Twitter Thread by Jonathan Blanks

Jonathan Blanks
@BlanksSlate

Here is a synopsis of a situation outside of our place in DC Saturday night and some things to think about going forward about the limits of policing. (1/?)

So, about two hours ago, there was a man across the street from where we live screaming and threatening no one in particular on our side of the street.

It's unclear from my vantage whether the man is mentally ill or was simply intoxicated, but suffice it to say he's not in his right mind during this outburst.

In a major US city, this is not particularly unusual, though anyone in the immediate vicinity could be excused for feeling uncomfortable.

I'd imagine description would read something like: B/M, 6'0", 30s, grey hoodie, black pants, pacing & yelling in threatening manner.

For 15-20 minutes, he was totally left alone. At some point, MPD was called, and they came-- but no lights or sirens, established a very loose perimeter--and let him continue to rant at nobody in particular.

At one point, he turned toward officers who were standing 20-30 ft away, who were making themselves known but not pushing or escalating situation. That didn't stop him from antagonizing them and continuing to make aggressive gestures, but the officers weren't biting.

Knowing a handful of patrol cops on this shift in my PSA, this is very much in line with how I'd expect and hope them to react.

Even though his pockets were even bulgy from a distance and he kept putting his hands in his pockets, no officer I saw made any move for their weapon

Eventually, it appears the man tired out and walked away. The police stuck around for a few minutes but got back in their cruisers and left--no one got hurt, no one arrested (as far as what was visible from my vantage).

Whether or not you are pro- or anti-police, or somewhere in between, the undeniable facts are:

-People sometimes get out of control (OOC) and someone needs to respond to put others at ease.
-The reasons people get OOC are myriad and often point to systemic social failures.

-Right now, police are the de facto responders, but they don't HAVE to be.
-Some cops/PDs handle these situations well, while others predictably resort to unnecessary violence. Because of the latter, it's reasonable to think twice before calling for help for OOC folks.

-The defund/abolish folx recognize these issues & want to address underlying issues--specifically support for the mentally ill--that lead to temporarily OOC people.
-The cops recognize these issues too and get frustrated that they don't have tools to address underlying issues

For all the man's bluster & aggressive posturing, he never approached anyone & thus no one seemed to be in imminent danger.

So here I am, looking out my window, staring at a situation that I knew someone would call 911 to address sooner or later & hoping right cops responded.

In discrete scenarios (cf. terrible day-to-day policy decisions), this is the crux of the problem.

Societally, we're failing our most vulnerable neighbors and generally don't care until they're having breakdowns outside of our homes, when we then call armed men to end it.

The BLM/defund/abolish folks are saying this is the wrong way to handle these situations...AND THEY ARE ABSOLUTELY RIGHT.

There is nothing anti-cop in saying & recognizing this basic truth. Sure, a few people will always get OOC, but we have a lot more OOC folks than we should

And that is because we have absolutely failed to address mental health issues in this country. In major cities, this leads to unnecessary arrests and police violence against disadvantaged. In rural areas, it leads to rising gun suicides among middle-aged white men.

So I see what happened outside my window tonight and think:
1-thank you MPD officers for not escalating an unfortunate situation
2-this is not a long-term solution for the man in question and the countless folks like him around the country.

People who paint these issues as pro-cop or anti-cop are not interested in making life better for our most vulnerable neighbors. They aren't taking into account what is going on when personal emergencies happen and what we collectively need to do to prevent unnecessary tragedies.

But it's also wrong to think that responding to mental health problems are the only issue with current policing.

Many day-to-day policing choices do nothing to improve community well-being, and the defund/abolish folks are right about

that too.

So the challenge we're facing is making govts & institutions more constructively responsive to enduring problems in communities. Some require law enforcement, many do not.

But in the best scenario, cops are performing triage which leaves us with far larger problems to confront

Thanks for coming to my TEDtalk.