

Too much policing: Why calls are made to defund the police

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Abstract

The repeat use of fatal force against unarmed people of color has driven global protests against police violence and fueled criticism of policing as a mechanism for public safety. In the US, calls to abolish, transform, or reform policing have reemerged with a primary focus on the elimination of structural racism. In this essay, we contend that a two-tier policing problem exists. The first is the continued use of policing to enforce racial dominance through policing practices labeled as “proactive”. The second is contemporary “warrior-style” police training that normalizes the expectation of unquestioned compliance with police directives and authorizes police to use physical force in its absence. This dangerous combination results in over-policing the public generally and Black members of the public specifically. Select incidents are provided to support these claims. We conclude by expressing support for the call to reallocate portions of policing budgets toward other government and community-based structures that function to enhance the ability of people to survive and thrive rather than operate as mechanisms of pre-adjudication punishment and state-sanctioned coercion.

Keywords

policing, structural racism, crime control, defund the police

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The deaths of Andrew Brown, Ma'kia Bryant, Daunte Wright, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rashard Brooks, and many others during 2020 and 2021 added to a long list of persons killed by police in the United States under circumstances that raise serious questions about the role of police in civil society. The prolonged and widespread protests that followed several of these killings have required that the nation look anew at the function of “law enforcement” and how police policies, strategies, and behaviors support or thwart that goal and to what end. Like the civil unrest of the 1960s, these contemporary protests have again thrust issues of race, justice, and policing to the forefront of the American conscience and sparked substantial debate about the need for reform, transformation, or abolition. These debates are largely driven by the recognition of structural racism in policing and its role within the carceral state. However, less attention has been given to the fact that modern policing has produced some harms that are not race-specific but represent the worst of what is possible when state-sanctioned violence is tacitly encouraged, supported, and left unaddressed. We contend that the US has both a general policing problem and a race and policing problem. We discuss some salient aspects of the problems using both historical and contemporary illustrations and suggest that the “defund the police” movement represents one means to shift public resources away from over-reliance on police surveillance, punishment, and coercion as primary means to address public safety concerns.

America's two-tiered policing problem

Tier 1: Warrior-style policing and over-reliance on police authority

People of color (POC), especially individuals of Black racial identity, regardless of nationality or ethnicity, are at greater risk of experiencing police-involved harm than are other racial and ethnic groups (Brame et al., 2021; Edwards et al., 2019). Over the life course, 1 in every 1000 Black men in the US can expect to be killed by police, making police fatal force the leading cause of death for young Black men ahead of cancer (Edwards et al., 2019). Black women are not immune from fatal police encounters. A study from Washington University in St Louis, Missouri found that police kill unarmed Blacks more often, including Black women (Everding, 2018). Nearly 60% of Black women killed by police between May 2013 and January 2015 were not holding weapons (Everding, 2018). In addition to these staggering statistics for Black men and women, the extent of police fatal force generally experienced by Americans substantially exceeds that experienced by residents of other developed democracies. In 2019, for example, there were 9.8 police killings per 10 million residents in Canada, 8.5 in Australia, and 0.5 in England and Wales. This is in sharp contrast to the 33.5 people killed by police in the US (Statista, 2021).

The increased risk that US residents will be harmed, including fatally, by police has been attributed to an increase in militarized warrior-style policing (Balko, 2014; Vitale, 2017). Under warrior-style policing, recruits are taught that they live in an increasingly hostile world that is “quite literally, gunning for them” (Stoughton, 2015). Warrior-style police training is fear driven and legitimizes the use of force during even

the most mundane police-civilian encounters. Being prepared to use deadly force is emphasized by training staff from independent training companies that serve both military and police clients and who teach officers military tactics as part of the training curriculum (Vitale, 2017).¹ Consequently, domestic police are taught to treat members of the public in the same manner as military troops would treat an enemy combatant.

Consistent with the acceptance of a military-style, warrior role for domestic policing, some police officials have become comfortable assuming an unequivocal “do not resist”, “comply or die” posture when police behavior is publicly challenged (Kendi, 2021). This is true even when the police behavior violates the rules of the officer’s own department, which was the case in the 2014 killing of Eric Garner.² While individuals of Black racial identity are disproportionately on the receiving end of aggressive and harmful police conduct, under the warrior-style regime neither age, race nor gender has proved to be a barrier against police excess. For example, in April of 2021, a 73-year-old White female with dementia was pushed down and suffered a dislocated shoulder while being forcefully handcuffed by Colorado police, who reportedly later laughed at the body-camera footage of the arrest (Slevin, 2021). In 2019, a 65-year-old White grandmother was tased for being uncooperative during a traffic stop for her malfunctioning tail-light (KHQ, 2019). In 2014, an 84-year-old Asian male was assaulted by police in New York City while they issued him a summons for jaywalking (Sheehan, 2014). In 2018, officers in Georgia used a taser on an 87-year-old woman who emigrated to the US from Syria who was not combative (Hauser, 2018). These examples illustrate that aggressive, punitive, and sometimes blatantly illegal policing³ is a broad problem not limited to the experiences of males or racial and ethnic minorities. The expansion of the power and responsibility of law enforcement agencies has become a problem in and of itself and much harm has resulted from the over-reliance on police authority as the primary mechanism of social control (Balko, 2014; Stoughton, 2015). Black people experience this over-extension of government authority more acutely than others; however, they are not the sole recipients of harsh and harmful police treatment. Excessive policing, including police violence, is not just a “Black problem” that White allies can help resolve. Multiple cases involve White victims whose deaths are indicative of police over-reliance on the use of deadly force. They include the 2004 death of 21-year-old Michael Bell, Jr, the 2015 deaths of 19-year-old Zachary Hammond and 17-year-old Kristina Coignard, and the shooting of Hunter Brittain on 23 June 2021. These cases expand our recognition that police violence is a problem that calls for systemic change in order to save lives, reduce injury, and promote and restore police legitimacy.⁴

The problem of proactive policing. The general push for police agents to play a more expansive and aggressive role in preventing and controlling crime and disorder (real or perceived) has led to increased police-civilian contact. This has meant that officers have fewer opportunities to handle public encounters informally (i.e. without making arrests, issuing summonses, or using force). The general increase in contact between police and the public has primarily been fueled by practices labeled “proactive policing”. Proactive policing strategies shift the primary focus of policing from responding to crime

that has already occurred to engagement in preemptive action aimed at preventing future crime (NASEM, 2018). In urban settings, these strategies include the aggressive use of stop and frisk, “hot spots policing” and order-maintenance policing (also known as broken windows). By design, these strategies mandate that police initiate contact with civilians to determine whether they *might* be engaged in crime or crime preparation (stop and frisk and hot spots policing) or ticket and arrest civilians who they see committing almost any minor offense (broken windows policing). Such policies remove an officer’s discretion to not act at all or to show compassion or mercy in their decision-making about how best to handle civilian encounters. Proactive policing strategies theoretically promise crime deterrence through surveillance, intimidation, and enforcement action, especially when used in urban areas. Such arrangements position the police against the public in locations where residents may most need police service because of current structural arrangements that do not provide alternative means to resolve conflicts or address victimization.

Proactive policing policies and practices have become quite controversial. Supported by statistical analyses and statements by police that admit racial targeting, there is ample evidence that proactive policing policies encourage police to use race and/or socio-economic status as a basis for suspecting low-income Black residents and other POC of continuously committing crimes (*Floyd v. City of New York*, 2013). Even police officers have criticized proactive strategies as promoting illegal quotas and representing an unjust means of measuring their productivity and worth (*Floyd v. City of New York*, 2013; *Matthew v. City of New York*, 2012).⁵ Specific to the practice of stop and frisk, a 2013 report by the New York State Attorney General found that the practice commanded a large expenditure of policing resources but yielded little in the way of detecting violent crime (Schneiderman, 2013). In fact, according to the *FBI’s Crime in the United States 2019*, nationally only 5% of all arrests made involved alleged violent crimes (FBI, 2021). Rather, most police work is in response to incidents that are noncriminal in nature and the majority of criminal offenses involve nonviolent behavior, such as drug offenses, disorderly conduct, and minor disturbances (Neusteter and O’Toole, 2019). Consequently, though the deployment of police personnel in furtherance of proactive policing strategies has had a considerable impact on police practice both systemic and individual, its effects on violent crime remain speculative. Yet, there is considerable evidence that they result in over-policing generally and over-policing of those impacted by social inequality the most.

Tier 2: Policing as racialized social control

Social psychological research that explores the presence and function of implicit racial bias has contributed significantly to the understanding of how race impacts policing. Understanding that race bias operates on both a conscious and an unconscious level has provided an important mechanism for breaking through the limited discussion of police violence as a function of overt historical and contemporary bigotry. To be clear, the existence of implicit racial bias does not diminish or excuse the role of overt racism in US policing. Rather, it provides an expanded basis for recognizing and

acknowledging racial influence in policing practices and outcomes. Moreover, we must acknowledge that the deep racial inequities that exist are a direct result of structural racism—the historical and contemporary policies, practices, and customs within private and public institutions that produce and maintain White supremacy. Structural racism continues to disproportionately segregate POC from access to opportunity and upward mobility, making it difficult to not only receive equitable treatment in the criminal legal system but also to secure quality education, employment, housing, and healthcare.

Black people comprise a subset of the general population that society, including the police, are trained to see as criminal and fear (Eberhardt et al., 2004). Black presence in the US is part of a historical record marked by legally sanctioned enslavement, statutory and judicially mandated discrimination, and socially accepted dehumanization that span more than four centuries (Cobbina, 2019; Owusu-Bempah, 2017; William and Murphy, 1990). Black individuals did not always occupy this position alone. Various European ethnics groups were once thought of as the “criminal classes”. However, they were able to shed their perceived innate criminal status through America’s adoption of White supremacist ideology, the creation of “white” identity as a means of justifying and sustaining African enslavement and subordination (Harris, 1993; McIntyre, 1984; Muhammad, 2010), and the establishment of social programs that excluded Blacks but gave poor whites a leg up in the social order (Muhammad, 2010; see also Netherland and Hansen, 2016). Though not unique to the US, this long and tortured racialized social history has had pernicious and debilitating residual effects—effects that are both distinct from and inclusive of contemporary crime patterns (Alexander, 2010; Butler, 2017). Black over-representation among victims of police violence is both directly and indirectly tied to contemporary over-reliance on police to address problems stemming from and exacerbated by current structural arrangements—arrangements that contribute to the unchecked growth of social inequality (Alexander, 2010; Vitale, 2017).

Consistent with the Jim Crow laws and Black Codes of the past, proactive policing strategies have exposed Black people to an increased number of occasions during which they might experience police violence (Jones-Brown et al., 2010; Terrill and Reisig, 2003). In addition, increased police contact has resulted in diminished life-chances through negative collateral consequences that accompany criminal justice processing (Stoudt et al., 2011). These include the accumulation of a criminal record for minor offenses (Howell, 2009; Pager, 2003) and the economic hardship of having to pay court ordered fines and fees (Harris, 2016). The disproportionate existence of these consequences within the lived experiences of Black individuals provides a feedback loop to more police contact (Brunson, 2007; Brunson and Gau, 2014; Epp et al., 2014). These prior contacts are subsequently used by law enforcement agents to explain their use of force during seemingly mundane and nonthreatening situational encounters, as well as in after-the-fact attempts by police officers or their agencies to legitimize the amount of force that was used. For example, fatal police violence has been used against Black victims with outstanding warrants for traffic tickets⁶ or unpaid fines and fees (i.e. child support)⁷ even though these matters have nothing to do with crimes of violence.

This pattern repeats itself in communities that Haldipur (2019) describes as “high need”, and that police departments and political leaders typically refer to as “high

crime". The designation of communities or neighborhoods as "high crime" or as sites of specific socio-political concern (e.g. homelessness, sex work, undocumented immigration, gang activity, or political resistance) has intensified investment in policing as the primary tool of governmental engagement with residents and visitors within certain geographic and socio-economic spaces (Stoudt et al., 2011; Vitale, 2017). Given the socially subordinate position that Black people have historically occupied in the US, and the ways in which that subordination has manifested in modern day,⁸ law enforcement resources are disproportionately directed to activities and locations that nearly guarantee repeat police contact (Fratello et al., 2013; Rios, 2011). Through a process of racial and spatial criminalization, Black people are also subject to suspicion and police-initiated contact when they appear in spaces commonly believed to be the exclusive realm of Whites (Boyles, 2015). This contact includes the possibility of fatal harm.⁹

Beyond split second decisions. The steady stream of stories about Black and brown death at the hands of sworn federal, state, and local law enforcers often result in claims of justification by a variety of actors when incidents involve a shooting. The 1989 US Supreme Court decision, *Graham v. Connor*, mandated that the police be given the benefit of the doubt when they "are forced to make split-second judgements... about the amount of force necessary in a particular situation".¹⁰ However, the 25 May 2020 killing of George Floyd involved no such reflexive split-second reaction. It happened over a span of nearly ten minutes while onlookers pleaded with a police officer to remove his knee from Floyd's neck and back so he could breathe. Floyd's death expanded support for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement to a scale beyond that experienced in the US during the protests for Black civil rights in the 1960s (Buchanan et al., 2020).

Even the protests in Ferguson, Missouri, Baltimore, Maryland, and New York City following the deaths of Michael Brown, Freddie Gray and Eric Garner respectively did not garner the broad-based and sustained support that occurred in the aftermath of George Floyd's death. The social forces that drove the mass global response will be the subject of considerable political and social scientific study and debate. But the cause of the callous, inhumane, and likely racist and classist police behavior that led to Floyd's death can be informed by comments made during another videotaped police encounter involving a Black male, Arnold Greene. The tape was not released until May of 2021 although the incident occurred in May 2019.

In body-worn camera footage, a Louisiana state trooper can be heard telling a fellow officer, "I beat the ever-living f*ck out of him, choked him and everything else trying to get him under control" (Mustian, 2021). When asked if he had captured his own behavior on videotape, the trooper then turned off his camera (Mustian, 2021). When a shackled Greene, who was on the ground, tried to roll onto his side, another trooper is heard issuing the following commands: "Don't you turn over! Lay on your belly! Lay on your belly!" He then knelt on Greene's back and dragged him by the chain that connected his shackled ankles, repeating "You better lay on your f*cking belly like I told you to! You understand?" Greene responded, "yes sir", subsequently went limp, and died as a result of the encounter. The state police initially refused to turn over documents about the incident and reported that Greene had died from injuries he sustained in a high-speed chase fleeing

from the officers (Mustian, 2021). The body-worn police videos emerged as evidence for the family's lawsuit. The videos do not show that Greene was acting in a threatening manner. Consistent with a historic pattern (Cobbina, 2019; Owusu-Bempah, 2017; William and Murphy, 1990), the troopers simply demanded unquestioned control of his Black body.

The videotaped killings of Arnold Greene and George Floyd stimulate a different conversation about police violence. It is a conversation that circumvents the often tautological discussion of "split-second" decision-making associated with police shootings (Klinger and Brunson, 2009). Both videos depict police action that takes place over a prolonged period and involves conduct that denies the humanity of the victims. The casual admission that the Louisiana state trooper makes about why and how much force he used against Arnold Greene and the nonchalant expression on Derek Chauvin's face as he knelt on the neck of George Floyd undergirds the message of the Black Lives Matter Movement. The message is that BLM even or especially when others behave as if they do not. The movement calls for the recognition of Black humanity, freedom of movement, personal autonomy, and the right to life itself.

Along similar lines, on 21 May 2021, a former St Paul, Minnesota police officer was sentenced to six years in prison for the use of excessive force when he released a police dog to attack a Black man who he claims to have mistakenly believed was a robbery suspect in possession of a gun. In addition to releasing the K-9 unit to maliciously maul Frank Baker, the officer was captured on video repeatedly kicking him in the torso while he was being attacked by the dog (Septic, 2021). The officer was fired by the police department after the attack but was subsequently reinstated by an arbitrator. He was fired again after a federal jury convicted him of violating Mr Baker's constitutional rights. In addition to a mauled leg, Mr Baker, who was 52 years old at the time of the attack, suffered seven broken ribs, collapsed lungs, and continues to suffer long-lasting health problems stemming from the attack (Septic, 2021). In an apology to Mr Baker before sentencing, the officer explained his behavior by simply stating that he thought Baker was the suspect. His statement reflects no concern for the legality of his behavior. The absence of due process and the excessive nature of his conduct do not appear to be a concern.

Whether these officers would have behaved the same way during encounters with White civilians is an empirical question that is beyond the scope of this commentary. Yet, statistical evidence establishes that Black men, women, and children are at a disproportionately higher risk of dying by police action than are Whites, whether they are armed or unarmed. A recent analysis examining officer-involved deaths for youth, under age eighteen, found that in 60% of the 121 reported deaths the police killed was a youth of color (Jones-Brown et al., 2020).

The broad-based participation in BLM protests associated with the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor marks a turn away from punitive attitudes toward Black people revealed in previous research (Gabbidon et al., 2013; Hetey and Eberhardt, 2018). Although some Americans still struggle to understand the BLM message, in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, the millions of people who protested around the world expanded the reach of the BLM movement such that it is thought to be the

largest movement in US history (Buchanan et al., 2020). A review of the 2020 Summer protests found that a vast majority of protesters were young, educated, and white (Harmon and Tavernise, 2020). In addition, the international impact of the Floyd killing might be viewed as similar to that of the 1955 killing of Emmett Till.¹¹ A website, *Black Lives Matter Protests 2020*,¹² identifies 4446 cities and towns in more than 60 countries where protests had occurred by 18 November 2020. Because the conduct involved was so inhumane, it is possible that the horrific videotaped death of George Floyd marked a tipping point in public tolerance of excessive police behavior beyond that invoked by previous cases. In addition, Floyd's stereotypic racial physical features, which stood out in strong contrast to the identities of the officers who killed him, may have elevated recognition that his treatment was related to his race (Eberhardt et al., 2006). The fact that he died for allegedly passing a counterfeit \$20 bill to buy cigarettes has strong implications that his treatment was also related to class. Though Floyd's behavior was not threatening toward the officers or the public, Chauvin used a life-threatening restraint technique to over-control him. It is worth noting that police budgets include funds that pay for trainings that teach officers to behave in such barbaric ways. This is a structural problem that needs correcting. Given that techniques known to be life-threatening are repeatedly used against Black civilians and other POC (Butler, 2017) under circumstances where the behavior is clearly excessive and unwarranted indicates a systemic problem that must be uprooted from US police culture.

How to move forward?: The debate—abolition, transformation or reform

In the debate over whether US policing should be reformed, transformed, or abolished, it must be noted that the modern government-sponsored full-time, paid, sworn, and uniform-clad police force is a social construction of relatively recent origin. Its formation was resisted by both the French and the English who believed that it would become a tool to increase the power of politicians and the wealthy while suppressing the rights and autonomy of the populace (Balko, 2014). In the case of England, Robert Peel is credited with founding modern urban policing less than two centuries ago, with the passing of legislation that authorized the creation of the London Metropolitan Police in 1829 (Balko, 2014; Vitale, 2017). To sell the idea of a full-time government-run force to the skeptical public and some reluctant legislators, Peel identified nine principles upon which the new social structure would be based.

Peel's first principle of law enforcement identifies the prevention of crime and disorder as policing's main mission. This mission is also claimed by proponents of proactive policing. However, the principle also specifically separates law enforcement functioning from the severity of "legal punishment". Principles two, three, and four contain language that suggests that the relationship between the police and the public would/should not be oppositional. Principle five speaks of providing police service with qualities that strongly contradict the tenets of warrior-style militarized training. It includes terms like "self-

sacrifice”, “humor”, “friendship”, “courtesy”, “impartial”, and “individual” service as appropriate and necessary attributes of police performance. Principle six recognizes that the use of force by police must be limited if police hope to gain/maintain the respect and cooperation of the public. Principle seven counts the police as part of the community not apart from it. Principle eight explicitly states that the officer’s role is not to mete out punishment. And Principle nine denounces the practice of engaging in police action as merely public performance.

Some question whether the principles were ever honored in practice. The answer to that query has considerable import in the determination of whether the recommendations of the current moment represent a movement to reform the entity as originally designed or to reform current modes of policing to match the original written blueprint.¹³ Much of what is included in Peel’s list from 1829 appears to address long-standing complaints about US policing—so much so that it could be concluded that simply altering existing policy and practice to more closely honor these original principles might be more prudent than engaging in a complete organizational overhaul.

Abolitionist scholars, activists, and advocates reject the idea that policing can be reformed, noting that the “footprint of police” must be decreased. They envision a restructured society where it is possible to address harm without relying on oppressive or violent systems that actually work to increase it (Brown and Schept, 2017). Abolitionists challenge the foundational legitimacy of punishment that is rooted in the historical prison-crime disconnect (Garland, 2001; Mauer, 2006), which is most often reserved for POC (Alexander, 2012; Mauer, 2006) and poor people (Reiman and Leighton, 2015); and rarely, if ever, is directed at state or structural violence. Despite the relative recent development of formal government-run domestic police departments, opponents of abolition see eliminating the current structure as impractical. In response, abolitionists note that many reform efforts are stopgap measures that provide limited help and fail to bring about real change (Butler, 2016).

One of the greatest challenges to reaching consensus over how best to address US policing is its dual-track origin. For those who accept racialized notions of crime and violence that position Blacks and other persons of color as the primary threat to society (Blalock, 1967), the current system of policing is performing as designed—a tool of race-based control, resulting in racialized violence (Brown and Schept, 2017). This is the legacy of policing inherent to its origins from slave patrols (Reichel, 1988; William and Murphy, 1990). Its practices cover roughly four centuries¹⁴ and stands in clear contrast to the principled law enforcement described by Robert Peel (Kelling and Moore, 1988; Vitale, 2017). The Peelean principles are objectively appealing yet largely incongruent with the police practices that fueled the 2020 protests and those before and after. Positioned between abolition and reform is transformation—the creation of policies, practices, structures, and relationships that alter the current dynamic between the public and the state and operates to diminish the social, psychological, political, and economic harms that flow from structural inequity and state punishment (Brown and Schept, 2017). Defunding the police and reinvesting criminal justice funds to support rather than control individuals who are at risk of having contact with the legal system is an approach that is advocated by legal scholars, social scientists, activists, humanitarians, some

political leaders and police officials who take exception to the way public safety and policing are currently defined and defended.

Justice Reinvestment—Divesting from police departments to invest in social support

As economic inequality has grown in the US so has reliance on police. But crime and disorder are symptoms of much larger societal problems over which police have little or no control. Most local police are trained to respond to crimes that do not include the economic and structurally violent harms committed by the wealthy (Reiman, 1995). Consequently, they are often in a position to wield considerable power over those who they may perceive as powerless. Coupled with research that suggests police implicitly see Blacks as innately criminal (Eberhardt, 2004; Muhammad, 2010) and statistics that show that Black males are disproportionately arrested for crimes in racially segregated low-income spaces, there is little wonder why they are repeatedly, though not exclusively, the victims of overly aggressive and fatal police contact (Moskos, 2008; Rios, 2011). The attempt to control crime almost exclusively through police enforcement has been unsuccessful for nearly two centuries. In the US and other developed nations, spaces characterized by high rates of interpersonal and property crime, are also the sites of high rates of unemployment, underemployment, poverty, homelessness, poor quality schools, and a general lack of social resources regardless of the racial identity of the inhabitants. Reliance on police to control crime under these circumstances ignores the results from multiple studies showing that government investments in educational opportunities, a living wage, stable and affordable housing, holistic health services and treatment are far more effective at reducing crime than the police (King et al., 2005).

This evidence notwithstanding, many municipalities have underfunded education systems, hospitals, and social services; but robust policing budgets remain. Each year, state and local government spend more than \$100 billion on law enforcement. In fact, government spending on police increased from \$42 billion to \$115 billion from 1977 to 2017 (Urban Institute, 2021). Today, police budgets remain high, ranging from 20 to 45% of discretionary funding in major metropolitan areas (The Center for Popular Democracy, 2021). While the federal, state, and local governments drastically increased their spending on police forces, extreme cuts were made to basic infrastructure and social safety net programs, such as housing subsidies, food benefit programs, mental health services, and programs for youth (Cloud, 2014). For example, over 40% of Oakland, California's general funds go to policing, while services for youth, housing, and income support receive 0.30 cents to every dollar allocated in the overall budget (The Center for Popular Democracy, 2021). Schools and other organizations supporting youth and families are often the most under-resourced in neighborhoods affected by high crime and intense coercive policing. Increased police budgets, in tandem with decreased funding to address other essential community needs are counterproductive to "public safety" because more spending on policing means fewer resources for institutions and initiatives that stabilize and strengthen community well-being (Sampson et al., 1997).

Calls to “defund the police” stem from concerns about both unchecked police violence and growing social inequality. The 2020 Summer protests against racism and police violence have revived a demand for government spending on “root causes” of crime. Under most formulations,¹⁶ the demand to “defund the police” means that some portion of funds previously earmarked for police budgets will be reallocated to agencies that address the basic needs and general welfare of the public, especially those who live on the margins. This reallocation would mean increased financial support for social services and anti-poverty measures. Rather than insisting that all persons remain law-abiding regardless of their living conditions, investment in these nonpolice structures and functions provide a means by which more Americans can not only survive but thrive (The Center for Popular Democracy, 2017).

Decades of criminological research has identified unmet need as a risk factor for crime. Consistent with the current calls to reinvest government funding away from policing and toward mechanisms that improve personal well-being, Cullen (1994) identified social support as an organizing principle for studying crime. He posited that crime is better addressed by increasing social support of community members as opposed to exerting greater amounts of coercive control. Colvin and colleagues (2002) noted that social support involves “assistance from communities, social networks, and confiding partners in meeting the instrumental and expressive needs of individuals” (p. 20). Over the past three decades, this concept has been connected to social capital theory (Coleman, 1990; Hagan, 1994) and explicitly applied to understanding crime and crime prevention. Studies show that increased social capital is correlated with reduced crime (Cullen, 1994; Cullen and Wright, 1997). Moreover, individuals who live in highly policed communities experience high levels of social strain produced by the structural and physical conditions of their community (Agnew and White, 1992; Wilson, 1996), police surveillance and contact (Haldipur, 2019; Rios 2011), and contact with other components of the legal system (Alexander, 2010; Butler, 2017; Harris, 2016). Social support reduces the impact of strain by providing needed resources that in turn allow individuals to cope with adversity via noncriminal means (Cullen and Wright, 1997).

Most importantly, diverting some funds away from policing creates opportunities to build alternative forms of communication, problem-solving, and interactions between police and community (see Vermeer et al., 2020). State, federal, and local government can start by diverting law enforcement funds previously spent on military-style training and equipment to agencies that provide holistic supports in neighborhoods and communities that have been over-policed and problematized. “Justice Reinvestment” is a reallocation model that can work for policing as it has in corrections. It is a concept introduced by Susan Tucker and Eric Cadora in 2003, as they reimagined the allocation of funds spent on incarceration (Tucker and Cadora, 2003). Recognizing that the prison system was costly and not working efficiently, they argued that the increased expansion of the carceral system sacrificed rather than improved public safety goals. As a remedy, they proposed that public safety could be enhanced by reducing the size and cost of the correctional system *and* by reallocating a portion of correctional spending toward “rebuilding the human resources and physical infrastructure” (p. 3). Under this model, they proposed that locally directed investments in jobs, housing, healthcare, and social

services would improve or restore communities and substantially reduce crime. Justice Reinvestment ultimately changed the narrative about incarceration, led to shifts in budget priorities, and reduced the prison population. Instead of leading to an increase in crime as some feared, reductions in the prison population coincided with a national decline in crime for which police departments have claimed considerable credit. As with policing, the calls to reduce the incarcerated population was precipitated, in part, by complaints of racial injustice and a series of highly publicized in-custody assaults and deaths. Whether called “defund the police” or something else, the current movement represents an opportunity to affirm the nation’s commitment to humane governance and to move away from a long and considerable allegiance to inequitable and coercive control.

There are some innovative approaches that communities have been exploring to promote safety and well-being outside of policing. Recently, leaders in Austin, Texas reduced the police budget by almost a third, one of the biggest funding cuts in the country (McGlinchy, 2021). The city spent part of the funds operate a hotel that will help people make the transition out of homelessness. Advocates say this is one example of spending police money on something that could reduce the need for law enforcement.

Advance Peace is a nonprofit organization that is dedicated to ending cyclical and retaliatory gun violence and they do this by investing in the health and well-being of people who are most likely to be perpetrators of gun violence (Corburn et al., 2020). This nonprofit organization offers those in the program seven-days-a-week of mentoring and supportive relationships. They use street outreach workers to deliver services and supports to these individuals during an intensive 18-month program. Since the launch of the program, outcome evaluations of Advance Peace show positive results, documenting a 21% reduction in gun homicides and assaults in Stockton, California and 60–82% decrease in total shootings involving injury or death in Richmond, California (Corburn and Fukutome, 2021).

Cure Violence is another organization that attempts to stop the spread of violence by using strategies associated with disease control. That includes detecting and interrupting conflicts, as well as identifying and treating the highest risk individuals through trained credible messengers. Operating independently of law enforcement, Cure Violence programs rely on violence interrupters who are connected to the community and settle conflicts, stop violent incidents, and advocate for community resources (Butts et al., 2015). This organization also relies on outreach workers—those who have had prior involvement with the legal system—to help connect high-risk individuals to positive opportunities and resources in the community, including employment, housing, recreational activities, and education (Butts et al., 2015). Cure Violence has shown success in reducing urban gun violence as well as reducing support for violence as a means of settling personal disputes. For example, an independent evaluation of Cure Violence shows a 63% reduction in gun shootings in New York (Delgado et al., 2017), 30% reduction in gun shootings in Philadelphia (Roman et al., 2017) and Chicago (Henry et al., 2014), and a 26% decrease in homicides in Baltimore (Webster et al., 2012).

In conclusion, this piece has suggested that the US has a policing problem that is not limited to the treatment of Blacks and other POC and consequently requires a broad look

at policing structures, training, culture, power/authority, history and funding in order to produce change in how we envision and conceive of public safety. We highlight that the rise in the use of so-called proactive strategies and militarized warrior-style police training increases the risk that civilians in the US will have police contact and be harmed by police, especially when they are perceived as noncompliant. We also underscore that Blacks are disproportionately and chronically subject to police activity and excesses including racially motivated police violence because such behavior follows a historical pattern of state-sanctioned control over POC. Stereotyped notions of who is dangerous and violent and how such individuals or spaces can be controlled has resulted in a drastic rise in spending on policing in the last 40 years and a corresponding divestment from social safety net programs.

Contrary to what some believe, increased spending on police does not equate to less crime (Bump, 2020) because police cannot solve structural problems and should not contribute to crime by their own behavior. History has provided evidence time and again that there are significant harms associated with using police to enforce control in times of rising social inequality. The 2020 policing protests are a renewed example. The incidents we point to in this essay provide evidence that no one is immune to being over-policed when law enforcement personnel are trained to prioritize compliance over compassion and care. Contemporary policing bares little resemblance to the principles outlined by Robert Peel in 1829, which magnifies the question of whether it can be reformed or must it be abolished or transformed into something markedly different. Calls to defund the police by reallocating resources away from police departments to other government and community-based agencies that provide essential human services represent one way forward in the transformative process. In accordance with the evidence-based examples that we have provided, we conclude that instead of increased spending on police, cities should hire more affordable housing developers, mental health clinicians, social workers, drug treatment specialists, and community-based violence interrupters as part of an expanded understanding of “public safety”.


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Notes

1. Balko (2014) comments extensively on why this arrangement is structurally and legally inappropriate.

2. The NYPD Patrol Guide banned the use of chokeholds in 1993.
3. Multiple sources report that sexual abuse is one the most prevalent forms of police misconduct.
4. See Brown and Schept (2017) suggesting that the only effective change might be abolition.
5. Police officers in multiple cities have sued their departments to challenge punitive quota systems that require a preset number of enforcement actions in order to avoid disciplinary action.
6. See the case of Timothy Thomas in Cincinnati in 2001.
7. See the case of Walter Scott in South Carolina in 2015.
8. See Massey and Denton (1993) noting that the racialization of Black individuals has been mapped onto geographical areas known as the 'ghetto', which is designed to control Blacks.
9. The US Supreme Court recognizes an 'out of place' doctrine, which allows race-based spatial incongruence to be considered by police in forming suspicion (see Jones-Brown, 2007).
10. *Graham v. Connor*, 490 U.S. 396–97.
11. In 1955, a 14-year-old Chicago teen was kidnapped and murdered in Money, Mississippi by White men who believed he had offended a White woman. His mother held an open casket televised funeral so that the world could see how badly his body had been disfigured as a result of racial hate.
12. Details about the cities and countries where BLM protest were held can be found at: <https://www.creosotemaps.com/blm2020/>.
13. The principles can be found at: Sir Robert Peel's Principles of Law Enforcement 1829 – <https://www.sjpd.org>.
14. The first enslaved Africans are recorded to have arrived in the British colonies in 1619, but sources record statutes singling out the conduct of 'negroes' for special punishment dating back to the 1400s.
15. Robert Peel is credited with founding modern urban policing in 1829.
16. There are some who advocate for abolishing policing as it currently exists, noting that it will be impossible to reform its entrenched, powerful, and racist and classist culture.

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