

POLICING – POLICY PRIMER

Prepared by Catch Fire Movement

Funding for law enforcement increased continuously for 40 years, even while actual crime rates decreased significantly over the same period. The U.S. spends \$222 billion on law enforcement - \$135 billion on policing and \$87 billion on correction officers. Yet, policing in the U.S. has undergone significant changes in the last several decades, which community leaders, activists, researchers, and others are now examining as they consider possible alternative futures for local and country-wide police forces.

Officers often confront a complex reality in the field as they fill a gap left in the social fabric of America due to the reduction of social services for neglected members of society. According to Professor Luis Fernandez, Chair of the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Northern Arizona University:

“In the last 30-40 years, we saw the dismantling of services for mentally ill, unsheltered people, and individuals with addiction issues. The police had to step in and engage these populations, and they are not necessarily the best at responding to certain kinds of situations. So, there are movements to reroute these vulnerable populations so that they don’t engage with police and instead engage with services in an attempt to prevent their entry into the criminal justice system.”

In response to the murder of George Floyd, there arose a movement to “defund the police.” For criminology scholars like Fernandez and others, this change means **divesting from institutions that kill, harm, cage, and control our communities and investing in violence prevention and interruption, housing, healthcare, income support, employment, and other community-based safety strategies and will produce safer communities for everyone.**

To date, efforts to reform policing have involved a smorgasbord of options, such as body cams, a more diverse police force, de-escalation training, civilian review boards, housing officers in the communities they serve, banning chokeholds, and many other efforts. **However, none of these reforms address the issue of the actual function and scope of the police in our society and, thus, have not been effective in reducing the number of police killings.**

Historian Keisha Blain notes that the origins of policing are rooted in the formation of slave patrols in the South as far back as the 1790s and continuing through the period of Reconstruction and Jim Crow to control the slave and freed slave population. They also served as an agent of class control of the newly arrived European immigrant population of the 19th century. They became an anti-labor enforcement tool of the capitalist class and newly crowned Robber Barons and helped break strikes and persecute union members. That role has continued to this day, as police unions resist accountability and shun solidarity with other labor unions or community groups.

Given those origins and the fact that, as the late black power activist H. Rap Brown said: “Violence is as American as Cherry Pie,” it would take a vast transformation to significantly reduce the social and economic violence that afflicts our society and that is reflected within the police themselves. It would mean seriously addressing racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-immigrant bias, poverty, lack of healthcare, mental illness, drug addiction, lack of housing, easy availability of assault weapons, and fascination with violence as a way to solve problems. It is also about investing in cultural life, arts, recreation, and the things that strengthen the community and our dreams for our future.

We need policing that grows alongside a progressive, humane, equitable society. To that end, policies should seek to do three things:

- 1) divert the funding from policing and toward community services,**
- 2) limit police contacts with vulnerable populations (e.g., unhoused and mentally ill individuals needing services), and**
- 3) reduce the number of police officers.**