CHAPTER TWO

DISRUPTING ORDER: RACE, CLASS, AND THE ROOTS OF POLICING

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Red and blue police lights cycle day and night outside many New York City public housing developments. The emergency lights, absent any emergency, penetrate apartment windows and the city landscape and are an established dimension of everyday urban life. On a summer day, trash fills the sidewalk of a Brooklyn housing development, while a police car sits directly in front of the pile. The trash makes it difficult and hazardous for residents, particularly elderly residents with disabilities, to make it into their homes. An officer rests his arm just outside the window of an NYPD squad car. The highly visible, persistent presence is framed as a way to maintain safety and deter disorder, and the squad car lights are meant to communicate that order is present in a disorderly environment.

Persistent police presence in cities has come to be taken for granted. When people think of cities, police sirens and lights often loom in the imagination. Through the ubiquity of policing, police power has come to seem natural in the landscape of everyday life. Policing, however, is not natural, and the function of the police is far from clear. To understand the nature of police, it is essential to explore the history of policing. In doing so, three approaches to the scope and power of police emerge: police abolition, preservation, and expansion. While the framework of abolition seeks to shrink and dismantle police power, police preservation aims to maintain police power, even when seeking to reform particular aspects of policing. Police expansion is a framework that aims to expand the scope and power of police in everyday life. Importantly, efforts and reforms consistent with police preservation and expansion often dovetail with one another, as expansion can be a strategy of preservation.

Police killings have persisted since 2014—the year the Movement for Black Lives emerged to protest and challenge police violence.¹ Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, when large numbers of people were inside, police killings remained on par with previous years.² The criminalization of the COVID-19 pandemic eventually led to police violence in the name of public health.³ Despite the perception that police killings are random and unpredictable, the data suggest a stable persistence. The reason for persisting police violence is simple: many efforts historically have centered on police preservation and expansion as an approach to reform while failing to recognize the fundamentally violent nature of policing.
CRIMINALIZATION, SAFETY, AND THE NATURES OF POLICING

Central to the premise of policing in the United States is that society is split into people who are good and those who are bad. The dominant framework suggests that those who are bad deserve to be punished and are largely incapable of change, and as a result, there needs to be an entity—namely, the police—that protects the good elements of society from the bad. These conceptions are socially constructed and shaped by race, class, origin, sexuality, and gender. Those invested in police preservation and expansion posit that the dangerous element, or predators of society that prey on individuals in need of protection, will always try to do harm and wreak havoc on others, thus requiring police to control them and use carceral institutions to contain them. At the core of this “thin blue line” premise lies a religious, Manichaean orientation that splits the world into good and evil. In this orientation, there will always be opposing forces, and police are the critical actors that hold the line between good and evil.

The focus on good versus evil, the latter of which is attributed to an inherent culture or ontological disposition, creates limitations to ending violence within communities, including patriarchal violence. Abolitionists present visions of safe, accountable communities that end and transform cycles of patriarchal violence in ways that do not exacerbate existing harm along the way. As a result, abolitionists challenge the views of human nature that underpin police and carceral logics. The current criminal legal system and structure of policing socialize people to refuse accountability for doing harm in order to prove themselves innocent. The carceral system creates a context where if one is accused of something, the first thing they often try to do is figure a way to discredit and disprove what happened in order to avoid severe punitive response from the state. This has created a culture of refusing accountability because of the realities and fears of the carceral system that have been internalized by society more generally.

Police and the criminal legal system rely on the dubious idea of a fixed human nature in order to justify the preservation and expansion of policing and punishment. Dominant society and elites have historically constructed criminals for the purpose of justifying an institution that exploits and controls those deemed threatening. People from marginalized communities have long been criminalized, and in many ways the expansion of criminalization was largely shaped by desires to control and exploit racialized communities, poor people, and workers.

Marginalized communities—whether the marginalization is a result of race, class, sexuality, gender, or citizenship—disproportionately end up navigating survival economies that are themselves criminalized creating controlling images that the criminal legal system puts forth. A “drug dealer” or “sex worker” is seen as a fixed label—rather than what one does for economic survival. In truth, these same individuals are almost always integrated into broader communities of care and financial networks, which are made invisible through criminalizing labels and carceral contact. The criminal legal
system attempts to label individuals based on what it defines as “criminal activity,” which does not provide context for particular survival-related strategies or grant people their full complexity and humanity. Once a community becomes labeled as deviant and criminal, it becomes easier for the state to target them with policing, surveillance, and punishment. Abolition requires shifting away from this labeling and how it has long been used in criminological and social science literature.

Data and statistics are also used to legitimize and normalize policing as an inherent public good. Police often make loose correlational arguments to justify particular strategies—and to help legitimize and naturalize their presence in general. Academics and data scientists have assisted with these efforts, multiplying the tools and resources that police have at their disposal. In creating “hot-spots” and identifying “target” people, the criminal legal system tries to refine who it exacts policing and carceral harm on and creates spaces and people that are inherently criminal. More than people, racialized spaces—such as public housing developments—are also criminalized and targeted by police and criminal-legal attention.

Reformers invested in preservation and expansion have presented police and prisons as approaches to stop gender and sexual violence. An archetype of this approach is the Violence Against Women Act of the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Bill. But as organizers and advocates such as INCITE! and Critical Resistance have claimed, this act does not effectively address gender violence. Critics further noted that most people—especially those that are racially and class marginalized—don’t report their experiences to the criminal legal system. When people do report, police and prisons can exacerbate harm experienced by survivors in many ways: rates of sexual violence in prisons are incredibly high, and sexual violence is also the second most reported police misconduct, followed by domestic violence.

A society in which people can freely enter into processes of accountability and are taught that doing harm does not make someone a deviant, terrible person—or monster—is much more likely to lead to communities that are able to receive what they need to heal from hurtful experiences and facilitate an end to cycles of harmful behavior. In the process, violence and harm can be navigated in ways that would sustainably reduce them—in addition to individuals being able to transform themselves through the process. But the state positions policing as the only well-resourced option for safety, so despite not seeing the police as legitimate, many people regard them as the only option. But decades of research show that communities, when given the resources and tools, are able to manage community conflict, violence, and harm.

The criminal legal system draws on ontological conceptions of nature to justify the very existence of policing and punishment. At the onset of policing, enslaved people and exploited laborers were criminalized and constructed as dangerous elements. The criminalization of race and class has contributed to increasing numbers of people that are considered in need—and deserving—of punishment, violence, containment, and control. The punitive, controlling focus on “good” and “bad” has permeated every aspect of society and has prevented society from creating models of safety that are
not steeped in isolation, vengeance, and retribution. Harm and violence are far more complicated aspects of social life than the framework constructed by the criminal legal system suggests, but the orientation has persisted largely by tapping into broader conceptions of human nature that resonate culturally. Safety is much broader than the criminal-legal definition of it. Crime rates, for example, only tell what is reported to and by the police, and data suggests that a large percentage of people who experience harm such as sexual assault, robberies, and aggravated assault do not report it. Moreover, safety and security also involve economic and material dimensions that are not captured by a criminal-legal conception of safety. Political leaders, police, and the criminal legal system have developed a monopoly over the definition and maintenance of public safety even when it is shown to be counter to the interest of public safety. Scholars such as Stuart Hall have theorized that the identity management work that police and criminal legal systems engage in serves the purpose of maintaining hegemony and racial-class orders.

As Hall argues, the state engages in public-facing and strategic identity management in order to reify hegemony; in doing so, societies can be ruled by “consent” rather than coercive violence. Police and the criminal legal system are not separate, external entities; they are institutions that socialize through routine, persistent contact and teach people what justice is, what adequate responses to harm look like, and the ways safety can be guaranteed. Prevailing societal institutions in the United States socialize people with narratives and worldviews that position police as the stewards of public safety, and, in turn, people seeking safety often ask for more police—especially given that for Black and poor communities, despite what people ask for, police and carceral responses are often the only things that the government provides.

Organizers—many of whom have been embedded in the broader Movement for Black Lives—have integrated abolitionist frameworks and demands, such as defunding the police, into national discourse surrounding policing in 2020 following the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. At the same time, many invested in police preservation and expansion have engaged in efforts that have reified the legitimacy of policing and undercut abolitionist organizing. Still, organizers have intervened in decades-old narratives and frames that have centered on a paradigm of safety, punishment, policing, and control that has challenged the naturalized framework of police. As advocates and scholars have noted, harm is dynamic, and most people in their lives will be harmed and engage in harmful behavior. To be sure, not all harm and violence are experienced in the same way, but the obsession with punishing the alleged monsters of society has served as cover for racial and class domination and has gotten in the way of developing a just society where people have safety interventions, reliable mechanisms of accountability, and their basic needs met.

Today, the idea that more police officers will make communities safer—including from violence—remains, despite the fact that police respond to 911 calls involving violence just approximately 4 percent of the time, make arrests for violent criminalized offenses less than 5 percent of the time, and
spend a vast majority of their time on noncriminal activities. Moreover, many harmful experiences go unreported, and when they are reported, clearance rates are notoriously low. The durability of this idea that police will make communities safer stems from a long history of the US government legitimizing and empowering police as a means of combating crime. Police departments and police unions have enormous political power. At the local level, they often organize and campaign for additional city-budget funds and seek to repress efforts aimed at holding police accountable and creating change in the criminal justice system. Moreover, the influence often extends to election cycles, where political candidates advocate for “tough-on-crime” stances and commit to pushing for increased funds for policing because they see tough-on-crime policies as politically necessary.

Instead of providing communities with resources and ensuring people’s basic needs are met, the state continues to respond with policing and carceral solutions. The only way forward is divesting and working to abolish policing. As is seen today, policing can be carried out by local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies and civilian entities, such as child-welfare and child support systems, schools, and private security, and abolition requires divesting and abolishing policing and prisons—as well as the logic that undergirds them as central animators of institutions responsible for safety—altogether.

**EARLY HISTORIES OF POLICING: RACE, CLASS, AND LABOR CONTROL**

Dominant power structures have institutionalized the idea that police are the only legitimate providers of public safety—which subsequently justifies their attempts to monopolize the use of violence. For most of history, however, police were not seen in that way. Rather, police were often considered as violent tools serving the interest of those in power, something that has remained true for many communities disproportionately targeted by police violence. Police are said to be the stewards of public safety, but across the country policing emerged as a tool of racial and class domination and control. Over time, we have seen that policing has been centered on maintaining the status quo, which has been shaped by white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism. The police violence we see throughout the country in the present is not a fluke or aberration. The criminal legal system today is not broken—it is operating exactly as it was designed: a violent tool of race and class control.

Policing, in various forms, has existed since colonialism and slavery in the United States. The formality, organization, and legitimacy of the police force has changed over time, but the institution of police, both when it was invented and as it exists today, is an apparatus to enforce the agenda of the state and coercively control the nation’s citizens. As Alex Vitale articulates in *The End of Policing*, “While the specific forms that policing takes have changed as the nature of inequality and the forms of resistance to it have shifted over time, the basic function of managing the poor, foreign, and
non-white on behalf of a system of economic and political inequality remains.”

The first organized policing entities began as slave patrols in the South. Slaveholders and local civilian officials paid full-time officers to prevent slave revolts. Slave patrols would surveil private property and public space to ensure that enslaved people were not carrying any weapons or fugitives, conducting any meetings, or gaining literacy. Officers also patrolled the roads to catch any enslaved people who attempted to escape to the North. Although a majority of these slave patrols dominated rural areas and were loosely organized, urban patrols such as the Charleston City Guard and Watch that began in 1783 became increasingly professionalized. With the rise of industrialization, enslaved African Americans had to work in places far outside their enslavers’ property, so there were large numbers of unaccompanied enslaved people around the city. Officers were viewed as even more necessary to supervise, monitor, and inspect slaves who worked in these urban areas.

After the abolition of slavery, slave patrols no longer existed, but racialized policing continued. Systems of formal policing became expanded in small towns and rural areas and were used to suppress, intimidate, and control the newly freed Black population and force them into convict leasing and sharecropping. No longer prioritizing the prevention of rebellions, the police enforced laws that outlawed vagrancy in order to criminalize and force Black people into convict leasing through the sharecropping system—which maintained exploitative labor conditions consistent with those under slavery. Officers also routinely enforced poll taxes and checked proof of employment for any Black person on the road. During the Jim Crow era, police often enabled and worked with white supremacist vigilantes such as the Ku Klux Klan to maintain social, political, and economic racial hierarchies. Meanwhile, northern political leaders also feared the northern migration of newly freed rural Black populations, who were viewed as inferior in every aspect. As a result, northern cities established segregated areas and utilized police officers to contain Black people in these spaces. In both the North and the South, the police employed brute means to impose geographical, social, and political limitations on Black communities.

Just as the state utilized the police force to maintain the inferior position of enslaved people and later freed African Americans, policing in the North began as informal, privately funded night watch patrols to control working-class immigrants and growing unrest among the industrial working class. Northern cities experienced an influx of immigrants and rapid industrialization, which instilled a sense of fear and resentment among white elites. They viewed Irish and other working-class immigrants as uneducated, disorderly, and politically militant. Labor strikes and riots broke out, inducing fear and anxiety and demands for the preservation of law and order. Although the informal night watch system was intended to block looting and labor organizing, it failed at preventing them, which resulted in the emergence and expansion of formalized public policing to protect the interests of property and business owners. The creation of the police enabled enforcement of morality laws, such as restrictions on drinking. However, the early urban police were
openly corrupt, as they were often chosen based on political connections and bribery. Qualifications to become a police officer did not include formal training or passing civil service exams. Political parties also utilized police to suppress opposition voting and to spy on and suppress workers’ organizations, meetings, and strikes.\textsuperscript{20}

Because of the high degree of police corruption, business leaders, journalists, and religious leaders united and exposed the corruption of the police beginning in the early 1900s. In response to the pressure, policing became increasingly professionalized through civil service exams and centralized hiring processes, training, and new technology. Management sciences were also introduced.\textsuperscript{21} Reformers such as August Vollmer, who drew his ideas from his experiences in the US occupation forces in the Philippines, also implemented police science courses, which introduced new transportation and communication technologies, as well as fingerprinting and police labs. Police reformers of the twentieth century paved the way for the increasingly intertwined relationship between standardized technology, policing, and surveillance. Police militarization—where police adopt military strategies, tactics, and tools in routine policing—began to increase in intensity in the early twentieth century as a result of imperial feedback, where police expanded their infrastructural power using militarization models, borrowing tactics, techniques, and organizational templates from America’s imperial-military regime developed to conquer and rule foreign nations.\textsuperscript{22}

Imperial feedback paved the way for police to adopt strategies and tactics used by the imperial military to control colonial subjects abroad to control racial and class minorities in the United States, such as African Americans and Indigenous communities.

The United States also employed colonial policing through the Texas Rangers, which were formally established in 1835. Texas Rangers were hired to protect the interests of newly arriving white colonists under the Mexican government and later under the independent Republic of Texas. The Texas Rangers hunted down native populations who were accused of attacking white settlers. Rangers also facilitated white colonial expansion by pushing out Indigenous Mexicans through violence, intimidation, and political interference. Mexicans and Native Americans who resisted were subject to beatings, killings, intimidation, and arrests. Throughout the 1960s and ’70s, local and state elites also relied on Rangers for political suppression of Mexican Americans’ suffrage rights and worked to subvert farmworker movements through similar tactics. Utilizing intimidation, they prevented voter rallies and threatened opposing candidates and their supporters. After organized resistance, communities pushed back against the Texas Rangers, which ultimately helped to pave the path for civil rights for Mexican Americans.\textsuperscript{23}

The early forms of policing across the nation served to maintain the interests of the dominant class of white elites. By characterizing newly freed Black Americans, the working class, and incoming immigrants as deviant, morally inferior, and uneducated, both state and local police forces used brute force to ensure that they remained in their perceived inferior positions.

At the turn of the twentieth century, political leaders of the United States radically changed the organization and
responsibilities of the police department. For much of history, the general public perceived the police as illegitimate and riddled with corruption. Reformers in the 1920s and '30s attempted to rid departments of organizational corruption and to decouple their close ties with political elites. Instead, they emphasized that the role of police departments was in crime control and arrest. Changing expectations of police led to organizational changes, in which police departments took on a more centralized, bureaucratic, paramilitary organizational structure. Inevitably, the reform era led to police professionalization that further cemented their power and allowed them to do more unchecked harm. These shifts led to changes in how a police department's success was measured, focusing increasingly on higher arrest rates and “efficiency” determined by rapid response time to emergency calls. By the 1950s these priorities were having devastating impacts on marginalized communities of color, beginning with Black communities. Scholars have long shown that poverty and disadvantage, shaped by centuries of structural racism, are closely related to levels of police violence and harm in neighborhoods across the nation.

During the 1960s, a large number of the urban rebellions that rocked the nation were directly prompted by incidences of police brutality. At the same time, the War on Crime and the Law Enforcement Assistance Act provided police with increasing amounts of resources and also helped to create a climate that legitimizing police as viable “crime stoppers,” even though the effect police even have on what is referred to as crime is largely inconclusive.

The Civil Rights and Black Power Era saw an incredibly violent, repressive policing and carceral backlash. The period was a time of widespread activism—including the work of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the antiwar movement, and the Black Panthers. For groups like the Black Panthers, which began in Oakland, California, that activism looked like both protecting Black communities from police violence and launching a wide variety of initiatives ranging from free breakfast programs for children to health clinics and ambulance services.

On the local, state, and federal levels, police engaged in surveillance, violent repression, and criminalization of nationwide protest and dissent against the US government. The violent repression of Black movements through COINTELPRO epitomizes the development of increasingly violent surveillance tools and police violence. One notable example of COINTELPRO's violent suppression of Black activists was the case of Fred Hampton, who was murdered in his home during a raid conducted by the Chicago Police Department and the FBI. Many other activists during this period were jailed, injured, and killed by local, state, and federal law enforcement.

President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Crime and creation of the Law Enforcement Assistance Act (LEAA) expanded the push towards empowering local law enforcement by legitimating the police as stewards of public safety. The 1965 LEAA authorized the US attorney general to make grants for the training and expansion of state and local law enforcement personnel. As the president told Congress in 1966, “The front-line soldier in the war on crime is the local law enforce-
ment officer.” The LEAA subsequently created the first federal funding stream for local policing efforts. At the height of an era that professionalized policing, Johnson’s financial support at the federal level and valorization of local police reinforced a paradigmatic shift toward the perception that local law enforcement served as the only legitimate gatekeepers to public safety.

The coming decades would set the stage for the mass incarceration of today. The emergence of police strategies—coming out of Johnson’s War on Crime—specifically aimed to violently police and punish Black people, poor people, and marginalized communities. These criminal-legal efforts included the War on Drugs, War on Gangs, and the criminalization of poverty, homelessness, and survival—such as via sex work. During the 1970s and onward, police developed and expanded tools such as hot-spot and problem-oriented policing, stop-question-frisk, investigatory traffic stops, surveillance devices like wiretaps, and data-driven police tactics as new standards. Moreover, police increasingly became involved in immigration enforcement and detention and deportation proceedings. These five decades filled jails with Black people, as well as poor people and people from other marginalized communities. From 1983 to 2012, the United States spent $3.4 trillion more on the criminal justice system as a result of mass incarceration, criminalization, and policing.

Anti-Black sentiments fundamentally shaped policing and punishment as solutions to issues of homelessness, poverty, drug use, housing insecurity, mental health, and interpersonal and communal violence. Consequently, the expansion of and increased funding for policing tore at the social fabric of Black communities, and in many cases worsened already pertinent social conditions. The growth of punishment and policing accelerated when President Richard Nixon declared a war on drugs. Nixon’s administration continued to channel hundreds of millions of dollars to local law enforcement in the name of curbing drug use and distribution. Statistics indicate that drug use is at similar levels across all races and that white populations sell drugs at higher rates than Black populations. Nonetheless, the War on Drugs both reinforced the criminalization of Black people and, in practice, disproportionately targeted Black and other racially marginalized and poor communities, facilitating the mass incarceration of large numbers of Black as well as Latinx people. By the 1980s, the War on Drugs reached its peak under President Ronald Reagan, notably because of the anti-Black hysteria around the use of crack cocaine, fueled by the platforms of both Democrats and Republicans. The hysteria drove even more government funds to local police, who were pressured to expand arrests to demonstrate success and justify these new budgets.

During the 1988 presidential campaign, George H. W. Bush utilized the image of Willie Horton—an escaped Black convict from Massachusetts—to portray his opponent, Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis, as soft on crime. The widespread popularity of this image drove white voters’ anxiety and fear around safety and perpetuated stereotypes about the Black community.

In response to concerns about Democrats’ image of being soft on crime, Clinton advocated for a tough-on-crime plat-
form. His adoption of this harsh approach to combating crime is exemplified by his signing of the 1994 Crime Bill—the largest bill to expand the criminal justice system since the LEAA. Clinton touted the number of additional police officers that this legislation put on the streets through the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) program. COPS was a seemingly liberal attempt to better police-community relations and reduce crime, but it flooded Black and other racially marginalized communities with police officers, fueling mass incarceration rather than reducing violence and harm within communities.40

The policies that Clinton, Johnson, and other Democrats advocated for and implemented set the stage for a federal commitment to fund local police departments. Increased spending on policing was often at the expense of social services like schools and community programs—the very programs implemented by the Panthers decades prior.41 Since the 1960s, there has been little evidence to suggest that the additional funding has had a large impact on driving down indexes of crime or violence.42 In fact, studies of communities with aggressive enforcement and the hyperconcentration of police found associations with increases in violence, worse health indicators, and adverse educational performance.43 Governments at all levels have created new threats to safety by failing to develop institutions that address the underlying causes of violence and harm, often shaped by legacies of racial and class inequality, and instead by increasing criminalization, policing, and incarceration.

As a result of the continued investment in policing and the criminal legal system, police today have an immense amount of power. During the decades following the 1960s, police were given more power to engage in contact with the public through the criminalization of traffic stops and emergence of pre-textual stops targeting poverty and survival economies, and legislators passed laws to allow for no-knock and quick-strike warrants—the same ones that led to the murder of Breonna Taylor. This rise in power occurred in tandem with rapid increases in police funding: national spending on police rose from $2 billion in 1960 to $16.7 billion in 1980 to $67 billion in 2000 to $137 billion in 2018.44 That expansion of policing overtime allowed police to engage in increased amounts of surveillance and state-authorized violence.

Supreme Court rulings have also granted protection for and expanded power to the police, specifically during their interactions with the general public. Qualified immunity first emerged during *Pierson v. Ray* (1967). The Supreme Court used it with the rationale of protecting law enforcement officials from lawsuits and financial liability in cases where they acted in supposed good faith. In 1982 it was expanded to protect police and government officials from criminal and civil repercussions unless the conduct is “clearly established” as unconstitutional and unlawful. In 1986 qualified immunity was reinforced to protect “all but the plainly incompetent or those who knowingly violate the law.”45 In the decades to follow, qualified immunity has continued to enhance and embolden police power. Federal policies that inevitably increased police power—at the local, state, and federal levels—also include the emergence of the 1996 Immigration Act and the USA Patriot Act. The War on Terror also saw the onset of new funding, technologies, and focus on surveilling
Throughout history, whenever police and politicians announce a “war” on a particular thing, it has also meant a war on Black people, poor people, and marginalized communities.

In recent decades the rise of “big data”—the use of large amounts of data to analyze and create algorithms—and increasingly sophisticated systems of surveillance have facilitated mass policing by expanding the capacity of police to engage in the sustained monitoring of residents and the use of algorithm-driven policing to focus on members of especially marginalized communities of color. Data and algorithm-driven strategies such as predictive policing, social network analysis, hot-spot policing, and focused deterrence today are seen as “race-neutral,” but they target Black and marginalized communities of color and position punishment and control as answers to social issues created by legacies of white supremacy and capitalism. These advances in criminological research that focus on algorithm-driven police tactics have equipped police with the resources and knowledge necessary to utilize “big data,” social network analysis, and geographic systems. Police maintain a large degree of discretionary control over how these technologies are implemented. For example, these tools have been used toward gang suppression efforts in New York City with little oversight. Moreover, the use of social media by police in order to surveil and monitor communities has also become increasingly widespread.

The militarization of local police has facilitated the use of surveillance technologies, such as night vision and Stingray military technology. Sponsored by the Department of Homeland Security, Department of Defense, and Department of Justice, these tools have been transferred and channeled through programs like the 1033 Program—which emerged in 1989 and provides excess Department of Defense equipment to police agencies across the United States—augmenting the capacity of county and state police to surveil and enact violence, particularly on Black, Latinx, and other marginalized communities and protestors and to undermine public safety.

MOVING BEYOND REFORM

Through community-relations initiatives, procedural justice, implicit-bias training, and reforms that focus on rooting out “bad apples,” police are taught to engage in ways that make communities feel heard and listened to, while doing nothing to fundamentally reduce police violence and contact. Academics and social scientists often help to develop and legitimize the police and the criminal legal system without shifts that lead to meaningful reductions in police violence. Other reforms, such as review boards that have little or no decision-making power, are symbolic rather than transformative shifts that have little effect on reducing police contact, arrest, and violence.

Academics, politicians, and police leaders posit use-of-force standards, force-report requirements, and licensing as solutions to police brutality and misconduct. The police reform era began over one hundred years ago, and procedure, professionalism, and training were framed as a solution to the problems of policing. Minneapolis implemented all the
progressive reforms—body cameras; deescalation, implicit-bias, and mindfulness training; reconciliatory efforts with communities of color; use-of-force standards; requirements that police intervene in misconduct; and community policing. The department was held up as a model for progressive police reforms, but it still murdered George Floyd.

Rather than these progressive reforms, the way to ensure police violence does not occur, and the way to help reduce violence, conflict, and harm within communities, is to reduce contact with police and invest in community resources and institutions. It’s also critical to remember that police brutality and killings are not the only form of police violence—sexual violence and domestic violence are among the most commonly reported police misconduct. Moreover, the fear and terror that many communities experience from police presence and interactions are forms of police violence as well.

Proponents of limited police reforms include progressive-leaning mayors, such as Ras Baraka in Newark, who proposed a 5–7 percent cut to the city’s police budget following nationwide calls to defund the police and reinvest in communities, but the proposed reduction was not the kind of substantial change organizers are envisioning. Moreover, Baraka’s violence interruption initiatives and social service programs are directly linked to partnerships with police and the criminal legal system. Linking the two will expand the scope of policing, increase contact with the public, and discourage many from using the services if they are linked to policing and the criminal legal system. On the subject of defunding policing, Baraka stated, “Most of our residents want police officers. . . . They want police officers in our neighborhoods, they want safety, they want security.” Baraka captures the heart of the issue here.

Reforms that do not reduce police power and scope will not lead to reductions in police violence and the reimagining of public safety. For instance, Camden, New Jersey, which is often praised as a case study around police reform, is not an example of reimagining public safety. In 2013, the local government replaced the local department (due to austerity measures) with a better resourced, county-level department that has created an intense surveillance culture in the city. The model still rests on punishment, surveillance, and control, even though there are ways to actually foster safety and accountability that do not center on policing and prisons.

There are many ways to reduce violence and intervene in conflict that do not rely on an incredibly expensive, archaic, and violent model of justice that actively harms and kills Black and other marginalized people. Largely a result of the culture of punishment that animates the criminal legal system, most people do not report things that are defined as crime at all. A major intervention moving forward is removing police from traffic safety, which has been implemented in Berkeley, California, where an unarmed civilian entity manages traffic safety. This is gaining momentum in New York City and Los Angeles, as many instances of police violence start during traffic stops, which often become pretextual stops and spiral out.

Since the wave of unrest following the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, there has been an increase in defund campaigns that seek to reallocate police funding directly to community investments and alternative systems of
safety. There is a growing list of alternatives to policing that center on safety and antiviolence work. For some organizations, there may be a need for companion organizing to build alternatives. The resource hub Transform Harm has developed strategies for transformative justice and alternative approaches to community violence and harm. Oakland POWER Projects has advanced alternatives to policing and emergency preparedness and decoupling health care from policing. The Health Alliance for Violence Intervention (HAVI) supports hospital and community collaborations to advance equitable, trauma-informed care for violence intervention and prevention programs. Violence Interrupters in localities such as Washington, DC, and in New York use personal outreach from community members to mediate and defuse neighborhood conflict. In California, the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective addresses child sexual abuse without the police.

There are existing violence intervention models that have been shown to be effective and do not center on police and systems of punishment. There is also a substantial body of evidence that suggests how other civic and community-based organizations and initiatives can build safe communities without the costs and violence that come along with police and prisons. These include conflict-resolution teams, summer jobs, engaging youth in after school programs, addiction and mental-health treatment, well-resourced community-based violence interruption teams (including for gender-based violence), creating more green spaces within communities, and making sure all residents have their basic needs met.

In 2020 after the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, tension emerged between individuals and organizations calling for traditional reforms and those making more transformative demands. In the summer of 2020, Campaign Zero launched #8CantWait, a set of policy recommendations based on faulty data science that failed to reduce police power and scope. Because #8CantWait seemed like it might undercut the transformative demands emerging from the Movement for Black Lives, organizers developed the #8toAbolition campaign, which put forth the following recommendations: defund police; demilitarize communities; remove police from schools; free people from jails and prisons; repeal laws that criminalize survival; invest in community self-governance; provide safe housing for everyone; and invest in care, not cops. After #8toAbolition and criticism emerged, Campaign Zero removed the specific data claims from the #8CantWait platform and added a framework of divest/invest and abolition to the platform.

Across the country, organizers are building political power to refuse the century-long reforms that have been recycled and repackaged time and time again, and they are pushing for a transformative shift away from police and prisons altogether. Instead, alternative safety interventions and designing models of responding to conflict, harm, and violence rooted in frameworks such as transformative and restorative justice are the priority, rather than punishment, vengeance, and control.

In 2018, the Movement for Black Lives outlined a policy platform on divest/invest initiatives, a part of the broader Vision for Black Lives policy platform, arguing for investment
in safety for Black communities through access to education, health care, jobs, and domestic infrastructure such as housing and transportation and divestment from “exploitative forces including prisons, fossil fuels, police, surveillance and exploitative corporations.”69 The platform presented an encompassing vision that addressed police violence in addition to the social, political, and economic realities that emerge from legacies of racial and class inequality.

Building on this 2018 policy platform, the Movement for Black Lives released the BREATHE Act,70 a sweeping omnibus bill that advances a divest/invest framework and significantly reduces criminalization, institutionalized punishment, and police surveillance. The bill is perhaps the largest bill proposed by Black movements since the Civil Rights Act. The four sections of the bill are titled: “Divesting Federal Resources from Incarceration and Policing & Ending Criminal-Legal System Harms”; “Investing in New Approaches to Community Safety Utilizing Funding Incentives”; “Allocating New Money to Build Healthy, Sustainable & Equitable Communities for All People”; and “Holding Officials Accountable & Enhancing Self-Determination of Black Communities.”

The BREATHE Act proposes eliminating surveillance tactics that are disproportionately used to target Black, Brown, and Muslim communities by prohibiting predictive policing, racial recognition technologies, drones, and similar tools; eliminating the use of electronic monitoring, including ankle monitors, smartphone applications, and any other tool used to track location; ending civil asset forfeiture; abolishing mandatory minimum sentencing laws; ending life sentences; abolishing “three strikes” laws; developing a time-bound plan to close all federal prisons and immigration detention centers; repealing federal laws that criminalize human movement and border entry; further repealing and replacing the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act with noncarceral, nonpunitive investments in communities; and decriminalizing and retroactively expunging drug offenses.

The BREATHE Act also calls for eliminating federal programs and agencies used to finance and expand the US criminal legal system, such as the Department of Defense 1033 Program, the Edward Byrne-Justice Assistance Grant Program, Community Oriented Policing Services, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The bill would ensure that non-punitive, noncarceral elements of these programs are identified so that they can be transferred to another funding source. The BREATHE Act also makes recommendations to dramatically reduce the Department of Defense budget. The act is the most sweeping bill offered to date that can fundamentally reduce the size and power of police and the broader criminal legal system.

The only guaranteed way of reducing police violence is by reducing and eliminating contact with police altogether. Communities, with the necessary time and resources, can develop alternatives to deal with violence, conflict, and harm, as most people who do harm and violence within the current model do not go to jail. In many ways, aggressive policing and incarceration make communities less safe and cause devastating effects that ripple across their social fabric. The criminalization of poverty and survival economies—such as the
drug trade and sex work—further inflames communities and seeks to police through an unpoliceable issue.

Activists and organizers have made compelling arguments for abolishing policing, jails, and prisons that have been injected into popular discourse in a way that has not before existed. Organizers have made clear that their efforts are not centered on abolishing safety and help but making a decision—as was made in Minneapolis by MPD150, Reclaim the Block, and Black Visions Collective—to unearth what currently exists. In that excavation process, organizers are calling to design reimagined models of public safety and craft transformative models of justice that create safer communities that have the resources they need to thrive. The current model of punishment is not making us safer and often leads to cycles of harm and violence that devastate communities.

Police have considerable resources, tools, and discretionary power. Across the country, police often engage in contact that is unnecessary and discriminatory. Particular emergencies could be managed by other entities better equipped to deal with the incident—such as crisis intervention teams for individuals experiencing mental health emergencies and homelessness. There have been efforts over the last decades to reform policing through a focus on initiatives such as community policing and training around procedural justice, but these reforms aim to change perceptions without changing the root causes of systemic police violence.

Policing was not designed for public safety but as a tool to exploit, punish, and control Black and other racially and class marginalized communities. The violence witnessed in recent years is not an aberration or accident. The criminal legal system isn’t broken. It is working exactly as designed: a system designed, foundationally, as a tool of race-class control. Policing has been responsible for continued injustices and violence, and it has not brought about sustainable safety and an accountable society. On the contrary, police violence and carceral harm have created safety and security threats far beyond the violence that is sensationalized. Policing is at the forefront of enforcing order in a society fundamentally shaped by structural inequality. As a result, policing disproportionately harms marginalized communities.

The expansion of police overtime pay allowed police to engage in increased amounts of state-sanctioned violence at the expense of social spending that would provide people with the basic necessities they need to live and thrive. When communities do not have these resources, violence and harm within communities are more likely. There is no evidence to suggest that policing can be reformed into a nonviolent, just system. Violence is a constitutive dimension of policing—leading some scholars to describe police as violence workers. At their core, police are indeed violence workers who enforce legal codes and orders that are shaped by white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy. People need resources in order to thrive, and there is a need for new models of safety that center on safety and accountability, not punishment and control. Legacies of punishment, containment, and control have been disproportionately waged against Black, poor, and marginalized communities. In order to end police violence, policing needs to be dismantled and abolished with new systems that center on safety and accountability, not vengeance and retribution, in its place.
Since the colonial beginnings of the United States, prisons and policing were used as tools of exploitation and racial-class control. The only way to end cycles of police violence and the devastation of incarceration is to dramatically shrink and abolish what currently exists and reimagine public safety in its entirety. New systems can focus on alternative ways to prevent, intervene, and respond to conflict, violence, and harm within communities. Divesting from policing, prisons, surveillance, and systems of control and reinvesting in communities is a step in that direction.

In recent years, there has been a large focus on integrating W. E. B. Du Bois into mainstream social theory. Du Bois was a staunch critic of the convict leasing system and broader criminal legal system he saw emerging as a tool of control and way to force Black people back into exploitative labor conditions after the abolition of slavery. In *Black Reconstruction* Du Bois criticizes the abolition of slavery as a purely legal process, one composed of a focus on formally ending slavery, and argues for an abolition democracy that aims to end oppressive systems and develop just, democratic systems in their place.

In *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture*, Angela Davis draws on the concept of abolition democracy and applies it to policing and the broader prison industrial complex. She also emphasizes the need for an abolition democracy that abolishes unjust systems and builds just, democratic systems that can meet people’s basic needs and be modeled on transformative visions for safety. As scholar and geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore has stated, “Abolition means not just the closing of prisons but the presence, instead, of vital systems of support that many communities lack.” The creation of life-affirming institutions is central to addressing the underlying causes of violence, harm, and conflict and developing alternative safety interventions and responses to them that do not center on policing, prisons, and punishment.

Policing and incarceration have become tools in the United States, and around the globe, to manage the consequences of unjust social, economic, and political institutions. To truly address concerns surrounding safety, it is necessary to provide resources, such as food, water, quality school choices, a universal basic income, guaranteed housing, accessible health care, dignifying jobs, alternative emergency response systems, drug treatment, and community-based violence interruption support, to deal with the underlying causes of harm, violence, and conflict. No amount of policing and incarceration can fully make a community reeling from legacies of structural inequality and poverty safe on its own. Attempts to control, punish, and use security measures to facilitate a semblance of safety in the face of legacies of racial and economic inequality has exacerbated harmful conditions within communities.

Fundamentally, abolishing policing, prisons, and systems of surveillance and punishment requires abolishing the idea that police are necessary because there are people who are bad and others who are good, thereby requiring police to hold the line of civility from descending into chaos, violence, and destruction. It also requires shifting away from a framework that positions punishment and vengeance as equivalent to safety, accountability, and justice.
As the United States continues to experience a range of political shifts from the local to the national level, participatory budgeting, a strategy that advocates for direct community decision making in budget decisions, may be the key to divest/invest campaigns. Creating the conditions where communities decide how funds are allocated in their localities offers an alternative, sustainable way to cultivate safety and prevent future budget decisions and resource allocation that hurt, rather than help, communities. There are more than enough resources in this country—and around the world—to make sure everyone has their basic needs met, the resources to thrive, and nonpunitive approaches to safety. But capitalism has created a world of unnecessary suffering and inequality that police and prisons help to maintain. Creating a safe, just world is possible. It’s fundamentally a question of building systems and institutions that center lives and people instead of property and capital. But throughout history, policing has been at odds with assuring the most basic human needs—safety and security.