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Abolish the Police? Those Who Survived the Chaos in Seattle Aren't So Sure

What is it like when a city abandons a neighborhood and the police vanish? Business owners describe a harrowing experience of calling for help and being left all alone.

By Nellie Bowles

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SEATTLE — Faizel Khan was being told by the news media and his own mayor that the protests in his hometown were peaceful, with "a block party atmosphere."

But that was not what he saw through the windows of his Seattle coffee shop. He saw encampments overtaking the sidewalks. He saw roving bands of masked protesters smashing windows and looting.

Young white men wielding guns would harangue customers as well as Mr. Khan, a gay man of Middle Eastern descent who moved here from Texas so he could more comfortably be out. To get into his coffee shop, he sometimes had to seek the permission of self-appointed armed guards to cross a border they had erected.

"They barricaded us all in here," Mr. Khan said. "And they were sitting in lawn chairs with guns."

For 23 days in June, about six blocks in the city's Capitol Hill neighborhood were claimed by left-wing demonstrators and declared police-free. Protesters hailed it as liberation — from police oppression, from white supremacy — and a catalyst for a national movement.

In the wake of the killing of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police, the Black Lives Matter movement is calling to defund the police, arguing that the criminal justice system is inherently racist.

Leaders in many progressive cities are listening. In New York City, Mayor Bill de Blasio has announced a plan to shift $1 billion out of the police budget. The Minneapolis City Council is pitching a major reduction, and the Seattle City Council is pushing for a 50 percent cut to Police Department funding. (The mayor said that plan goes too far.)

Some even call for "abolishing the police" altogether and closing down precincts, which is what happened in Seattle.

That has left small-business owners as lonely voices in progressive areas, arguing that police officers are necessary and that cities cannot function without a robust public safety presence. In Minneapolis, Seattle and Portland, Ore., many of those business owners consider themselves progressive, and in interviews they express support for the Black Lives Matter movement. But they also worry that their businesses, already debilitated by the coronavirus pandemic, will struggle to survive if police departments and city governments cannot protect them.

On Capitol Hill, business crashed as the Seattle police refused to respond to calls to the area. Officers did not retake the region until July 1, after four shootings, including two fatal ones.

Now a group of local businesses owners — including a locksmith, the owner of a tattoo parlor, a mechanic, the owners of a Mexican restaurant and Mr. Khan — is suing the city. The lawsuit claims that "Seattle's unprecedented decision to abandon and close off an entire city neighborhood, leaving it unchecked by the police, unserved by fire and emergency health services, and inaccessible to the public" resulted in enormous property damage and lost revenue.

Rancho Bravo, a popular late-night Mexican restaurant on Capitol Hill, is one of the businesses in the lawsuit, which says Seattle provided material support for the occupation. Grant Hindsley for The New York Times

The Seattle lawsuit — and interviews with shop owners in cities like Portland and Minneapolis — underscores a key question: Can businesses still rely on local governments, which are now rethinking the role of the police, to keep them safe? The issue is especially tense in Seattle, where the city government not only permitted the establishment of a police-free zone, but provided infrastructure like concrete barriers and portable toilets to sustain it.

The economic losses that businesses suffered during the recent tumult are significant: One community relief fund in Minneapolis, where early protests included vandalism and arson, has raised $9 million for businesses along the Lake Street corridor, a largely Latino and East African business district. "We asked the small businesses what they needed to cover the damage that insurance wasn't paying, and the gap was around $200 million," said Allison Sharkey, the executive director of the Lake Street Council, which is organizing the fund. Her own office, between a crafts market and a Native American support center, was burned down in the protests.

Some small businesses have resorted to posting GoFundMe pleas for donations online.

Many are nervous about speaking out lest they lend ammunition to a conservative critique of the Black Lives Matter movement. In Portland, Elizabeth Snow McDougall, the owner of Stevens-Ness legal printers, emphasized her support for the cause before describing the damage done to her business.

"One window broken, then another, then another, then another. Garbage to clean off the sidewalk in front of the store every morning. Urine to wash out of our doorway alcove. Graffiti to remove," Ms. McDougall wrote in an email. "Costs to board up and later we'll have costs to repair."

The impact of the occupation on Cafe Argento, Mr. Khan's coffee shop on Capitol Hill, has been devastating. Very few people braved the barricades set up by the armed occupiers to come in for his coffee and breakfast sandwiches. Cars coming to pick up food orders would turn around. At two points, he and his workers felt scared and called 911. "They said they would not come into CHOP," said Mr. Khan, referring to one of the names that protesters gave to the occupied Capitol Hill area. "It was lawless."

He had to start chipping in for private security, a hard thing to do when his business had already been hurt by the coronavirus.

But he considers himself lucky — and he was. Even weeks after the protests, blocks of his previously bustling neighborhood remained boarded up and covered in shattered glass. Many business owners are scared to speak out, Mr. Khan said, because of worries that they would be targeted further.

One mid-July morning in the neighborhood, workers in orange vests were mopping off the sidewalks and power-spraying graffiti off the sides of buildings. Two window repair guys said they had their hands full for weeks. Shattered street lamps were being unscrewed and replaced.

A confusing array of security teams wandered around, armed with handguns and rifles. Some wore official-looking private security uniforms. Others wore casual clothes and lanyards identifying their affiliation with Black Lives Matter. A third group wore all black with no identifying labels and declined to name their group affiliation.

Rick Hearns displays two handguns while patrolling Capitol Hill as a private security guard. His badge reads "Black Lives Matter Community Patrol." Grant Hindsley for The New York Times

When a tall man in a trench coat and hiking boots walked over to question Mr. Khan, the man spread his coat open, revealing several pistols on harnesses around his chest and waist. He presented a badge on a lanyard that read "Black Lives Matter Community Patrol."

His name is Rick Hearns and he identified himself as a longtime security guard and mover who is now a Black Lives Matter community guard, in charge of several others. Local merchants pay for his protection, he said as he handed out his business card. (Mr. Khan said he and his neighbors are now paying thousands of dollars a month for protection from Iconic Global, a Washington State-based private security contractor.)

Mr. Hearns has had bad experiences with the police in his own life. He says he wants police reform, but he was appalled by the violent tactics and rhetoric he witnessed during the occupation.

He blamed the destruction and looting on "opportunists," but also said that much of the damage on Capitol Hill came from a distinct contingent of violent, armed white activists. "It's antifa," he said. "They don't want to see the progress we've made. They want chaos."

Many of the business owners on Capitol Hill agreed: Much of the violence they saw and the intimidation of their patrons came from a group these business owners identified as antifa, which they distinguished from the Black Lives Matter movement. "The idea of taking up the Black movement and turning it into a white occupation, it's white privilege in its finest definition," Mr. Khan said. "And that's what they did."

Antifa, which stands for anti-fascist, is a radical, leaderless leftist political movement that uses armed, violent protest as a method to create what supporters say is a more just and equitable country. They have a strong presence in the Pacific Northwest, including the current protests in Portland.

Police officers did not retake the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest zone, where demonstrators graffitied walls and broke windows, until after four shootings had occurred there. Grant Hindsley for The New York Times

When the occupation in Seattle started in early June, Mayor Jenny Durkan seemed almost amused. "We could have the Summer of Love," she said.

After President Trump took aim at the governor of Washington State and Seattle's mayor on June 11, Ms. Durkan defended the occupation on Twitter as "a peaceful expression of our community's collective grief and their desire to build a better world," she wrote, pointing to the "food trucks, spaghetti potlucks, teach-ins, and movies."

The lawsuit by the small-business owners, filed by the firm Calfo Eakes on June 24, seizes on such language, pointing out that the city knew what was happening and provided material support for the occupation.

Matthew Ploszaj, a Capitol Hill resident, is one of the complainants. He said his apartment building, blocks from Mr. Khan's shop, was broken into four times during the occupation. The Seattle Police were called each time and never came to his apartment, according to Mr. Ploszaj. When he and another resident called the police after one burglary, they told him to meet them outside the occupation zone, about eight blocks away. He and other residents spent nights at a friend's house outside the area during the height of the protests.

The employees of Bergman's Lock and Key say they were followed by demonstrators with baseball bats. Cure Cocktail, a local bar and charcuterie, said its workers were asked by protesters to pledge loyalty to the movement: "Are you for the CHOP or are you for the police?" they were asked, according to the lawsuit.

The business owners also found that trying to get help from the Seattle Police, who declined to comment for this article, made them targets of activists.

Across from Cafe Argento is a funky old auto repair shop called Car Tender run by John McDermott, a big soft-spoken man. On June 14, Mr. McDermott was driving his wife home from their anniversary dinner when he received a call from a neighbor who saw someone trying to break into his shop.

Mr. McDermott and his 27-year-old son, Mason, raced over. A man who was inside the shop, Mr. McDermott said, had emptied the cash drawer and was in the midst of setting the building on fire. Mr. McDermott said he and his son wrestled the man down and planned to hold him until the police arrived. But officers never showed up. A group of several hundred protesters did, according to Mr. McDermott, breaking down the chain-link fence around his shop and claiming that Mr. McDermott had kidnapped the man.

"They started coming across the fence — you see all these beautiful kids, a mob but kids — and they have guns and are pointing them at you and telling you they're going to kill you," Mr. McDermott said. "Telling me I'm the K.K.K. I'm not the K.K.K."

The demonstrators were livestreaming the confrontation. Mr. McDermott's wife watched, frantically calling anyone she could think of to go help him.

Later, Mr. McDermott's photo and shop address appeared on a website called Cop Blaster, whose stated aim is to track police brutality but also has galleries of what it calls "Snitches" and "Cop Callers." The McDermotts were categorized as both of those things on the website, which warned they should "keep their mouths shut."

John McDermott said the police did not respond when his auto repair shop on Capitol Hill was being robbed by someone trying to set the building on fire. Grant Hindsley for The New York Times

Many of the listings include names and addresses of people who are said to have called the police. Since the Cop Blaster post went up, Mr. McDermott's shop has received so many harassing phone calls and messages that some employees have had to take time off.

A block away is Bill Donner, the owner of Richmark Label, who let police officers use the roof of his factory to monitor the demonstration. Inside, his company had spent 50 years making labels for products like whiskey, soaps and natural beef jerky. Many days during the occupation, Mr. Donner, who said he was in favor of police reform, had to negotiate with the occupiers of the zone for access to his factory.

Twice, he called 911 and was told that the police would not be coming into the area.

The experience of the small-business owners seems a universe away from the rhetoric of Seattle's politicians. As the violence turned deadly, Councilwoman Kshama Sawant, who represents Capitol Hill, defended the protesters' use of their own armed guards instead of the police.

"Elected committees of self defense have historically played vital roles during general strikes, occupations and in mass movements, in order for the working class and marginalized people to defend themselves and carry out necessary functions in place of the forces of the state," she wrote. She has called for the local police precinct to be permanently placed under "community control."

When the mayor did send in police officers to end the occupation after the shootings, Ms. Sawant wrote on Twitter, "Shame on Mayor Jenny Durkan for deploying Seattle police yesterday in a brutal attack against peaceful Black Lives Matter protesters & homeless neighbors at the Capitol Hill Organized Protest."

Many protesters who remained in early July were milling around a small tent encampment on a lawn at Seattle Central College, some with rifles slung over their shoulders. The smell of weed drifted through. The streets were full of moving trucks.

The crowds were gone, but every now and then, the demonstrators gave speeches about the importance of disbanding the police. Sometimes the activists spoke about what went wrong with the occupation. One young woman on a bullhorn argued to passers-by that the police left too quickly and that a sustainable police-free region would have to be built more slowly.

These days, storefronts in the neighborhood remain boarded up, covered in Black Lives Matter signs and graffiti. Demonstrators still hold evening protests, albeit smaller and quieter than before. But the businesses remain on edge.

"This is an ongoing crisis," Mr. Donner said on Tuesday. "Protesters are apparently staying until they get some of what they want. No one knows what level of city cooperation will be enough for them."

But the area is slowly going back to its old normal. The park and playing fields have been cleared, and police officers have returned to the streets. An apartment building that opened earlier this summer is finally attracting prospective tenants.

A spokeswoman for Mayor Durkan did not comment on the lawsuit but acknowledged frustrations from small businesses.

"Many who live and work in Capitol Hill and other parts of the city continue to witness daily protests that are rightly demanding an end to systemic racism," she wrote. "In some circumstances, businesses and residents have faced property destruction in the last two months."

She encouraged the businesses to file claims.

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