management and statistical reporting.” In particular, the new platform leveraged data from a computer-aided dispatch system and a records management system that allowed SPD to track a variety of metrics, including every instance in which an officer stops and detains someone, and any incident in which an officer thinks someone might be in crisis. What’s more, the system—for which SPD received recognition from Drexel University’s LeBow School of Business as one of 50 notable companies using analytics to solve business problems—has dashboards and other tools that provide supervisors the opportunity to examine data, disseminate “visualization and analytics tools” to SPD officers, and share raw data with the public.⁴⁸ Taken together, this allowed SPD to get better information and facilitated more informed dialogues with an array of stakeholders by contextualizing data, mapping different data sources together, and creating a baseline for discussions.

The creation of the data analytics platform was also valuable because it facilitated the learning process that SPD hoped to cultivate. For example, whereas in the past the Department had relied on descriptive statistics, officers were now interacting with dashboards and raising questions about potential patterns that they asked the analytics team to investigate. This in turn would give the analytics personnel a potential future avenue of research that might lead to a new measure or a technique for anomaly detection that they could build into the system. More broadly, this interactive process dovetailed with the inquisitive mindset that SPD was hoping to create. Recognizing that they were operating with a large quantity of data, SPD leaders were encouraging officers to “be data curious” and use the dashboards as a way to experiment,

raise questions, and yield learnings that enhanced performance. At the same time, they were approaching this process gradually, knowing that it would take time for people to adapt. “You have to evolve an organization to recognize the value of data and information, explained Loren Atherley, SPD’s Senior Director of Performance Analytics & Research. “You can’t cram it down their throat.”⁴⁹

Still another integral aspect of reform was continuing to refine and evolve SPD’s organizational cultural attributes. A vital aspect was integrating new policies and practices into the organization and layering in new forms of supervision and review, such as the Force Review Board. In some respects, this was a delicate process because SPD had to figure out how to synchronize training and policy refinement with officers’ existing, day-to-day responsibilities and ways of working.

Taken together, this progress across multiple domains embodied how O’Toole, SPD, and their partners generated significant momentum in the second phase of reform in part because the different stakeholders were working together. “Between years three and six or so, for me, that was the sweet spot,” reflected Judge Michael Diaz, who previously served as an Assistant U.S. Attorney at the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Western District of Washington. “...Everybody was rowing the same direction.”⁵⁰ This pointed to how O’Toole’s upbeat approach was beginning to permeate SPD and the community and helping to propel change. “I think optimism is a great trait for a leader,” the chief said. “I think it’s contagious.” The growing cooperation across stakeholders also carried an important lesson for how to approach consent decrees. “Once you get to the right alignment of leadership across the different players, then you can sprint,” Mygatt explained, “and you need to sprint as fast as possible at that point.”⁵¹

Body-Worn Cameras and In-Car Video

At the outset of the Consent Decree, SPD’s officers were highly skeptical, and some strongly resistant, to the idea of officer encounters with civilians being recorded. Specifically, SPD officers were not equipped with body-worn cameras (“BWCs”), and many SPD patrol cars were not equipped with in-car video (“ICV”). To enable the comprehensive investigation, detailed review, rigorous supervision, and in-depth accountability necessary with respect to use of force and other critical officer-civilian encounters, the Monitor initially focused on ensuring that all SPD cars were equipped with ICV systems and that they functioned properly.

It is fair to say that the Monitoring Team encountered sustained, internal resistance to the widespread deployment, and measures to facilitate the appropriate use, of ICV. For instance, SPD personnel initially indicated that a “single sign-in for ICV and the [patrol] vehicle’s other mobile computing processes,” which would help to ensure that ICV was activated and ready to record upon an officer leaving the station, was impossible.⁵² However, after interacting directly with the ICV manufacturer, which “directly contradicted” the Department’s claims, the single sign-on was established—with the Monitor observing that “[a]bsent external pressure, the job would not have gotten started.”⁵³

Similarly, even after nearly all SPD patrol cars were equipped with the ICV system, at least half of use of force incidents involved instances where ICV “recording equipment . . . malfunctioned,” “an officer failed to properly activate recording equipment,” or where issues with the recording made captured video and/or audio difficult to use.⁵⁴ SPD leadership, including the then-Chief of Police, indicated that underlying technological issues simply would prevent the reliable capture of video via ICV systems. However, an early December 2013 report by the Monitoring Team was incredibly specific and prescriptive about what SPD needed to do to get the ICV to be both consistently functional and useful with respect to capturing video and audio of critical incidents.⁵⁵ Only after ongoing meetings with SPD, its internal IT team, and the ICV manufacturer were problems sufficiently addressed and supervisors appropriately shifted to a posture of raising and seeking to solve ICV issues.

Due both to some internal reticence and extended periods of community dialogue and political negotiation—noted by some as a prime example of “Seattle process,” in which inclusive, collaborative processes without definitive timetables dramatically lengthen the amount of time necessary to reach policy decisions or take action—SPD was also slow to implement body-cameras. As of June 2015, SPD had completed a limited BWC pilot program, involving 12 officers in one district, which had been established only after years of discussions and work relating to transparency, public disclosure, and privacy issues.⁵⁶ Despite the fact that, as of that juncture, “[a]s many as 6,000 police departments across the United States use[d] body cameras – including 8 of the 10 largest metropolitan areas in the U.S.,”⁵⁷ community groups including the CPC⁵⁸ and ACLU⁵⁹ lobbied against their use in Seattle. The Monitor, recognizing “four years of discussion, public engagement, and collaboration on body cameras in Seattle” on policies and procedures for

BWC use and the potential for “adjustments to policy” to be made as SPD encountered relevant issues in practice while broadly deploying BWCs, indicated in June 2015 that “[t]he time for permanent use of on-officer cameras by all SPD officers is now.”⁶⁰ It would still take until mid-2017 for the cameras to be deployed across all patrol officers,⁶¹ with SPD needing to make sometimes bold implementation decisions and design some technological innovations to address potential public disclosure and transparency issues for rollout across officers to become feasible.

With the Court approving SPD’s body-worn camera program and policy in May 2017,⁶² the use of body-worn cameras rapidly became an accepted part of the way that SPD does business. Indeed, officers discovered that BWCs did not impact their duties, could help positively shape encounters when civilians recognized that the encounter was being recorded, and often supported or exonerated officers by supporting their accounts of what transpired during interactions subject to complaint, investigation, or review.

The evolution of SPD—from skepticism to opposition to police encounters being regularly recorded to one where BWCs have become seen as another non-controversial tool of the profession—illustrates the importance of culture change, strong internal leadership, and, at least in the Consent Decree context, the importance of the Court and Monitoring Team pressing the Department and Seattle community into action.

The (Unintended) Stress Test: Protests of 2020

On May 7, 2020, after a two-year period during which SPD demonstrated the required “sustained compliance” with the Decree, the City and DOJ filed a motion to end significant portions of the Consent Decree.⁶³ However, the situation shifted when protests broke out nationwide following the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer on May 25, 2020.⁶⁴

In Seattle, the demonstrations began downtown on May 29 as protesters threw debris and fireworks at officers, and SPD used tear gas, flash-bang devices, and pepper spray to control crowds. These initial protests led to broken windows in businesses, car fires, and a nighttime curfew across Seattle.⁶⁵ By early June, the protests had moved to the Capitol Hill neighborhood, and the City had received approximately 14,000 complaints about officers’ conduct. The City withdrew its motion to end significant portions of the Consent Decree.⁶⁶

On June 8, SPD abandoned its East Precinct headquarters in Capitol Hill, leading to the formation of the Capitol Hill Organized Protest (“CHOP”), a multi-block area controlled and operated by protesters without the presence of police.^{67, 68} To proponents, including many who advocated for defunding the police, CHOP—which had a medic station, a food co-op, and security patrols—illustrated how an area could operate without police. To critics, CHOP represented the risks that emerge without a police presence.⁶⁹ In early July, after two people were killed in a spate of four shootings just outside CHOP, the Mayor issued an executive order making it illegal to gather in the area, allowing SPD to disperse the protest zone.⁷⁰

The protests continued in the months that followed, including in the aftermath of the “fatal police shooting” of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin in August and a September decision by a grand jury in Kentucky not to charge local police officers for shooting and killing Breonna Taylor.⁷¹ At the same time, there was a growing focus on examining SPD’s performance. OPA received approximately 19,000 complaints (a historic number) about SPD’s response to the protests. This was distilled to 145 investigations, as many of the complaints were about the same incident, and reflected enormous concern about SPD’s conduct, particularly when it came to complaints about the use of “excessive force” and “unprofessional behavior.” City leaders called for a “systemic review” of SPD’s protest response.⁷²

Phase Three:

Growing an Outcomes-Oriented Organization

By late fall of 2020, SPD and the Consent Decree parties and stakeholders were at an inflection point. While substantial progress had been made in preceding years, the tumult of 2020 set back community trust and frayed the collaboration that was critical to moving forward. The first order of business was pushing the reset button, reestablishing collaboration, and charting a pathway forward.⁷³

The pathway forward in this third phase of transformation was built on three foundations. First, SPD and the community had to learn from the challenges of 2020, enact policy change, and heal rifts across the city. Second, the Monitoring Team had to reassess SPD progress on core requirements of the Consent Decree. And third, the City of Seattle—from the Mayor’s office to SPD—had to drive reform and innovation above and beyond the Consent Decree and ready themselves and the community for long-term success.

To jumpstart the tracking of compliance and outcomes critical to completing the Consent Decree, the Monitoring Team embarked on comprehensive assessments of SPD’s use of force, crisis interventions, stops and detentions, and supervision. The former Monitor stepped down, and a new Monitor had to be hired, leading to a lapse in oversight. An important first step was rebuilding the “connective tissue” among The City, the DOJ, community groups, and the Monitoring Team. This work was initiated via “community engagement sessions” between the Monitor and community groups with the intent of gaining an understanding of community sentiment and what measures of SPD outcomes were most important. Simultaneously, the Monitoring Team worked with the City and DOJ to develop a methodology for qualitatively and quantitatively assessing SPD’s performance.

The resulting Comprehensive Assessment of the Seattle Police Department, was filed with the Court in May of 2022. The Assessment found SPD to be in general compliance with the core requirements of Constitutional and Lawful policing pertaining to use of force, crisis intervention, stops and detentions, and supervision. However, the Assessment also found disparate impact in policing – primarily for Black and Native American persons in Seattle. The Monitoring Team noted that even as the sources of these disparities may be complex, SPD must catalyze the City of Seattle to identify systematically

the types of activity that lead to disproportionate impacts and explore potential alternative responses that might reduce or eliminate such disparities.

The city was simultaneously moving forward on a Sentinel Event Review of the police response to the 2020 protests in Seattle. Sentinel Event Reviews are frequently used in fields like aviation, health care, and manufacturing “to identify root causes of tragedies and design improvements that will prevent their recurrence.” In Seattle, the Sentinel Event Review of the police response to the 2020 protests was led by OIG, the independent oversight body for SPD described above.⁷⁴ The review divided its analysis into four waves of protest activities and released reports based on each of these periods. The reports documented the most troubling moments from the protests, including when police made extensive use of tear gas to disperse a crowd, vandals set police cars on fire and stole patrol rifles, and SPD put out fake radio chatter warning of armed Proud Boys members near the protests.⁷⁵ The reports also identified 229 factors that contributed to “undesirable incidents” and made 139 recommendations for reform on topics ranging from “community legitimacy” to “officer wellness and training” to “communication and community engagement.” Notably, the analysis of the final wave of protests said that SPD should “offer a sincere, public apology for its actions during the 2020 protests as a significant step in building trust between police and Seattle communities.”⁷⁶

The Sentinel Event Review stood out for not only the breadth and depth of its analysis but also the collaborative, innovative, and forward-looking manner in which it carried out that work. One key pillar of the Sentinel Event Review was integrating the perspectives of an array of local stakeholders, including community members and SPD.⁷⁷ OIG also engaged numerous academic experts—including faculty and staff from the University of Pennsylvania, Arizona State University, Keele University (UK), and University College London—to help facilitate and contribute analysis to the Sentinel Event Review.⁷⁸ Additionally, the Sentinel Event Review placed a premium on not being “focused on individual actions or assigning blame” but instead “strengthening system fail-safes to prevent harm.” To that end, the Sentinel Event Review underscored the importance of collaborative dialogue. This began with stakeholders identifying areas

GROWING AN

Outcomes-Oriented Organization

Concepts in Action

The third phase of the transformation moves the public safety organization beyond the baseline of constitutional and lawful policing to one that is reinvented to foster safe and thriving communities.

For leaders and the community guiding progress, this final stage of transformation involves creating an ecosystem of services that addresses the core drivers of public safety challenges and opportunities; builds resilience across communities; and enables the public safety ecosystem to continuously learn from outcomes, refine policy and practice, and adapt to changing community needs and goals. To achieve this, the public safety organization will need to build capacity both internally and through collaborations across sectors, organizations, and disciplines; the organization will also have to enable capacity growth via systems and technologies that unify information sharing, analytics, decision making, and multi-disciplinary responses.

Integrating these new capabilities into the organization requires leaders to navigate legal, structural, cultural, and political barriers, emphasizing the importance of creating an ecosystem approach. Furthermore, organizational culture must evolve significantly, with people at all levels embracing continuous learning, co-creation of solutions with community, and a growth mindset that enables a broader mission and purpose.

Leadership Imperatives

- ① **Focus on Outcomes:** Transparently share the outcomes the organization is generating and engage the organization and stakeholders in fine-tuning the overarching mission and value over the long-term.
- ② **Renew Policy and Practice:** Leverage the transformation in organizational capabilities built over time and turn them into dynamic capabilities that are ever evolving and improving based on analytics, learning, and co-creating solutions with community.
- ③ **Foster a Growth Mindset:** Embed the cultural competencies that help people and teams take charge of their own learning, innovation, and growth and enable the organization to proactively adapt to changing societal and community conditions.

of agreement (e.g., that Seattle residents should be able to exercise their First Amendment rights), continued with a shared commitment to “listening and respecting each other,” and emphasized mutual respect.⁷⁹

The Sentinel Event Review’s dedication to a multi-stakeholder approach that stressed dialogue and integrated expert analysis yielded a number of valuable outcomes. One was that SPD implemented tangible reforms. This was in part thanks to the input of Clifford Stott, a social psychologist at Keele University in the United Kingdom. Stott helped design the Sentinel Event Review and was commissioned by OIG to “conduct a scientific analysis of the early stages of the 2020 protest events in Seattle.” One of his key findings was that SPD’s approach—particularly its over-reliance on the use of force and more limited use of “de-escalation through dialogue”—exacerbated the situation. He elaborated:

The data is consistent with the conclusion that crowd police interactions during the first days of the demonstrations in the city reshaped protester identity. These social psychological processes may then have played a key role in driving the observed escalations within and across events as motivating future protests in Seattle.

To avoid similar escalations in the future, Stott recommended that SPD create a “dialogue unit to facilitate communications during protests.” This led to the establishment of the department’s “Public Outreach and Engagement Team” (POET), a “dialogue unit” for demonstrations that “engag[ed] with organizers and crowd members to offer support and build rapport with a goal of facilitating safety for all who wish to exercise their First Amendment rights.” By 2022, the group—which was based on the work of the Stockholm Police Authority—had become “an active presence before, during, and after numerous events.”⁸⁰

In addition to enabling the implementation of specific reforms, the Sentinel Event Review contributed to the development of a new dynamic capability for resolving disagreements and learning. In particular, the process that the Sentinel Event Review employed could serve as a model for future conversations. In that sense, SPD and the community had not only acquired a better understanding of one another’s perspectives (including how different people can perceive the same event in distinct ways) but also developed a new approach for critically examining and learning from difficult events.⁸¹ This included bringing together people with different perspectives, beginning a dialogue from a place of consensus before critically examining and documenting an event without assigning blame, and integrating expert perspectives. Taken together, this provided a way to build trust, heal, and implement valuable reforms. What’s more, the Sentinel Event Review process distinguished Seattle from other communities that experienced issues with the police response to 2020 protests but failed to undertake similarly robust examinations.⁸² This demonstrated that the City and SPD were now learning organizations in regards to public safety and could institute processes beyond what was required by the Consent Decree to identify and correct problems.

The development of these capabilities was valuable in part because it contributed to a broader process of resetting the Department as it tried to chart a path forward. The protests and their aftermath—not to mention the broader national call to defund the police—represented an extraordinary challenge. At the same time, the crisis could potentially serve as a stress test (albeit an unintended one, as this was not part of the Consent Decree plan) that illuminated problems and served as a catalyst for the Department to pursue broader reform.⁸³

SPD Moves Forward on Sustaining Progress and Broadening Innovation

Moving forward, SPD solidified and leveraged reform and innovation. In this phase, the City and SPD went significantly beyond the Consent Decree, demonstrating that the Consent Decree was no longer necessary. They not only fulfilled it by sustaining progress, but took the next steps on their own. More specifically, during this period, SPD made progress in numerous key areas. First, following the challenges involving use of force during the 2020 protests, there was a focus on altering policies for responding to demonstrations and integrating these changes into training. Second, SPD reinforced reforms involving stops and detentions and bias-free policing, including attempting to address potential concerns about disparate impacts. Third, there was a continued focus on enhancing Crisis Intervention, including refining policies and sustaining training.⁸⁴ Fourth, in addition to pursuing reforms in these areas, SPD and Seattle as a whole endeavored to reinforce its overarching supervisory structure, including the Force Review Board, OPA, CPC, and OIG. Taken together, these changes reinforced that SPD was now a learning organization. Rather than responding to urging from the Monitoring Team and DOJ, SPD largely recognized the need for these reforms on its own.

One critical facet of the effort to solidify reform and innovation involved policy changes. This included introducing some relatively large shifts, such as remaking SPD's crowd management policy following the 2020

protests. This was important in part because the Consent Decree had focused on "more typical, isolated use of force incidents" involving one officer or a small group of officers. At the same time, SPD made more tailored refinements to existing policies. A case in point involved reviewing crisis intervention approaches for someone holding an edged weapon, especially when it was difficult to create the space to deescalate. This too was a priority because while the use of force in Crisis Interventions had been low, any instances of the use of force in these scenarios still had serious implications for community members.⁸⁵ The common thread across these policy changes was that SPD was introducing changes based on its experiences, whether it was the 2020 protests or individual interactions. This was emblematic of how the Department was responding to data, analyzing outcomes, and becoming a learning organization.

In tandem with these policy changes, SPD was continuing to dedicate itself to improving training. This included ongoing training for the use of force, crisis intervention, stops and detentions, and bias-free policing. It also entailed creating new trainings, such as the Before the Badge program. Conceived amid the national racial reckoning following the murder of George Floyd, the initiative—which was launched in May 2022—provided context and knowledge to recruits that had yet to attend the state's mandatory "Basic Law Enforcement Academy."

It aimed to introduce participants to “the city’s history” and attune them to tensions between SPD and different demographic groups by having them meet with people who had been incarcerated and attend community meetings. The recruits also studied psychology and brain development along with techniques to promote wellness and manage stress. To critics, the program—which was funded in part through a grant from the Department of Justice—was a necessary but insufficient condition to effect change. Seen from this perspective, it was beneficial that SPD officers were receiving more training, but it was also imperative to create a “testing requirement” and accountability to evaluate officers’ de-escalation and cultural competency skills. SPD was responding to this concern by working with a researcher to explore how to measure officers’ abilities in these areas. Nevertheless, SPD leaders felt that the program was already putting them at the cutting edge of reform nationally.⁸⁶

The creation of the Before the Badge program paralleled a broader effort at the state level to introduce new trainings for police. In 2021, the state legislature passed a set of reforms and accountability measures that ranked among the most far-reaching in the nation. This included a bill “saying officers could use force only when they had probable cause to make an arrest or to prevent imminent injury and that they were required to use appropriate de-escalation tactics if possible.”⁸⁷ In response, the Washington State Criminal Justice Training Commission—a government body that establishes standards for and trains police officers across the state—offered a host of initiatives. These included trainings focused on de-escalation as well as classes designed to provide broader knowledge on topics ranging from “the history of race and policing” to “structural inequalities in the criminal justice system” to “LGBTQIA+ history.” An underlying objective of these new trainings was to help officers become more empathetic and in the process more effective.⁸⁸

Another important part of SPD’s effort to enhance training and resulting outcomes involved its participation in Active Bystandership for Law Enforcement (ABLE). Developed by the Center for Innovations in Community Safety at Georgetown University in partnership with Sheppard Mullin (a global law firm), ABLE aims “to prepare officers to successfully intervene to prevent harm and to create a law enforcement culture that supports peer intervention.” It also aims to avoid misconduct.⁸⁹ For SPD, participating in ABLE was valuable in part because it contributed to the development of broader cultural competencies. For instance, in the past, it had been

difficult to give feedback to officers surrounding the use of force. In particular, there was a general consensus that if an officer had not been present to observe the use of force, he was not in position to offer feedback to a colleague. Now, however, thanks in part to programs like ABLE, it was more common for officers to share impressions with one another and for supervisors to meet informally with officers over coffee and offer guidance. What’s more, it helped that ABLE was a Department-wide initiative, which contributed to the sense that feedback conversations were not punitive but instead part of a larger process of helping SPD evolve.

Participating in ABLE was also beneficial because it contributed to the development of “front-end accountability.” This refers to having officers conduct themselves in a way that reflects community expectations “before anything goes wrong.” By contrast, “back end accountability” addresses responses to officer misconduct. In its 2021 semi-annual report, the Monitoring team underscored that participating in ABLE was equipping officers with “tools necessary to step into situations involving peers to prevent harm” and therefore augmenting “front-end accountability,” which lies “at the heart of the consent decree.”⁹⁰

These programs and trainings were instrumental in bringing policy and practice change to life and supporting continuous learning and growth. But fully implementing these approaches—and more broadly carrying out the Consent Decree—was a long-term endeavor. “It’s like trying to turn a battleship around,” reflected Lesley Corder, a former Assistant Chief for SPD who commanded the Professional Standards Bureau. “It takes time.” Initially, there were some personnel who supported the shifts and others who were skeptical, but gradually (and thanks in part to new trainings) support for and participation in the new approaches increased. A key facet of this was helping officers understand the underlying reasons for the novel tactics. For Corder, there was a sense that the strategies were finally penetrating after overhearing an officer discussing an incident and exclaiming, “We’re going to deescalate the heck out of this.” She also pointed to the importance of celebrating these kinds of anecdotes and, as part of that, communicating to the public positive stories involving officer interactions. “You really need to hold your people up,” Corder explained, “because it becomes contagious that they know they’ve done a good job.”⁹¹

Finally, in addition to continuing to hone policy and establish new trainings, another integral aspect of SPD’s evolution in this third phase of reform involved reinforcing its supervisory structure. As discussed earlier, the Sentinel

Event Review was a critical aspect of this process. At the same time, there was an emphasis on continuing to strengthen the three-legged stool involving the CPC, OPA, and OIG. This included making changes to improve how these organizations operated. For instance, in 2021, OPA decided to reorganize its staffing structure and then hire new staff to expand its capacity. Similarly, OIG created a community advisory group as part an effort to rebuild community trust following the 2020 protests.⁹² All of this—the Sentinel Event Review as well as incremental changes to staffing and approaches—reflected how the accountability system was functioning in a learning capacity that facilitated innovation.

SPD was leveraging analytics for learning and developing new solutions. The Department viewed this as a continuous circular process in which personnel ask insightful questions, collect data to test their hypotheses, and develop new queries after analyzing the information. “In a perfect world,” explained Rebecca Boatright, formerly SPD’s Executive Director of Risk Management and Legal Affairs, “the research, the data governance, the data warehousing, and then the analytics that flow from there are not designed to answer a question and move on. They’re designed to drive curiosity and identify what additional questions need to be asked in that area.”

In parallel to fostering this overarching growth process, SPD has focused its data-driven work on core outcomes—including equity and accountability—that are often difficult to measure but illuminate the benefits of becoming a learning organization that skillfully uses data. For instance, law enforcement organizations have often relied on analyses of disproportionality to gauge equity; this refers to the deviation between an activity in a demographic group and that group’s representation in the population (e.g., one way to gauge disparate policing is to look at disproportional treatment of specific demographics, such as Black citizens). The problem is that this fails to inform what should change if disproportional policing is occurring. In an effort to tease out more helpful insights, SPD has employed propensity score measuring, a technique to create quasi-experimental conditions to control for an array of factors (e.g., officer age, location, time of day, or weather) and isolate one independent variable (e.g., race). Then, if SPD identifies a disparity, it shares that data with officers and asks them for help analyzing it. This has led to fruitful discussions where officers share what they were focusing on in a situation, and there is then an opportunity for the Department’s data scientists to draw on data and integrate that information into the model. This embodies the collaborative process that is necessary to leverage

analytics to its greatest effect; it is also helping SPD isolate variation that can only be explained by a subject’s race, which allows the Department to determine what it needs to prioritize to boost equitable treatment.

SPD has similarly employed sophisticated analytical techniques and collaborative dialogue to evaluate and augment accountability. Specifically, the Department used a kernel density estimate to explore residuals of police presence. This means that SPD aggregated data on vehicle location and overlaid it on a map with service calls, which enabled them to identify hot and cold spots for policing and seek feedback from officers to try to explain the variation. What’s more, the Department paired the analysis of hot and cold spots with an examination of metrics for community sentiment, including surveys of residents affected by Micro-Community Policing Plans that SPD established with Seattle University. This helped the Department identify goldilocks zones where communities are receiving just the right amount of law enforcement support. It also reinforces how an interactive dialogue, paired with data analysis, can lead to learning that facilitates changes in services and behavior and ultimately improves outcomes.

For SPD, the evolution of its data and analytics infrastructure was emblematic of how its approach to learning had become more sophisticated and in the process helped accelerate the pace of change. Early on in the Department’s journey with data, SPD had relied primarily on descriptive data and adopted the mantra of, as Atherley recalled, “Learn something new every month.” As its approach to data became more sophisticated, it graduated to “learn something new every week” and then “learn something new every minute.” Now, it is at a point that Atherley describes as “Learn something new on the edge.” In this phase, it is trying to establish a human-machine interface so that personnel are able to discern their highest priorities and technology facilitates their analysis and decision-making. This involves leveraging machine learning and advanced statistics to help people evaluate different possibilities and determine the best path forward.

A case in point of “learn on the edge” involved “a human-in-the-loop” intelligent-decision support tool for crisis response. This is a statistical process where SPD reads the crisis response, the narrative from the crisis supplement, and based on patterns of language or features in that narrative, predicts whether that description of someone’s behavior resembles the description of behavior that has caused somebody else in the past to seek an extreme risk-protection order. The benefit of this is that, in

lieu of requiring a sergeant to peruse all of the reports, the data and analytics team is able to filter the documents that are likely to be most relevant so that they are able to make an evaluation more quickly.

The incremental evolution of SPD's approach to data and analytics along with the gradual transformation of its policies, training, and supervisory structure was emblematic of important lessons for pursuing consent decrees. To begin with, that these reforms occurred so slowly reinforced the significance of capitalizing on momentum when there was synergy among key stakeholders. "The slowdown...in the middle towards the end was just that the leadership piece from every entity wasn't quite aligned..." Mygatt reflected, "and it was not all pulling in the same direction."⁹³ What's more, in part because that collaboration could be difficult to sustain, it was imperative to have diligent personnel who exhibited persistence. "All the shiny stuff is at the beginning. ... The hard work is all...off screen," Diaz reflected. "We would always hire experts who had what we called, 'butt discipline.'"⁹⁴

The Pace of Change:

Lessons for Investing in Transformation

For cities looking at starting a reform and transformation initiative, much can be learned from the duration of time necessary for SPD to transform to Constitutional policing and a new community-centric service model. As this paper has shown, the SPD transformation encompassed technical, adaptive, and cultural change over approximately 13 years. As the Consent Decree ended in Seattle, there were segments of the community that thought progress took too long and segments that believed more work and time needed to be invested for deeper reform. There was also the perspective that the Consent Decree ended at the appropriate time—with sustained and measurable progress on Constitutional and lawful policing and the development of an adaptive policing organization that can learn and transform continuously.

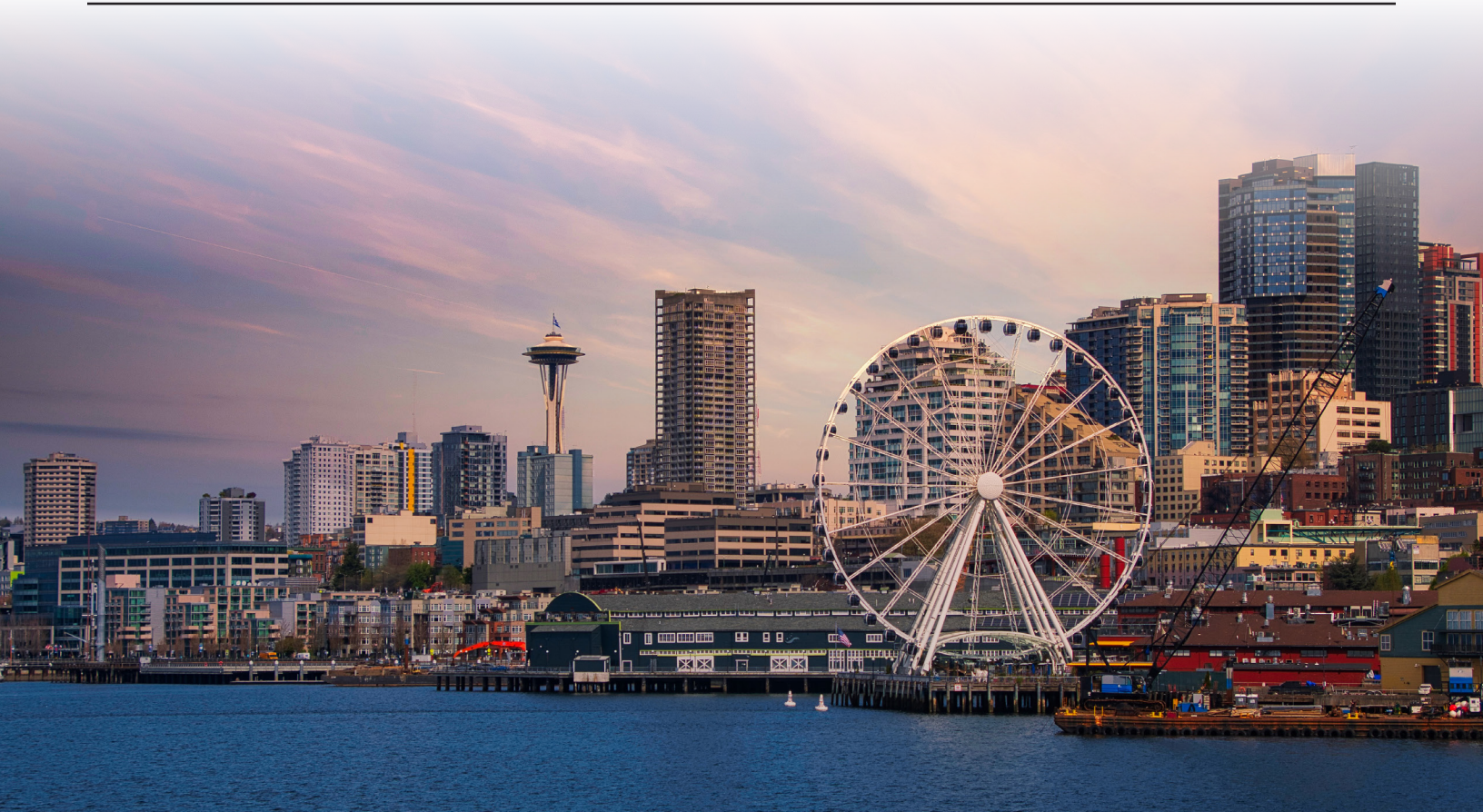
For broader perspective on the duration of transformation initiatives, we can look to the private sector and Seattle-based Microsoft's roughly 15-year transformation from a company primarily associated with personal computer software and computer-related products to a cloud computing leader. While Microsoft began investing in online services in the early 2000s, the decisive shift started around 2008 with the launch of the Azure cloud platform and accelerated after 2014 when Satya Nadella became CEO. By the early 2020s, cloud services had become Microsoft's principal growth engine, with

Azure, Microsoft 365, and other subscription-based cloud offerings accounting for a substantial share of revenue and market value. Organizationally, this transformation was not a discrete event but a long-term reinvention from selling packaged software tied to personal computers toward delivering continuously updated digital services through global data-center infrastructure.

Like SPD, Microsoft's largest barriers to progress were organizational and cultural. Microsoft's historical success in Windows and Office created incentives to protect established business models rather than embrace disruptive cloud offerings that initially generated lower margins and threatened existing revenue streams. The company also had to develop new technical capabilities in large-scale distributed computing, build new organizational units and infrastructure, and retrain employees to operate in a service-centric rather than product-centric environment. To overcome these barriers, Microsoft leveraged strong financial resources, engaged its customer base in service design, and explicitly promoted a "cloud-first" strategy. Under Nadella, Microsoft eliminated past ways of working, encouraged greater organizational learning, and aligned incentives around cloud computing. These changes allowed the firm to leverage its existing strengths while gradually overcoming resistance to change, resulting in one of the most significant business model transformations in modern corporate history.

While operating in different sectors, Microsoft and SPD navigated similar dynamics of change. For both organizations, it took more than a decade to develop and align new organizational capabilities and cultural competencies. However, SPD and the federal Monitoring Team faced the novel barriers of discontinuous executive sponsorship (SPD experienced significant turnover in police chiefs), policing unions that fought policy and practice change at multiple junctures, and of course the public sector challenge of aligning a consistent vision across the political establishment and community groups.

A key takeaway for cities looking to move forward on reform and transformation is to expect long-term engagement and multiple cycles of refining the vision, gaining buy-in, and securing resolve. Additionally, it may take years to seed and scale technical changes to policy and practice, systems, and processes; it may then take another set of years to build and foster actions and behaviors that exemplify, solidify, and sustain change. It is equally important to remember that reform and transformation are continual—any organization must build the long-term capacity to learn and improve year over year.



Closing

In August 2025, an officer from SPD's Crisis Response Team sought out a man experiencing a behavioral health crisis. Joe had recently lost his housing and been stabbed. Now he was camping in North Seattle, and SPD had received complaints about him shouting slurs and profanities throughout the day. The officer hoped to connect the man with resources and address the community's concerns, but at first Joe was resistant, insisting that he was not in crisis and did not want to leave the neighborhood. Hoping to deescalate the situation, the officer asked for Joe's input about what he wanted to do. Joe suggested that he camp in a different location where he had not had conflict with the community. At Joe's request, a Community Service Officer was called to help him move his belongings to the new location. While they were waiting, Joe and the officer discussed his life, including how he had grown up in North Seattle and his mother still lived there. As Joe prepared to move to his new location, he asked SPD officers for information on work assistance, and the officers connected him with a job training service.⁹⁵

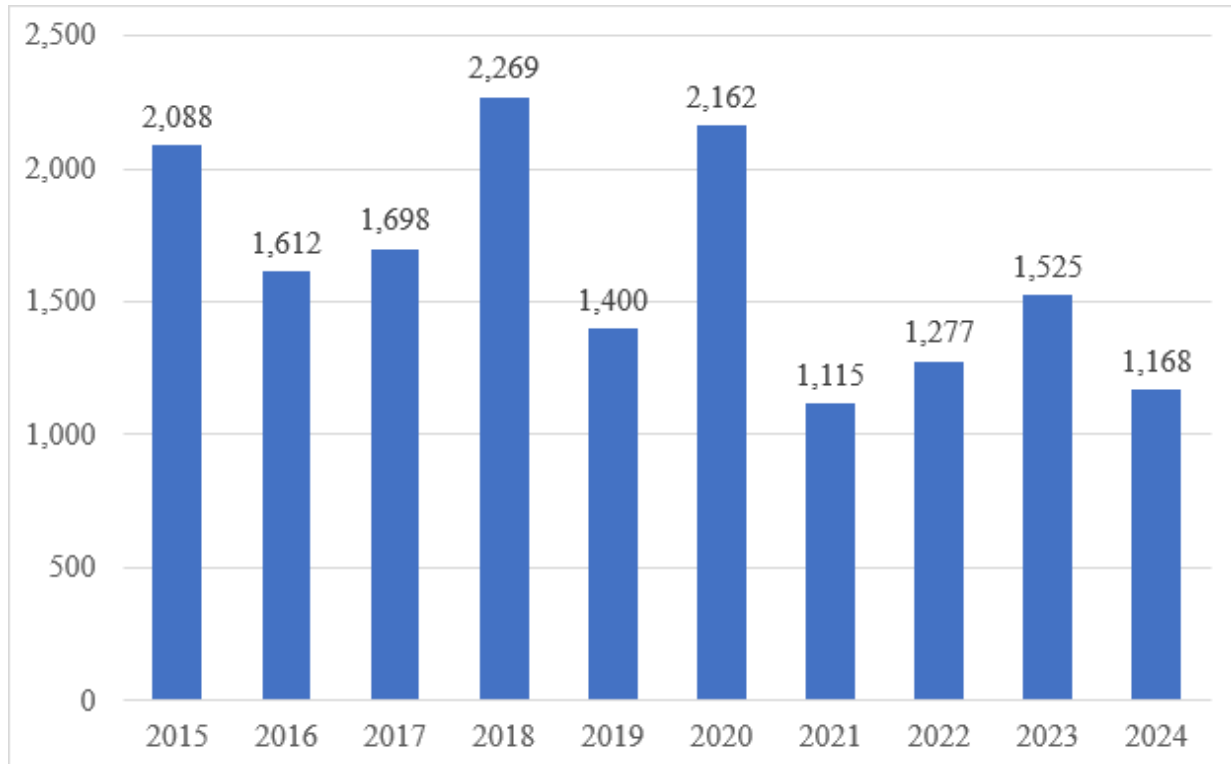
Positive incidents and outcomes like Joe's are now a regular occurrence for the SPD. The majority of rank and file officers of SPD have worked tirelessly for more than a decade to embrace the vision of the Consent Decree, develop new capabilities and competencies, and deliver a more just and safe community. Yet sustaining progress now, and building the future will take all of Seattle. The Seattle mayor and City Council must not only commit to ongoing reform and improvement, but also invest in the capacity of the accountability system. SPD leadership must continue to work on service improvement, internal accountability, external transparency, and public engagement. Most importantly, it will be up to the people of Seattle to keep visioning and defining the outcomes desired from public safety services and keep the city moving toward that future. Still, even as more work remained at the closure of the Consent Decree on September 3, 2025, there was also a recognition that SPD had come a long way. "From when I started to where we are today," Robart concluded, "I would say that the Seattle Police Department is not 100, not 200, but 300 percent better."⁹⁶

Appendix A: Measurable Impacts of Organizational Change

Organizational changes, catalyzed by the Consent Decree, produced measurable improvements in SPD's operations and interactions with the community. For example, SPD's use of force practices, a primary reason for the Consent Decree, have transformed over the course of the Consent Decree. Whereas DOJ's 2011 investigation found that SPD "engage[d] in a pattern or practice of using unnecessary or excessive force,"⁹⁷ SPD has dramatically decreased use of force, consistently adhered to new policies on using force appropriately, and improved supervisory and accountability systems overseeing force. This section provides an overview of these and other measurable changes produced by the Consent Decree.

SPD's use of force declined over the course of the Consent Decree, with a 44% decrease from 2015⁹⁸ to 2024.

Figure 1. Use of Force Over Time



Source: SPD Open Data

When SPD uses force, the force is predominantly lower-level force. Lower-level force (Level 1)⁹⁹ constituted 73% or more of use of force for all years between 2015 and 2024, except for 2020 when SPD's intermediate force (Level 2) significantly spiked related to its protest response. Level 2 constituted 57% of force in 2020 and otherwise constituted 16-25% of use of force per year for 2015-2024.

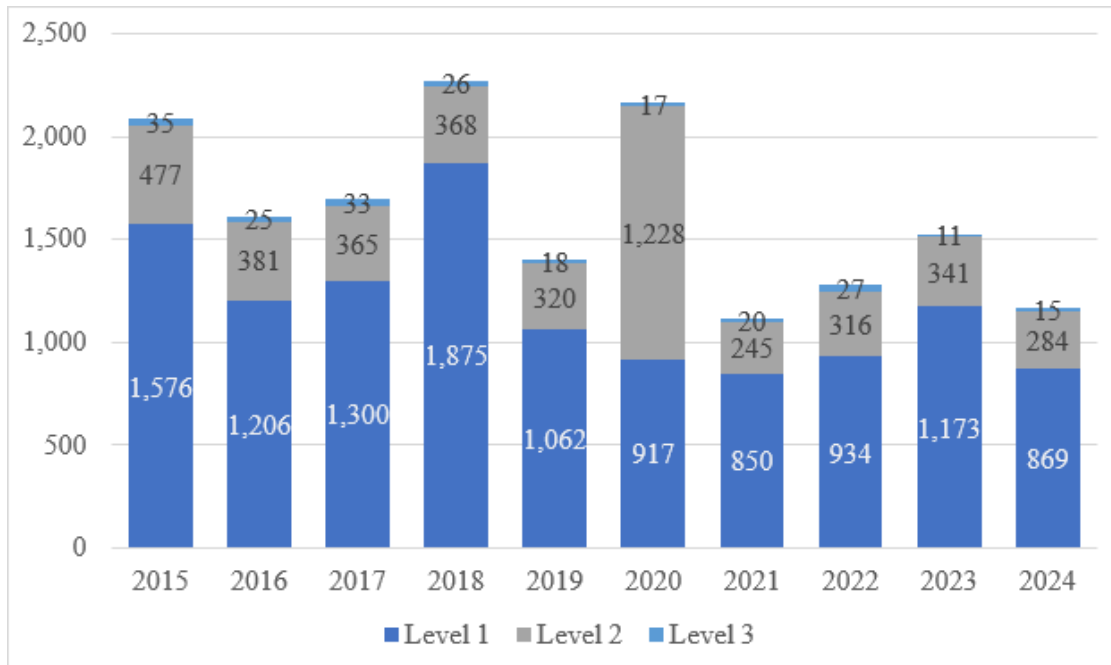
The most serious force, Level 3, consistently constituted only 1-2% of uses of force annually and is extremely rare during an officer dispatch.

Table 1. Force Levels by Year¹⁰⁰

Year	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Total
2015	1,576 (75%)	477 (23%)	35 (2%)	2,088
2016	1,206 (75%)	381 (24%)	25 (2%)	1,612
2017	1,300 (77%)	365 (21%)	33 (2%)	1,698
2018	1,875 (83%)	368 (16%)	26 (1%)	2,269
2019	1,062 (76%)	320 (23%)	18 (1%)	1,400
2020	917 (42%)	1,228 (57%)	17 (1%)	2,162
2021	850 (76%)	245 (22%)	20 (2%)	1,115
2022	934 (73%)	316 (25%)	27 (2%)	1,277
2023	1,173 (77%)	341 (22%)	11 (1%)	1,525
2024	869 (74%)	284 (24%)	15 (1%)	1,168

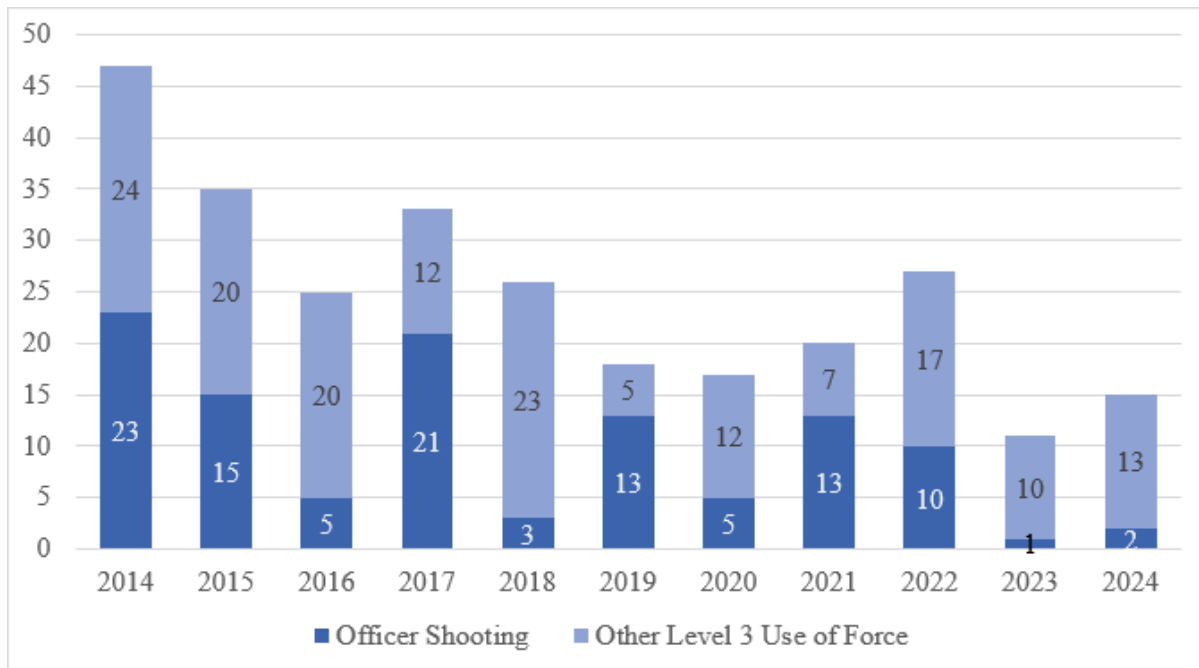
Source: SPD Open Data

The following figure visualizes these trends over time. Force at every level decreased over the course of the Consent Decree, including when assessing the force rate per officer dispatch to factor in decreases in officer activity and dispatches over time.¹⁰¹ Level 1 force decreased by 45%, and Level 2 decreased 40% from 2015 to 2024.

Figure 2. Use of Force by Level Over Time

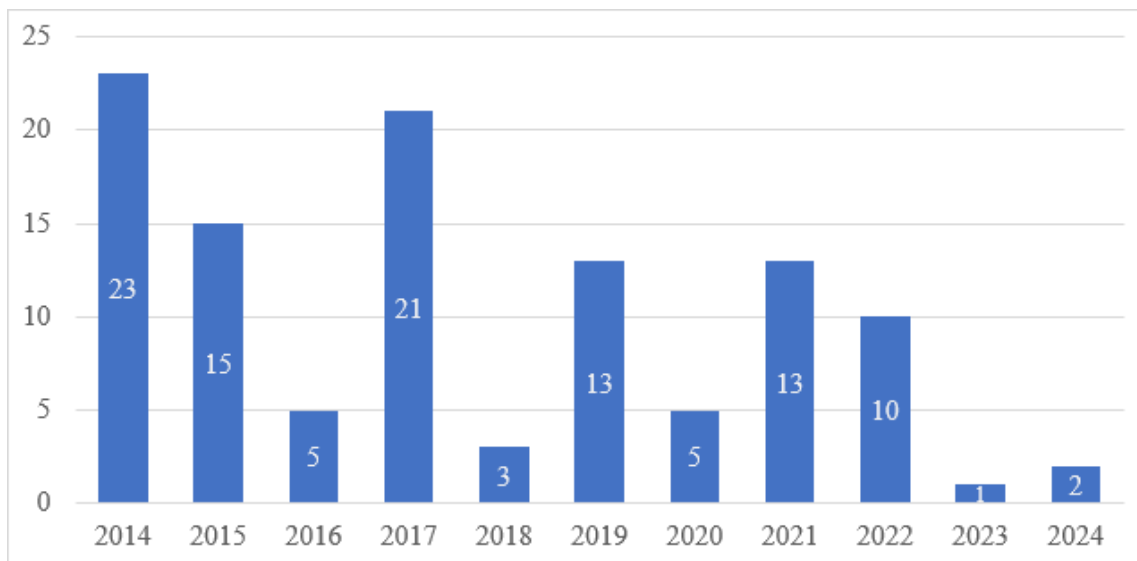
Source: SPD Open Data

The most serious force incidents (Level 3) decreased 68% from 2014 to 2024.

Figure 3. Level 3 Uses of Force Over Time

Source: SPD Open Data. SPD began using this force reporting system in 2014, so the Level 3 reporting for 2014 may be incomplete or otherwise present data quality issues.

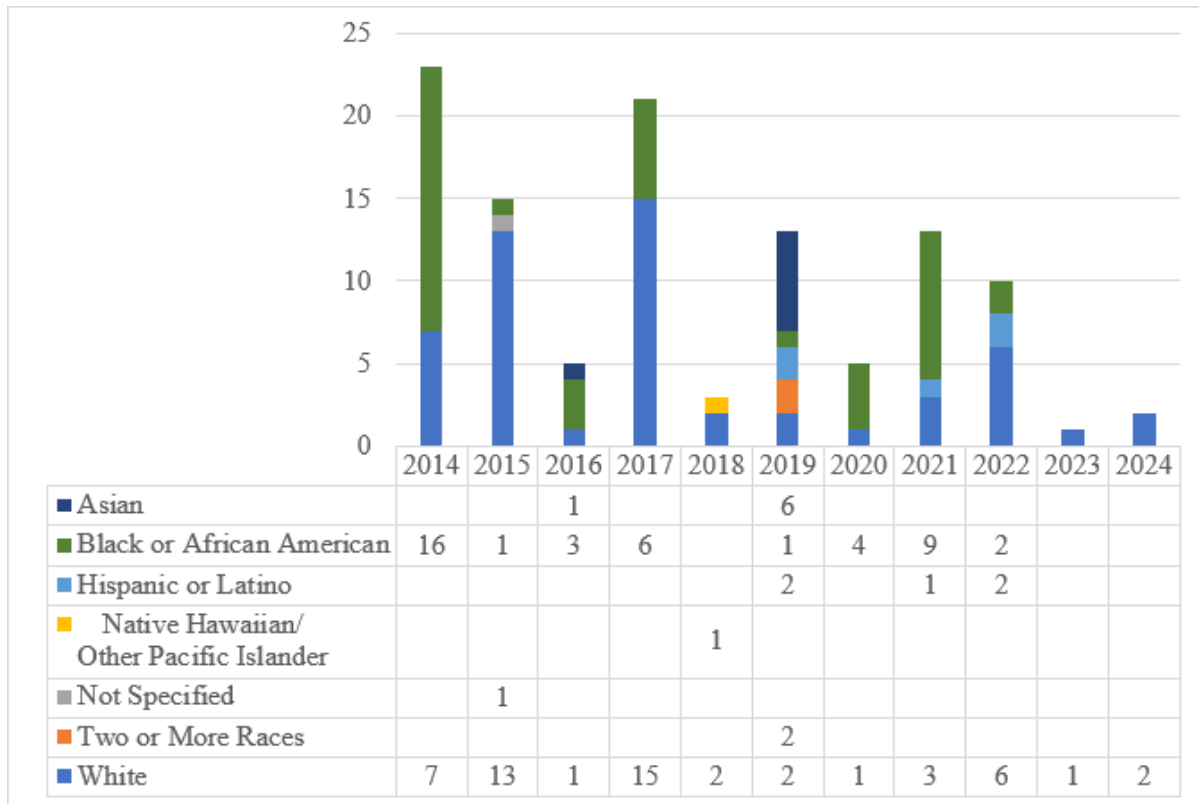
Officer shootings, one type of Level 3 force, decreased from 23 in 2014 to 1 in 2023 and 2 in 2024, representing a 91% decrease from 2014 to 2024.

Figure 4. Officer Shootings Over Time

Source: SPD Open Data

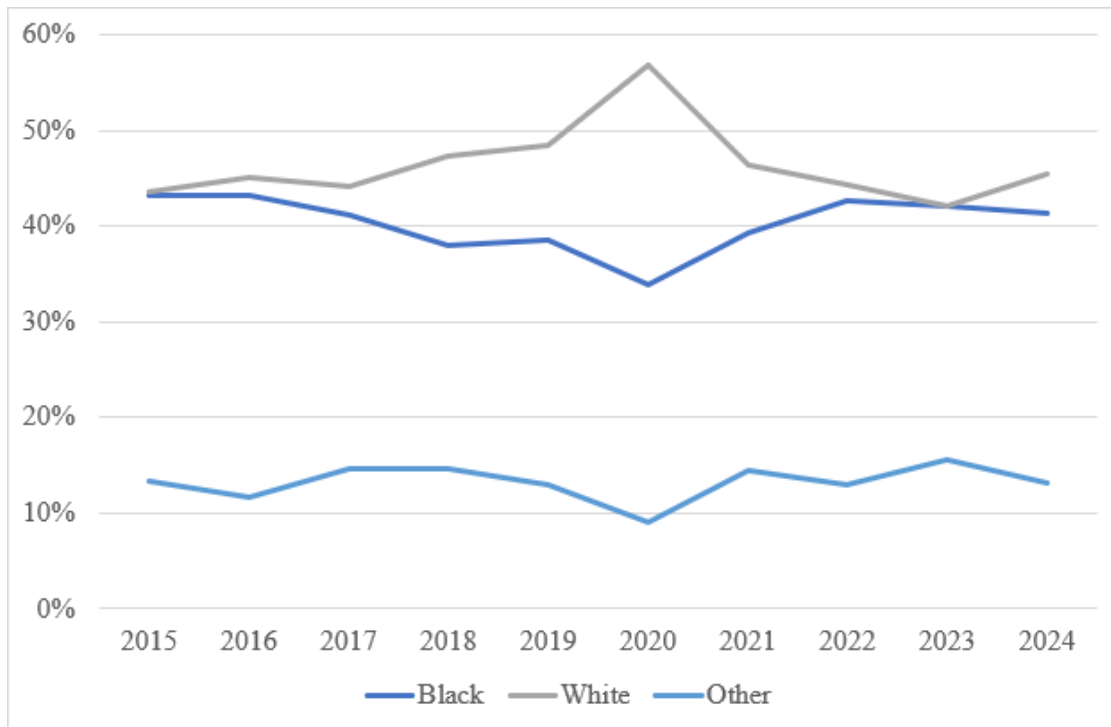
In 2014, SPD reported shooting at 16 Black individuals. SPD fired at no minorities across 2023 and 2024. SPD had three officer shootings across 2023 and 2024, with SPD firing at white individuals each time.

Figure 5. Race of Subjects of Officer Shootings Over Time



Source: SPD Open Data

While rates have fluctuated for the reported races of subjects of use of force, there have not been dramatic changes in the racial distribution of force when comparing 2015 and 2024. Disparities are discussed in greater depth under the “Stops and Detentions” section that follows.

Figure 6. Reported Race of Subjects of Use of Force Over Time

Source: SPD Open Data. This figure excludes subjects with no specified race.¹⁰²

Alongside significant decreases in force, SPD also eliminated the high levels of inappropriate force found in the DOJ investigation. DOJ found that “[w]hen SPD officers use force, they do so in an unconstitutional manner nearly 20% of the time.”¹⁰³ After SPD implemented Consent Decree reforms to address this critical issue, multiple Monitor reviews found that SPD’s practices had improved dramatically since DOJ’s original findings. The Monitor’s 2022 Comprehensive Assessment found that, “Overall, SPD demonstrates consistent adherence to its use of force policies in practice”¹⁰⁴ – a dramatic change from nearly 20% of uses of force violating the Constitution.

Supervision and oversight of force also transformed during the Decree. DOJ’s investigation found that “the secondary review process [was] little more than a formality that provide[d] no substantive oversight or accountability.”¹⁰⁵ Early in the Consent Decree, the Monitor found that “force often went unreported – leaving it subject to no departmental scrutiny.”¹⁰⁶ When force was reported, it was documented “on paper stuffed, unreviewed, in file cabinets.”¹⁰⁷ This led the Monitoring Team to question whether a force review and accountability process “existed at all.”¹⁰⁸

Today, “SPD’s force reporting and review practices have improved dramatically over the course of the Consent Decree, from no apparent meaningful review at the outset to intensive reporting and reviews today.”¹⁰⁹ Monitor reviews concluded that “supervisors regularly take corrective action in response to deficiencies.”¹¹⁰ Critically, SPD’s specialized “Force Investigation Team continues to document in-depth investigations of the most serious force incidents, and the Force Review Board continues to conduct wide-ranging discussions which generate a variety of recommendations for organizational improvement.”¹¹¹ “SPD’s transformation in this area has been a key achievement of SPD’s reforms under the Consent Decree, leading to improved force practices and accountability.”¹¹²

Based on these substantial improvements in use of force supervision and accountability, the 2022 Monitor Assessment concluded, “These various internal and external systems together provide Seattle with rigorous use of force oversight programs and present mechanisms for continually improving force practices into the future.”¹¹³ The Monitor’s Assessment added, “With continued support, emphasis, and community collaboration, these interlocking systems of accountability can maintain and enhance SPD force practices to promote safety for the Seattle community moving forward.”¹¹⁴

All together, “SPD’s reforms have translated into safer interactions between police and the community.”¹¹⁵ The work of continuous improvement, however, is never over, and the Monitor reiterated its call from the 2022 assessment: “SPD must continue to strive for ever-improving outcomes in its interactions with the community, building upon these significant, positive changes in its operations.”¹¹⁶

Crisis Intervention

These significant improvements in use of force practices helped address another area of DOJ concern: SPD's interactions with individuals experiencing behavioral health crisis. DOJ's 2011 investigation of the Seattle Police Department (SPD) found that:

SPD officers escalate situations and use unnecessary or excessive force when arresting individuals for minor offenses. *This trend is pronounced in encounters with persons with mental illnesses or those under the influence of alcohol or drugs.* This is problematic because SPD estimates that 70% of use of force encounters involve these populations.¹¹⁷

The Monitor later summarized that there was a “general concern that when SPD officers arrived at the scene of a behavioral crisis event, they did not always have the skill or training to address them in a manner that adequately promoted officer safety, subject safety, and any implicated law enforcement objectives.”¹¹⁸

Today, SPD responds to a significant amount of behavioral health crises each year, often around 10,000, but the outcomes are far different as a result of the Consent Decree. SPD rarely uses force in these crisis contacts, only using force in 1.5% of crisis contacts from 2022-2024. This low rate of force means crisis interventions are now safer both for SPD officers and community members.

Further, SPD rarely resorts to arrests during crisis contacts. SPD arrested individuals in 8.7% of crisis contacts from 2015-2019, decreasing to 6.1% across 2020 through 2024 with a low of 5.4% in 2024.

Overall, the Consent Decree's focus on de-escalation in crisis situations has improved outcomes for both SPD officers and the community. SPD can continue to work with its community toward further improvement in crisis intervention as Seattle moves forward.

Stops and Detentions

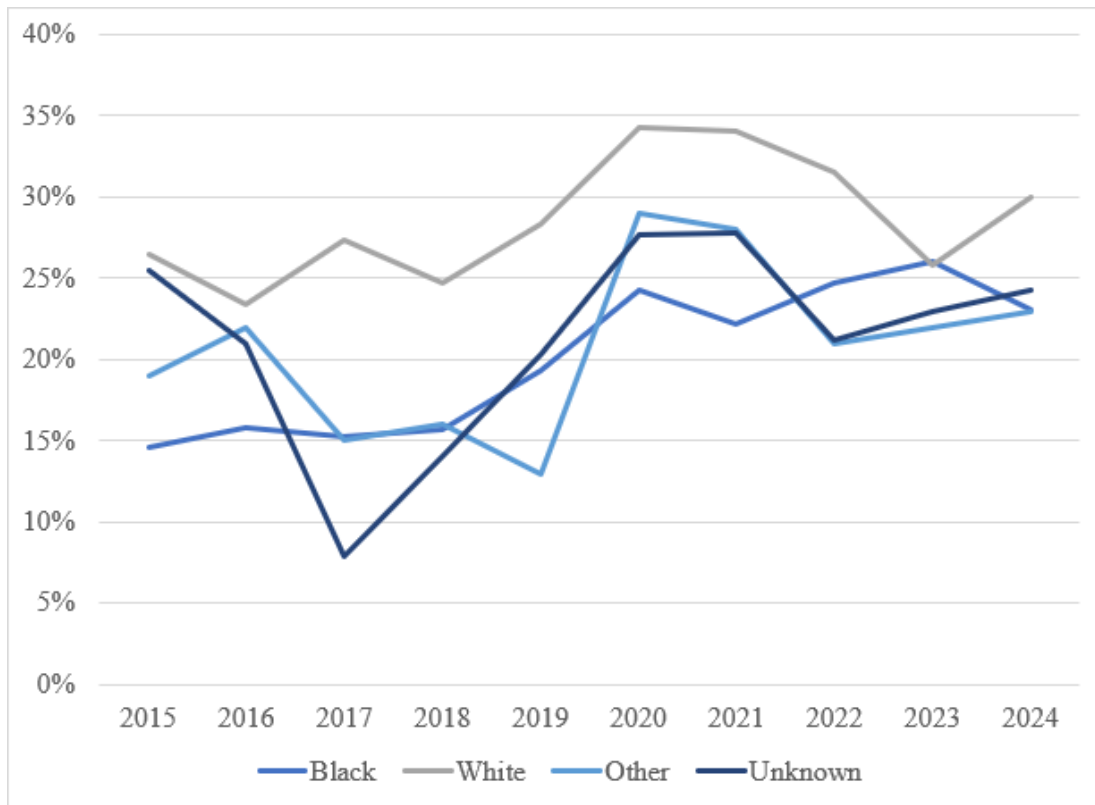
The Department of Justice's 2011 investigation “raise[d] serious concerns about SPD's practices related to pedestrian stops,”¹¹⁹ and DOJ found that “SPD need[ed] to implement better policies, training, and supervision to ensure officers constitutionally detain someone in a pedestrian encounter.”¹²⁰ Further, DOJ found that SPD did not collect “adequate data to self-assess” its stop and detention practices for appropriate legal bases for individual stops or potential trends of biased policing.¹²¹

As a result of the Consent Decree, SPD now collects data regarding stops and has developed a leading analytics program, allowing for continuous monitoring of agency operations. Collecting stop data and recording stops on body-worn camera now allows for subsequent review of the appropriateness of officer actions beyond SPD's capacity before the Consent Decree.

Whereas DOJ's investigation found “serious concerns about SPD's practices related to pedestrian stops,”¹²² the 2022 Monitor assessment found that officers “continue to routinely articulate reasonable suspicion for their stops.” Further, the Monitor found that officers were “appropriately articulating the justification for conducting frisks”¹²³ and were “not conducting frisks as a matter of course.”¹²⁴ Critically, the Monitor found that “[r]ace was not a factor in determining an individual's likelihood of being the subject of a stop or frisk lacking documentation of sufficient legal justification by officers.”¹²⁵ These findings were confirmed over multiple Monitor reviews, demonstrating sustained improvement in SPD's stop practices.

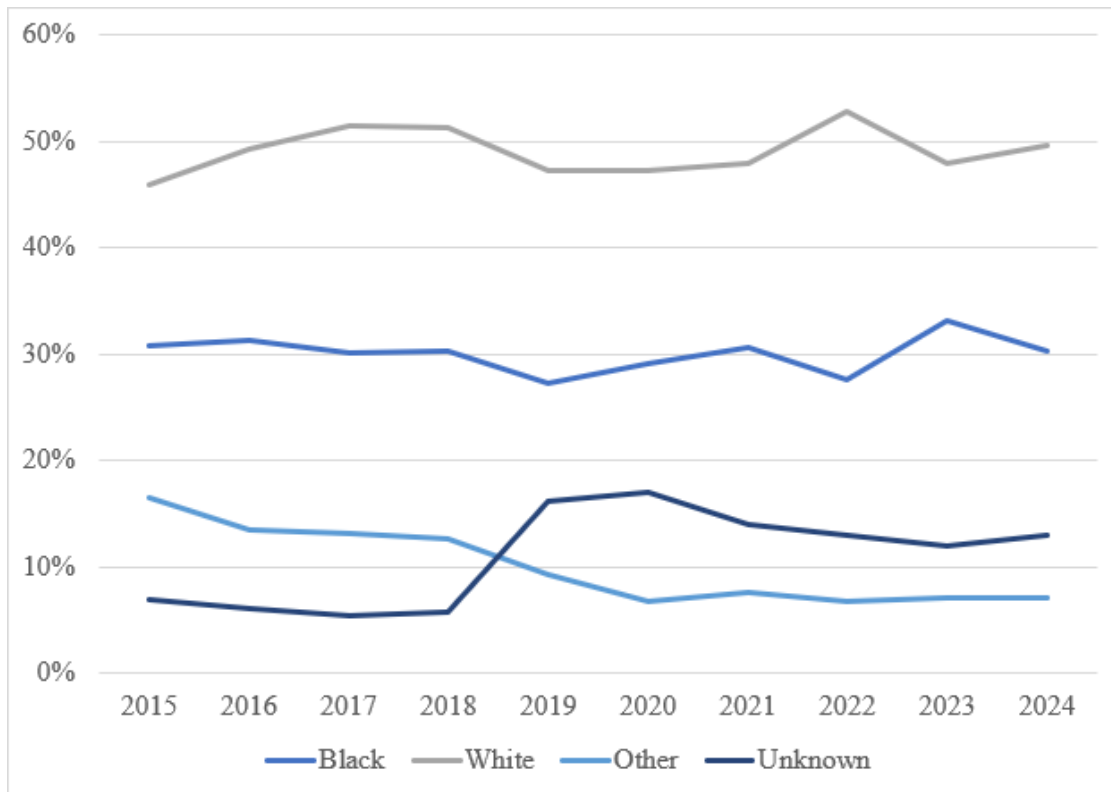
Additionally, frisk hit rates, a performance measure which shows how often officers find a weapon during a weapons frisk thus confirming their reasonable suspicion for conducting the frisk, fluctuated but generally increased over the course of the Consent Decree, with hit rates for Black individuals increasing eight percentage points between 2015 and 2024. At the same time, the frisk hit rate was consistently higher for white subjects than Black subjects, except for 2023, providing an ongoing area of inquiry for SPD.

Figure 7. Frisk Hit Rates by Race Over Time



Source: SPD Open Data

The racial composition of stopped individuals remained fairly consistent over the course of the Consent Decree.

Figure 8. Racial Composition of Stopped Individuals Over Time¹²⁶

Source: SPD Open Data. Non-Black minorities are grouped into the “Other” category for this chart due to the lower aggregate stop activity for these groups.

As a result of these minimal changes in the racial distribution of stops over the course of the Consent Decree, concerns regarding disparities, between the racial distribution of stops versus Seattle’s population, persist. This is a topic of great community interest, even if social science recognizes the limited insights of comparing stop distributions against the population of Seattle. As the Monitor previously reported, “Population-based analyses present insights but also do not, by themselves, tell a complete story regarding disparity or potential bias, since other sociological factors may impact policing disparities as they do in other areas of society.”¹²⁷

To its credit, SPD has developed greater capacity to analyze disparities more rigorously, and the Consent Decree has provided a pathway for continual community engagement on addressing disparities. As the Monitor previously reported:

SPD is now identifying specific disparities through sophisticated analyses, previously conducted solely by the Monitoring Team since they were beyond SPD’s abilities. Now, critically, SPD must build upon the Department’s prior analyses and community engagement in this area to move forward in addressing any unwarranted disparities in accordance with its Court-approved bias-free policing policy.¹²⁸

SPD’s bias-free policing policy, produced as a result of the Consent Decree, provides a framework for SPD to engage collaboratively with the community toward addressing disparities. This policy requires that where “unwarranted disparate impacts are identified” with respect to a given SPD practice or policy, “the Department will consult with neighborhoods, businesses, community groups, and/or the Community Police Commission, and the Office of the Inspector General for Public Safety, to explore equally effective alternative practices that would result in less disproportionate impact.”¹²⁹

SPD’s transformation in this area is notable. They once failed to collect “adequate data to self-assess”¹³⁰ stops and now have a framework for ongoing collaboration with the community to address disparities identified in its data analyses. Still, there is room for improvement. SPD is seeking to upgrade its public-facing dashboards, which would bolster the community’s ability to analyze practices and grow the Decree’s improvements into the future. Additionally, SPD could refine how it tracks the outcomes of stops, beyond what is required by the Consent Decree, to provide additional clarity on what occurs during stops. In 2024, 72% of stops resulted in a “field contact” disposition, a category which does not distinguish whether there was criminal activity or whether the officer’s reasonable suspicion of criminal activity establishing the basis for the stop

was subsequently confirmed during the stop. The Monitor reiterated its recommendation from the 2022 Comprehensive Assessment to “break up the ‘field contact’ outcome category into at least two categories: (1) ‘no action’ or ‘no criminal activity,’ for which the reasonable suspicion for the stop was dispelled and, consequently, the officer took no action and (2) ‘verbal warning,’ for which the reasonable suspicion of criminal activity was confirmed but the officer responded informally, whether by policy or discretion.”¹³¹ Again, this is beyond the Consent Decree’s requirements but certainly a topic worth exploring to improve operational insights and bolster disparity analyses moving forward.

Reflecting on these findings, challenges, and newfound capacities and systems, the Monitor provided the following overview and recommendations in the 2022 Comprehensive Assessment, with a focus on continual community collaboration moving forward:

Disparities persist, and the critical work toward more equitable policing must continue. As the prior Monitoring Team and the Court has observed, the Decree does not require the elimination of all disparities among SPD’s various enforcement activities. At the same time, however, the Decree process has not been silent as to the import of addressing disparities, with Decree-required policies producing a necessary path forward for SPD and the community to meaningfully address specific disparities across various areas of SPD’s activities and performance.

With SPD’s leading disparity analytics to inform evidence-based approaches, a Police Department committed to improvement, and community oversight bodies dedicated toward ensuring the Department’s improvement, Seattle now has a foundation for substantive collaborative action toward more equitable policing that is present in few other cities – and certainly not present in Seattle at the beginning of the Consent Decree. This potential for further transformation, of course, does not minimize the findings of disparity highlighted in this report – which cannot be satisfying to the Seattle community or to SPD. However, it appears that Seattle has the information, policies, tools, and systems in place to allow for the Seattle community to consider how to best address identified disparities in the long-term. SPD has come a long way in this area, and the work toward continual improvement must be ongoing.¹³²

This framework not only provides a structure for addressing disparities but also presents a broader blueprint for Seattle moving forward on public safety improvements. SPD’s reforms have produced substantial, wide-ranging improvements benefiting SPD officers and the Seattle community, but the work of continual improvement in collaboration with the community never ends. As Seattle moves forward, the Monitor encouraged the City to remain committed to building upon its successes with the Consent Decree and continually engage with the community toward a brighter public safety future.

Endnotes

1. This vignette is based on a report that the SPD shared via a personal communication by email on August 12, 2025. The name of the person involved has been changed to protect their privacy.
2. This vignette about John Williams draws on a case study previously developed by Dr. Antonio Ofelie: “Rebuilding Trust and Value: The Transformation of the Seattle Police Department,” Leadership for a Networked World, 2019, available at <https://lnwprogram.org/sites/default/files/SPD-Transformation.pdf> (accessed on July 3, 2025). This is one of four previous case studies and insights that Ofelie has authored on SPD. The others are “Smart Power: Transforming Seattle’s Police Department,” An Insight from the 2015 Public Safety Summit, Leadership for a Networked World, available at <https://lnwprogram.org/content/smart-power-transforming-seattle-s-police-department> (accessed on July 3, 2025); “The Importance of Collaboration: Seeding Change and Creating Accountability in Seattle,” An Insight from the 2016 Public Safety Summit, Leadership for a Networked World, available at <https://lnwprogram.org/content/importance-collaboration-seeding-change-and-creating-accountability-seattle> (accessed on July 3, 2025); and “Leveraging Technology To Become A Learning Organization: Lessons from the Los Angeles and Seattle Police Departments,” An Insight from the 2022 Public Safety Summit, Leadership for a Networked World, available at <https://lnwprogram.org/content/leveraging-technology-become-learning-organization-lessons-los-angeles-and-seattle-police> (accessed on August 11, 2025). For much of its description of the transformation of SPD, here and throughout the paper, this report draws on these previous publications.
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91. Interview with Lesley Cordner, February 28, 2025.
92. “Seattle Police Monitor 2021 Semi-annual Report,” pp. 18 and 22.
93. Mygatt interview.
94. Diaz interview.
95. This vignette is based on a report that the Seattle Police Department shared via a personal communication by email on August 12, 2025. The name of the person involved has been changed to protect their privacy.
96. Robart interview.
97. 2011 Findings Letter at 3.
98. 2015 is the first year with reliable data collection on use of force per SPD.
99. SPD classifies use of force with a three-level system that, generally, categorizes force according to the severity or significance of the force involved:
- Type I force, the lowest level, includes “force that causes pain or injury not requiring anything greater than basic first aid.” Type I also includes pointing a firearm.
 - Type II, or intermediate force, is defined as “force that causes or is reasonably expected to cause physical injury requiring medical treatment greater than basic first aid.” Type II force generally includes the use of tasers, OC spray, and impact weapons.
 - Type III force is the most serious force, including “force that causes or is reasonably expected to cause, great bodily harm, substantial bodily harm, loss of consciousness, or death.” Officer shootings are Type III uses of force.
- For full definitions, see Seattle Police Department Manual, Section 8.050, Use of Force Definitions (last rev. September 1, 2024, available at <https://public.powerdms.com/Sea4550/tree/documents/2042942> (accessed on August 19, 2025)). While SPD policy uses “Type,” as in “Type I,” to designate levels of force, SPD’s data uses “Level” in place of “Type” to designate the category of force. This report uses “Level” in keeping with the language used in the SPD’s open data analyzed for this report.
100. Some of these figures have changed since the Monitor’s 2022 Comprehensive Assessment, which was based on the data available in SPD’s open data portal at the time. SPD provides the following explanation: “Police data evolve to be more accurate as systems and infrastructure process records. For this reason, the data become more stable over time. This analysis reflects the state of the data at the time they were retrieved from the Seattle Police Departments (SPDs) public data repository, data.seattle.gov (“DSG”). According to the SPD, there are variety of seasonal and capacity influences on Use of Force case processing. Data available from DSG are only posted after all reporting, investigation, review and quality assurance workflow processes have concluded. These data lag between weeks and in the case of serious use of force (Type III, select Type II, Taser, and associated force) months.”
101. The Monitor encouraged SPD to continue to analyze force trends against officer dispatch and proactivity records, excluding dispatches unlikely to involve an enforcement interaction between SPD and the public, such as instances where officers are dispatched but are unable to locate an incident.
102. SPD can work to decrease the number of use of force incidents with no reported race for the subject (around 25% of incidents across 2023 and 2024).
103. 2011 Findings Letter at 4.
104. 2022 Comprehensive Assessment at 10.
105. 2011 Findings Letter at 4.

106. Ninth Systemic Assessment at 1 (internal citations omitted).
107. Ninth Systemic Assessment at 1 (internal citations omitted).
108. Fourth Semiannual Report at 26.
109. 2022 Comprehensive Assessment at 10.
110. 2022 Comprehensive Assessment at 10.
111. 2022 Comprehensive Assessment at 10.
112. 2022 Comprehensive Assessment at 10.
113. 2022 Comprehensive Assessment at 11.
114. 2022 Comprehensive Assessment at 11.
115. 2022 Comprehensive Assessment at 12.
116. 2022 Comprehensive Assessment at 12.
117. Dkt. 1-1 at 5 (emphasis added).
118. Fifth Systemic Assessment at 3.
119. 2011 Findings Letter at 26.
120. 2011 Findings Letter at 26.
121. 2011 Findings Letter at 30.
122. 2011 Findings Letter at 26.
123. 2022 Comprehensive Assessment at 15.
124. 2022 Comprehensive Assessment at 126.
125. 2022 Comprehensive Assessment at 15.
126. As reported in the Monitor's 2022 Comprehensive Assessment: "SPD ceased the use of 'Hispanic' as a racial category for stops at that time, instead tracking it separately as an ethnicity, contributing to the increase in subject race being reported as 'unknown.' SPD implemented its new stop reporting and records management system in May 2019, leading to system changes in data collection and reporting and impacting these trends." (Page 114)
127. 2022 Comprehensive Assessment at 23.
128. 2022 Comprehensive Assessment at 23.
129. Seattle Police Department Manual, Section 5.140, Bias-Free Policing (effective Aug 1, 2019), available at <https://public.powerdms.com/Sea4550/tree/documents/2042894> (accessed on August 19, 2025).
130. 2011 Findings Letter at 30. Emphasis added.
131. 2022 Comprehensive Assessment at 118.
132. 2022 Comprehensive Assessment at 17.



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