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The Baltimore Sun

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No more "knockers": Commissioner Davis says plainclothes policing in Baltimore is over

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Baltimore Police Commissioner **Kevin Davis** said Wednesday that he is effectively ending plainclothes policing in Baltimore after the federal indictments of seven officers last week.

Known on the streets as "knockers" or "jump-out boys," the officers were most often seen wearing tactical vests, jeans and backwards hats as they prowled the city for guns and drugs.

Davis said they have also been the officers most likely to be the subject of complaints, and he had become increasingly concerned that their style "accelerated a cutting-corners mindset."

On Tuesday night, he ordered 46 officers from the agency's centralized intelligence unit back into uniformed patrol. Another 100 officers in operations squads in districts were ordered into uniform last week.

"I'm not a big fan of these modified uniforms, these tactical vests, the T-shirts, the jeans, the baseball caps," Davis told The Baltimore Sun on Wednesday. "I don't think it represents our profession the way it should, and I'm doing away with it."

The moves come a week after seven members of the department's Gun Trace Task Force were indicted on federal racketeering charges. They are accused of robbing and extorting citizens, filing false police reports and receiving fraudulent overtime pay. One of the seven officers was also charged in an alleged drug conspiracy.

Authorities said a Drug Enforcement Administration investigation into an illegal drug organization led to the officer facing the drug charges, who led to the rest of the gun unit. The probe eventually involved the FBI and electronic surveillance — including a recording device placed in a Baltimore police vehicle that prosecutors say picked up the officers discussing an array of crimes.

The officers have pleaded not guilty. They have all been held pending trials.

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The reassigned officers are likely to be asked to do the same type of police work they've been doing, Davis said, but in uniforms and marked cars.

"There's nothing that these guys do in plainclothes that they can't do in uniform," Davis said. "You can still be in uniform and a marked car and get guns and get bad guys."

At Penn North in West Baltimore, a neighborhood that was engulfed in rioting after the 2015 death of Freddie Gray, news of Davis' order drew shouts: "They're getting rid of the knockers!"

Davon Jones, 21, came running over.

"They locked me up twice," he said. "All the knockers around here, they be harassing me. This is good."

Older residents and workers were conflicted.

Christopher Fowlkes, 50, a neighborhood barber, questioned whether uniformed patrols could effectively catch drug dealers.

"As soon as [the dealers] see them, they're going to stop," Fowlkes said. "I don't know. I got mixed feelings about it."

Outside the barber shop, Sheldon McDonald, 55, said uniforms and marked cars will bring accountability.

"Yeah, no knockers, no more," he said. "Now we can see who they are."

Davis said some officers — such as those assigned to federal task forces, the vice squad, Regional Auto Theft Task Force and Warrant Apprehension Task Force, will continue to work in plainclothes. He is not doing away with undercover units, which are distinct from plainclothes officers.

Chuck Wexler, executive director of the Washington-based Police Executive Research Forum, said police departments have used plainclothes units in an attempt to blend in. He said some agencies have been putting not only plainclothes officers but also suit-wearing detectives into uniform.

"It's probably more important to have officers in uniform in locations where there has been high drug activity," Wexler said. "More and more chiefs are recognizing a uniformed presence is really important. It's about accountability, it's about prevention, and it's about visibility."

Plainclothes squads have existed in a variety of capacities and with different names over the years. Under Police Commissioner Frederick Bealefeld, officials credited the plainclothes Violent Crimes Impact Division, or VCID, with driving down killings by targeting repeat offenders in high-crime zones. In 2011, Baltimore saw fewer than 200 homicides in a year for the first time since the 1980s.

Bealefeld's successor, Anthony Batts, said those units also drew a disproportionate number of complaints. He reduced the number of officers while rebranding the unit.

Davis said his moves over the past week finally end that type of policing in Baltimore.

"This is the absolute, final dismantling of VCID," Davis said.

U.S. Justice Department investigators found that a "disproportionate share of complaints ... accuse plainclothes officers of misconduct."

"During the course of our investigation, we received a large number of anecdotes specifically identifying plainclothes officers enforcing violent crime and vice offenses ... as particularly aggressive and unrestrained in their practice of stopping individuals without cause and performing public, humiliating searches," the investigators reported last summer.

The shift to more uniformed patrols comes a historic spike in killings. Other crimes are also up considerably. As of Feb. 25, total shootings were up 78 percent over the same time last year, while robberies and aggravated assaults were up 40 percent and 45 percent. Total property crimes were up 23 percent.

One officer who has worked in operations squads said some officers see the moves as punishment for something they were not involved with.

The officer, who requested anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly, said many younger officers have a goal of being promoted into plainclothes enforcement.

Davis "just ensured that highly motivated officers" will pull back, the officer said.

"Proactive policing is done. It's been done at a patrol level for years," he said. "Now the last of those that were proactive are also done."

But the move was welcomed by Gene Ryan, president of the city's police union, who said he has long favored more officers in uniformed patrol.

"I think uniforms in patrol cars, preventing crime, is a move in the right direction," Ryan said.

City Councilman **Brandon Scott**, who chairs the council's public safety committee, said it's a good idea for the units to continue proactive policing, but under the direction of district commanders.

"The district commanders should be able to come up with their own plans and strategies while talking to their communities, and base it off that and the crime data itself," Scott said. "This represents a new day. We have to be willing to adapt, and be willing to be creative on how we do things moving forward."

Davis said he has not decided whether to rebuild a centralized operations squad.

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"More than likely what we'll do, when the dust settles, I'll beef up the decentralized units, but in a way that's not plainclothes and relies less on surveillance and less on the investigative tactics that they've used," he said. "It'll be more overt."

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