

# The Socio-Political Landscape of the Defund the Police Campaign

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by

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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## **Preface**

How can the United States reduce the collateral consequences of its criminal justice system? The country relies far too heavily on incarceration and policing as its central social service.

To develop best practices for serving mentally ill inmates, data from multiple criminal justice agencies and partnering services were integrated. The researchers helped regional criminal justice agencies and community mental health services better serve inmates suffering from severe mental illness. The project found inmates who were linked to services were returning to custody at a higher rate than those who were not linked to services. Additionally, the population that returned to custody expended more bed days than those not returning to custody. Inmates who both returned to custody and screened in for having a severe mental illness also had longer lengths of stays than folks returning to custody and not screening in. The project concluded with focusing aid to these populations interacting with the jail system more frequently.

Defenders of status-quo policing, proponents of reform, and advocates of abolishing police are divided by divergent conceptions of justice. To defenders of police departments as they now are, justice is the preservation of the status quo. To reformers, police can be agents of justice if sufficient accountability mechanisms are implemented. To the advocates of police abolition, however, the status quo is injustice, and police, as an armed force charged with defending and perpetuating the status quo, are an unreformable obstacle on the road to justice that must be cleared if a just society is to be achieved.

## Exploring the Socio-Political Landscape of the Defund the Police Campaign

Following years of police killings of suspects, U.S. police departments are under serious scrutiny. In 2019, 1,004 people were fatally shot by police (Statistica, 2020). Black men were much more likely to be shot by police than others (Statistica, 2020). One in every 1,000 Black men in the U.S. can expect to be killed by police (Edwards, 2019). According to Covert (2020), spending on police departments by state and local governments jumped from about \$17.61 billion in 1960 to \$142.58 billion in 2018, in constant 2020 dollars. In the summer of 2020, following the murder of George Floyd, protests demanding police be defunded received unprecedented support and attention. Defenders of status-quo policing, proponents of reform, and advocates of abolishing police are divided by divergent conceptions of justice. To defenders of police departments as they now are, justice is the preservation of the status quo. To reformers, police can be agents of justice if sufficient accountability mechanisms are implemented. To the advocates of police abolition, however, the status quo is injustice, and police, as an armed force charged with defending and perpetuating the status quo, are an unreformable obstacle on the road to justice that must be cleared if a just society is to be achieved.

Most Americans favor maintaining or increasing spending on police departments (fig. 1).

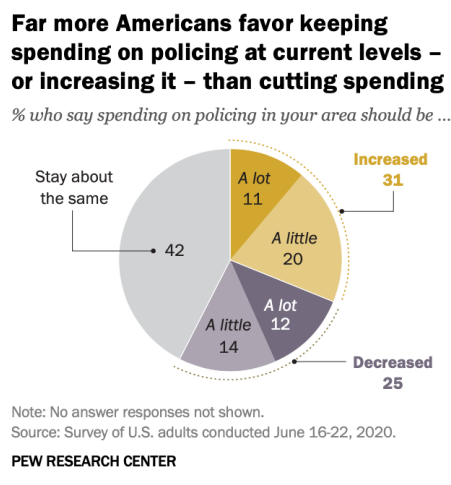


Figure 1. U.S. public opinion on police funding (Pew, 2020).

Police abolitionists have successfully introduced their agenda into the mainstream conversation. However similar to the national dialogue surrounding restructuring policing. The campaign itself has no centralized organization propelling its cause nor a single opposition. Social groups engaged in the controversy may be classified as police abolitionists, pro police, and reformers. Police abolitionists expose systemic injustices in policing, propose dismantling police, and shrinking the carceral state. The pro police group are content with the policing systems currently, actively resist changes in police management. Reformers believe police can be regulated and reformed to properly conduct their responsibilities. Reformers reproduce iterations of police systems and distract participants from confronting systemic issues of policing. These labels are not mutually exclusive nor are they all encompassing attitudes towards defunding the police but they do include most positions for those engaging in this debate.

## **Review of Research**

Historians who have investigated police brutality have noted that violent incidents involving police expose systemic issues in policing and reform fails to uproot them (Miller, 1998; Posey et al. 2020). Police have a record of racist and oppressive practices; Black people between the ages of 20-24 are the most likely to be killed by law enforcement and excessive force in policing is aimed at poor and working people (Grabiner, 2016). Police face little accountability as 98.3% of killings by police from 2013-2020 have not resulted in officers being charged with a crime (Mapping Police Violence, 2021). They are the front line in addressing societal problems and address community issues outside what would normally be considered the core responsibilities and training of law enforcement. (Vermeer et al, 2020).

Emerging elites in US history needed a mechanism ensuring a stable workforce and an orderly work environment for the conduct of business (Spitzer & Scull, 1977). From its genesis, police operated as a class tool to maintain order. Historian Platt (1982) finds that “law and order” is an ideological and political repertoire to justify attacks on political and labor organizations of the working class. The mantra of law and order represents misguided support by the working class to oppress its own class. The US carceral state relies on containment rather than rehabilitation which casts citizens into a permanent diminished citizenship (Simon, 2007). Police act as the first point of contact introducing people into the carceral state and perpetuate this system.

### **Police Abolitionists**

Police abolitionists desire to reshape and redefine the United States’s carceral system and delegitimize the police. The United States’s current use of incarceration and policing controls, subverts, and isolates society’s lower class with little resources for rehabilitation. A series of law enforcement and sentencing policy changes of the “tough on crime” era resulted in dramatic growth in incarceration. The number of people incarcerated for drug offenses in the U.S. skyrocketed from 40,900 in 1980 to 452,964 in 2017 (Sentencing Project, n.d.). Black people are disproportionately likely to be arrested and overrepresented on death row and solitary confinement (Sawyer, 2020). The racial disparities in mass incarceration illuminate its systematic racism. Furthermore, a history of incarceration hinders future employment opportunities after release from custody reinforcing economic inequality (Western, 2018). Private companies stood to gain the most from the expansion of the U.S. prison population which created an enormously profitable market opportunity (Friedmann, 2012). The chosen system dealing with crime harms Black people, benefits corporations, and sustains inequality in America. Abolitionists stress the

need for a new system of accountability since their perspective is the survival of people harmed by the carceral system

MPD150, a Police Abolition organization, is a broad and inclusive coalition in Minneapolis advocating structural change in policing. Its report, “Enough is Enough,” claims the police cannot be reformed away from their core functions (MPD150, 2020). In response to proposals to diversify police personnel, Smith’s (2003) findings show that more diversified departments do not have significantly lower levels of police-caused homicides. Despite holding the Minneapolis Police Department as a model for progressive police reform with renovations such as body cameras and implicit bias trainings, the department is still responsible for George Floyd’s murder (McHarris 2020). The George Floyd Justice [in Policing] Act promises to ban racial profiling, supposedly overhaul qualified immunity for the cops, to ban no-knock raids, to ban the use of chokeholds (Kaba, 2021). None of which would’ve protected George Floyd’s life. The MPD150 report goes on to state that these cycles of reform serve to temporarily pacify resistance from victimized communities without altering police business as usual. On June 7th, 2020, the Minneapolis city council pledged to dismantle the Police Department. In December that year, the council moved roughly \$8 million dollars out of the police budget (a 4.375% decrease) and gave the city’s mayor the concession of upholding the size of the force at 888 rather than lowering it to the proposed 750 (Gustavo, 2020). This failed promise is a clear example of the pacifying acts the MPD150 report describes. Abolitionists reject any proposal to reform policing since it fails to solve the systemic issues of policing.

Another claim MPD150’s report makes is that there are viable existing and potential alternatives to policing for every area in which police engage (MPD150, 2020). Police are unsuited for most encounters with the public. People with untreated mental illnesses are 16 times

more likely to be killed during a police encounter than other civilians approached or stopped by law enforcement (Fuller, 2015). Transitions of responsibilities from police have already begun to occur. COPE (Community Outreach for Psychiatric Emergencies) is an emergency service provider for adults experiencing mental health emergencies in Minneapolis. Since its inception in 2006, their website states that incoming calls and team visits have quadrupled and now average more than 1,000 each month. Police Abolitionists envision a future where police no longer exist. The MPD150 report states, “Communities with lots of good jobs, strong schools, economies, and social safety nets are already, in some ways, living in a world without police” to alleviate fears skeptics have of their future (MPD150). The goal of abolitionists is to clear police who stand as obstacles on the road to justice.

### **Pro Police**

The pro police strategy creates the illusion that defunding the police represents a strict binary between supporting law enforcement or abolishing it. While campaigning for the US 2020 election, candidate Donald Trump aired a political advertisement illustrating that his opponent, Joe Biden, intended on defunding the police (Trump, 2020). In the ad, a person watches a news channel reporting police departments being downsized while an intruder attempts to break in. They dial 911, the phone remains unanswered, and the intruder gains entry. The final seconds air the text “You won’t be safe in Joe Biden’s America.” The video producer forecasts a false dichotomy following the decision to defund the police and presents the viewer with a choice of only two options: endorse Trump who desires a so-called safe society with police or support Biden who wants rampant crime and less police. This clip succinctly presents law enforcement to be synonymous with safety and deterring crime. Furthermore, the clip infers that supporting defunding the police permits crime and danger and that no middle ground exists between the two

choices. The Los Angeles Police Protective League (LAPPL), a union for the city's officers, said budget cuts would be the “quickest way to make our neighborhoods more dangerous,” and that “with violent crime increasing, a global pandemic and nearly a week’s worth of violence, arson, and looting, ‘defunding’ the LAPD is the most irresponsible thing anyone can propose” (Balsamo, 2020). By presenting two starkly different future realities, these critics practice fear mongering. President of the National Association of Police Organizations, McHale (2020) states:

The calls to defund or even completely dismantle police departments across the United States are dangerously misguided at best, and a cynical attempt to create a power vacuum to be exploited at worst...The real-world consequences [of defunding the police] are a marked uptick in violent crime, the flight of local businesses, and the fright and despair of community members. (pp. 4-5)

McHale correctly identifies the power the police stand to lose and attempts to persuade readers to fear its absence. This stance supports the coordinator of the Policing and Social Justice Project at Brooklyn College, Vitale’s (2020) claim that policing is a fundamental tool of social control to facilitate our exploitation. The claim is then proceeded with ‘real-world consequences’ that could occur if defunding the police was an isolated effort. These parties wrongly claim that there is a major movement to abolish the police because pro police use rhetoric to set up a misleading binary.

The rhetoric of pride, courage, and bravery espoused by the pro police crowd are core components in creating the culture attributed to law enforcement. This constructed and idealized image portrays police as heroes and idols. People socialized by this portrayal of police then irrational refrain from digesting the criticisms and critiques of police. In 2017, a majority of all officers across the country say their work in law enforcement nearly always (23%) or often



(35%) makes them feel proud and only 16% feel their work is hardly ever or never fulfilling (Morin et al 2017). The Act for America activist group, who advocate for preserving civil liberties, states the following regarding law enforcement (ACT, n.d.):

America's law enforcement represents the very best of our nation. Despite increasingly dangerous times both abroad and within, America, its constitution, and its citizens remain protected thanks to the selfless sacrifices of these heroes. Unfortunately, America's finest do not always receive the honor and recognition they deserve for their sacrifices and bravery. In the most egregious cases, America's finest are even demonized for their heroism, whether by politicians, the mainstream media, celebrities, or professional athletes.

ACT places police on a high pedestal worthy of high respects and insists that lacking honor and recognition for law enforcement is 'egregious.' These parties commend law enforcement bravery due to the perceived violent nature of their occupation. Ratcliffe (2017) identified that in 2013, maintenance workers, roofers, fishermen, truck drivers, and logging workers all work deadlier jobs than police officers. Furthermore, daily police activity has very little to do with violent crimes (fig. 2).

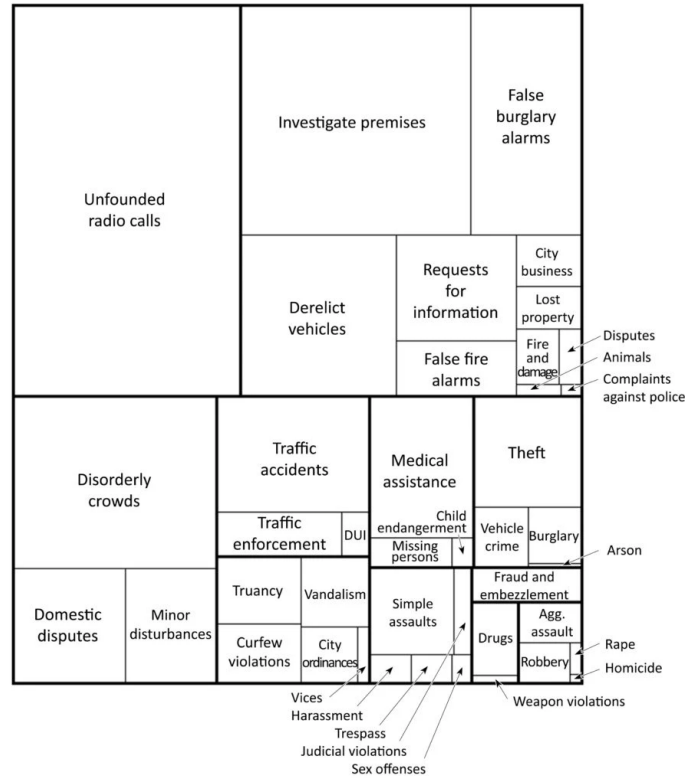


Figure 2. The area of each box represents the volume of incidents in 2015 in the City of Philadelphia (about 1.5m in total) (Ratcliffe 2017).

Policing is simultaneously a less deadly job than other occupations and also receives more clout than jobs that incur higher fatalities. Police culture upholds white supremacy since in US history there is a priori association of Blackness with guilt (criminality) and innocence as code for nonthreatening to white civil society (Wang, 2014). Slave patrols are also the forerunner to modern law enforcement (Grabner, 2016). Police culture is inherently tied to white supremacy and maintaining social order. In order to justify the police's role in less explicitly racist language, pro police participants fabricate a culture of honor, respect, and courage and attach a valiant mission to their purpose.

Pro police advocates claim that law enforcement is an essential pillar in the foundation of a functioning society. Angela Davis, in her book *Are Prisons Obsolete*, claims, “the history of visibility linked to the prison is also a main reinforcement of the institution of the prison as a

naturalized part of our social landscape. The history of film has always been wedded to the representation of incarceration” (Davis, 2003). Our policies, institutions and media have led society to believe life does not exist without police. The President of the National Association of Police Organizations demonstrates how prisons and policing are naturalized parts of our social landscapes in the following (McHale, 2020):

Police officers know as well as anyone else, and better than most, the urgent need for better housing, health care, jobs creation and social services in marginalized communities. But that does not mean that the vital services for protection of life and property that police departments provide should be cut. It’s a false choice... recognize that the men and women who serve their communities as police officers are a vital and indispensable part of protecting and enhancing the health, safety and welfare of our towns, cities and states. (pp. 4-5)

Although McHale agrees that various other services need improvement, he is a vehement subscriber to the essentiality of police and that both must be advanced. McHale leaves no room for alternative sources of safety, is a proponent for police as a beneficial aspect of society, and refuses to decouple police with ‘protection of life and property’ and ‘the welfare of our towns’. This absolutism anchors his position and illustrates where the unrelenting support for police originates. As investigated by Sherman (1992), growing experimental evidence suggests police actions can reduce crime, increase it, or make no difference, depending on a wide range of conditions reinforcing how embedded politics is in crime. If Sherman produces varying suggestions about the efficacy of policing on crime, then pro police claiming policing is a foundation to society is primarily a conditioned belief.

## Reformers

Reformers advance their agenda by proposing incremental changes appealing to a broad base. Reformists appease pro police by ensuring the continued support for police and also satisfy citizens concerns with police brutality by advocating for police regulation. Abolitionist Rodriguez (2020) refers to reformism as counterinsurgency and it being the ideological and political position that fixates on reform as the primary if not exclusive engine of social change/justice. Campaign Zero is an online police reform campaign to curtail police violence (fig. 3).



Figure 3. Campaign Zero's list of police reforms (Campaign Zero, 2021)

Exemplifying Rodriguez's reformism, Campaign Zero caters analytical evidence to claim policing can be better with the provided steps but also implies policing must remain. The campaign's goal is not to solve the issues of police brutality and racist policing but to merely reduce police killings. Police reform campaigns like Campaign Zero offer a much easier—albeit less effective—alternative to the radical change proposed by police abolitionists (Murray, 2020). The National Police Foundation puts forth the possibility to reduce crime and preserve liberties

with carefully structured enforcement strategies that are also embraced by citizens to portray policing as tolerable (Engel, 2015). Another common sentiment is to preserve what is good in the profession while rooting out all that is bad (Southers, 2020). This sentiment promotes police issues as individual and repairable, not systemic.

## **CONCLUSION**

The uprisings of protests against police violence following the death of George Floyd is one instance of an incredibly disturbing repetition of police violence and loss of Black life at the hands of the State. In review of previous analyses of police brutalities, scholar Kenneth Clark states the following:

I read that report. . . of the 1919 riot in Chicago, and it is as if I were reading the report of the investigating committee on the Harlem riot of '35, the report of the investigating committee on the Harlem riot of '43, the report of the McCone Commission on the Watts riot. I must again in candor say to you members of this Commission--it is a kind of Alice in Wonderland--with the same moving picture re-shown over and over again, the same analysis, the same recommendations, and the same inaction (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968).

Defenders of status-quo policing, proponents of reform, and advocates of abolishing police are divided by divergent conceptions of justice which fuels Clark's frustration. To defenders of police departments as they now are, justice is the preservation of the status quo. To reformers, police can be agents of justice if sufficient accountability mechanisms are implemented. To the advocates of police abolition, however, the status quo is injustice, and police, as an armed force

charged with defending and perpetuating the status quo, are an unreformable obstacle on the road to justice that must be cleared if a just society is to be achieved.

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