

THE WEEK

The policification of everything

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April 28, 2021

This past Sunday, my family met up with friends so the parents could talk and the kids could play. All the adults are at least halfway vaccinated, but we hung out in the backyard as a pandemic precaution and for swing set access. Because we were outside, no one was wearing masks — except two kids. Their parents didn't tell them to, but it was cold, and I'm guessing they think masks can be fun. Good for pretending, for feeling sneaky and mischievous. They stayed masked until the sun (and some graham crackers) came out.

Tucker Carlson says I should've called the cops.



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Tucker Carlson is now telling his audience to harass people who wear face masks outside.

If they see children wearing masks, Tucker says the response should be no different than when you see a kid being abused -- "call the police immediately, contact child protective services"



8:21 PM · Apr 26, 2021 

 23.8K  See the latest COVID-19 information on Twitter

With a chyron declaring "masks are a sign of obedience," Carlson railed against outdoor mask use on his Fox News show Monday night. If you see an adult in a mask outside, he said, tell them to take it off. If you see a kid, however, your response "should be no different from your response to seeing someone beat a kid in Walmart," Carlson argued: "Call the police immediately. Contact Child Protective Services. Keep calling until someone arrives. What you're looking at is abuse. It's child abuse, and you are morally obligated to attempt to prevent it."

It's not, and you're not, certainly not by involving the cops. Carlson is right about outdoor masks being unnecessary, especially for vaccinated people (many public health experts and the CDC now agree, with strong scientific basis for their thinking here). Yet in his advice to call the police and CPS on kids in masks, Carlson is wrong, and dangerously so.

This isn't a matter for police — nor are many matters in which officers of the state are now routinely involved. We are multiplying opportunities for law enforcement intervention in the average person's life. This policification of America is a mistake.

Carlson's recommendation highlights one half of this phenomenon. We might call it the popular half: our cultural tendency to see calling the cops as an acceptable solution to interpersonal problems in which no one is at risk of criminal violence. Most 911 calls "are unrelated to crimes in progress," reports the Vera Institute, a think tank focused on the justice system. "Many are for quality-of-life issues like noise, blocked driveways, or public intoxication. Others are for problems like drug abuse, homelessness, or mental health crises that would be better resolved with community-based treatment or other resources — not a criminal justice response."

Police themselves tend to dislike these calls, especially the quality-of-life ones. As an officer named Dan Pasquale put it in an article for PoliceMag.com, "you are being thrust into the middle of a situation that took years to deteriorate [and] are expected to solve it in five minutes or less because you are, in fact, the police department." Some cops call these "garbage" calls, a 1976 Police Foundation report on the subject observes, because they "receive low departmental priority, training for them is minimal, and the goal of officers on the scene is to leave as soon as possible." Solving a neighborhood argument about a fence or making kids turn down their music isn't considered "real" policing, nor should it be.

The trouble is police officers' disinterest here doesn't allow them to ignore the summons, and they may have no way of knowing whether they'll face a petty, interpersonal grievance or a mental health crisis or an actual crime. That uncertainty makes this sort of 911 call not only needless but dangerous. It invites the government — and the force it wields — into private lives. That's inherently risky. Sometimes it gets innocent people killed.

But even if such invitations never went awry and police always comported themselves perfectly, these calls would still be unjustified. This popular part of policification is a bad cultural tic, a ludicrous concession of basic adult responsibility to the state.

Then there's the other half of this phenomenon, which I'll label the policy half: the addition of a law enforcement edge to ever more parts of American governance. Overcriminalization is perhaps the single greatest culprit. We have so many laws on the books, and so many of them are

ill-considered and/or paired with unduly harsh punishments. "In addition to the thousands of criminal laws," explains Cato Institute scholar Tim Lynch, "there are now tens of thousands of regulations that carry criminal penalties, including prison time. The web of rules has become so vast that it seems as if most Americans are now criminals whether they realize it or not."

Anything related to terrorism, kids, drugs, or some combination thereof is particularly ripe for policification. Think of the post-9/11 expansions of the surveillance state (particularly digital spying and airport security theater), cops in schools, and the massive expansion of the American police state the drug war has occasioned. Even the Postal Service is getting in on this now, trawling Americans' social media posts for (constitutionally protected) protest plans and reporting its findings to various other federal agencies.

Policification is self-perpetuating, I suspect, in that the sheer size and visible presence of our country's law enforcement apparatus means it constantly suggests itself as a solution to our problems, whether personal, political, or, as in Carlson's reckless proposal, both. Overcriminalization and the agencies that impose it will be difficult to scale down. Maybe even impossible — I don't know anymore.

But if the policy half seems intractable, the popular half is not. We can refuse to call the cops over a blocked driveway. We can refuse to call the cops over loud music. And we can definitely refuse to call the cops over a kid outside in a mask. Threatening to take away people's children because of a (possibly imaginary!) political difference is a pathological new extreme of policification. We can and should reject it.