



Modern Abolition: Imagining a World Without Police

Senior Project

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By

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tasia Mears".

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Abstract

Recent police violence in the United States has caused a mass reexamining of the role and function of police in our society. This project is an exploration into the police abolition movement, where the history is examined and recent developments are considered. The main tenets of the police abolition movement are disinvestment of funds from police budgets, and reinvestments of those funds into social programs and community development. Analysis of cities and other jurisdictions where these tenets have been implemented is used to show that police abolition is not only possible, but necessary in our ever developing society.

Modern Abolition: Imagining a World Without Police

Recent murders at the hands of police have exposed many inadequacies in the United States policing system. Many scholars, politicians, and citizens have differing opinions on how to create lasting change. There have been calls for police reforms both at the federal and local levels, as well as for defunding the police. The most controversial of these ideas, however, has inspired much debate from all sides of the political spectrum. So, what would it mean to “abolish the police”? What does a world without police look like? How do we abolish the police and stay safe? For many, the idea of abolishing the police inspires fear. They imagine the world we currently live in, the world as dangerous as it is now, but with no one to protect us. But abolitionists imagine a world much different than the one we’re used to. In this world, police and policing have become obsolete, and the world is safer because of it. One of the core ideas behind abolition is that when we invest in people and communities, police become obsolete. When we learn the causes of crime and poverty and then address them, the purpose for police becomes less clear. The most effective way to end police violence is to abolish policing as we know it.

Why Abolition?

There are many reasons why abolitionists choose to advocate for abolition. First, much of the resistance to police abolition is the fear of living in a world of crime without police. It is important for us to realize that police do not do what much of society thinks they do. Most of what police do daily is dealing with traffic violations, administrative tasks, and other noncriminal issues. According to the National Institute of Justice, violent crime is defined as a crime in which a victim is harmed or threatened by violence, and it

only makes up about 4% of what the police do on average across the country.

Abolitionists work to fight the myth that police “catch the bad guys”, because more often than not, police officers make non-felony arrests (Asher 2020). Next, police only create a “safe world” for those who are rich and white. For black, brown, and other marginalized people, police create a more terrifying environment. The very history of policing is a history of racism and violence against marginalized communities. A poll found that Black Americans fear violence from the police more than violent crime itself (Arrieta 2020). Because of the previously mentioned ideas, abolitionists believe that police reform is simply a band aid used to please the masses, and it can never actually fix the inherent problems with policing. Many abolitionist thinkers write about how the only way we can “fix” the system is to completely tear it down and start over. They believe that, considering the history of U.S. policing, the system is not “broken”, it functions exactly as it was meant to.

History

Policing

To understand the history of police abolition, it is important to understand the history of police in the United States. Despite the common idea that police have always been a fixture in our society, policing as we know it is actually fairly recent. The first publicly funded and organized police force was founded in Boston in 1838. This “police force” had the sole purpose of protecting merchandise as it was imported and exported through the commercial shipping center. Merchants marketed this a “public good” which allowed for taxes to be used for salaries, instead of having to pay it themselves. Throughout the 19th century, police forces grew in almost every major city. These police

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forces grew out of fear of labor unions and the influx of European immigrants to major cities in the North. Politicians and businessmen with connections to politics often found ways to use police to threaten labor union organizers, immigrants, and political opposition (Waxman 2017).

In the southern states, policing began as slave patrols, the first of which was formally created in 1704 in the Carolina Colonies. These slave patrols were tasked with preventing slave revolts, which often involved ensuring that slaves were not organizing or learning to read and write. They also were responsible for capturing and returning runaway slaves. After the Civil War, formalized sheriff offices became a fixture in every county. These police forces were mainly responsible for enforcing segregation and Jim Crow laws, including the disenfranchisement of former slaves (Vitale 2018).

In general, police forces spent much of their history with the purpose of protecting property and capital, rather than people. They were often paid off by politicians in order to turn a blind eye or focus their “public safety” efforts in a specific community. In 1929, President Hoover appointed the National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement, which was responsible for looking into the effectiveness of laws and the entire criminal justice system. In their findings, the commission reported gross police misconduct all over the country, including uses of excessive force, bribery, fabrication of evidence, and coercion of witnesses. The commission also called for professional police forces that had more trained and qualified officers and were not subjected to political pressures (“Wickersham”). This professionalization of police is the reason we have “career cops”, people who dedicate their entire lives to the profession of law enforcement. Throughout the 20th century, police in the United States have undergone many

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reforms. Social movements like the civil rights movement had a large role to play in many of these reforms, and even more have been adopted in recent years. However, it is the belief of abolitionists that police forces can never be redeemed from their original purpose, and that largely their chief purpose is still what it was at the start: the protection of property, and capital and the maintaining of racist systems (Waxman 2017)

Abolition

Abolitionist theory is older than the United States itself. It began with slavery abolition, and since then, many have believed that those fixtures in our society thought of as permanent can be changed, and life can go on without them. One of the first examples of abolition after slavery comes from WEB Du Bois in his book *Black Reconstruction*. In this book Du Bois called for the rise of what he dubbed “abolition-democracy”.

Abolition-democracy describes the fight to end the power structures left over from slavery, designed to continue the subjugation of Black people. Du Bois mainly focused on prisons and fixtures within the prison system, such as convict leasing. While he does mention white police as an enforcer of further subjugation, he chooses to focus mainly on prisons (Arrieta 2020). Many years later, the prison abolition movement took off, with Black women like Angela Davis at the helm. In her writings, Davis expanded Du Bois’ idea of abolition-democracy to include the entire “prison industrial complex”, which includes police. Davis writes with the belief that systems created in order to uphold racism and capitalism cannot be reformed or redeemed in any way. Instead they must be torn down and something new must be put in their place. Du Bois and Davis both agree that there are institutions in our society, like police and prisons that were created to uphold white supremacy and keep Black people and other marginalized groups in a state

of subjugation. Following this line of thinking, the only way for those groups to ever truly be free, is to abolish those systems in their entirety.

Abolition Today

Abolition and Current Events

While the abolitionist movement has been around quite a long time, and abolitionist theory has been around even longer, abolition has recently entered the public sphere and has even made national headlines. The recent widespread interest in the police abolition movement seems to have begun in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 after the police murder of 18 year old Michael Brown. The police officer shot Brown a total of six times, many while his hands were up in surrender. Brown's murder led to an uprising in Ferguson, which included weeks of dangerous riots. These riots lead to hundreds of arrests and even more police violence in the form of riot control. Many of the protests and riots began a call to "disarm, disempower, and disband the police." After similar occurrences in Baltimore, Charlotte, and Milwaukee, more people began to realize that the problems with police are systemic rather than individual. As more riots and uprisings continued to happen, more people learned about the history and function of the police. More people began to learn about the police abolition movement, and started to see how we could live in a world without police (McDowell 2018)..

Reform to Abolition

Critics of police abolition argue that police departments and policing in the U.S. as a whole can be reformed. Reformists believe that the history of policing in the United States doesn't affect the way it operates today, and that the institution can be preserved as long as some things are changed. However, as previously stated, the professionalization

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of police didn't happen until the government decided to reform police departments.

Angela Davis once said, "The history of prison is a history of prison reform", and the same can be said about police.

One of the more recent reforms in policing takes the form of officer worn body cameras. Body cameras are meant to be worn on the uniforms of police officers, and record their activities throughout their shifts. The use of body cameras has its origins in the United Kingdom in 2005, and was slowly adopted by some police departments in the U.S. Body cameras did not become widespread in the U.S. until 2014 after the Ferguson uprising. Police departments nationwide started purchasing body cameras and implementing them in their work in order to keep an uprising from happening in their own cities (Norwood 2020). Currently, only seven states have laws mandating the use of body cameras by police departments. Prior to May 2021, South Carolina was the only state with such a law (Widgery). While there is not much research about the effect of body cameras on racialized police violence, a study out of Washington, D.C. found that body cameras had an insignificant effect on officer's behavior, and determined that body cameras should not be expected to make huge changes in policing (Coppock 2017). Body cameras also do produce a large difference in accountability when the footage shows officer misconduct. When and if body camera footage is released to the public depends on the jurisdiction, which is also in charge of how the footage is released, what edits are made and how much the public is allowed to see (Norwood 2020).

Other ideas for police reform revolve around further training. Implicit bias training, and de escalation training are a few examples of those recommended training. Implicit bias is attitudes or stereotypes that affect the actions and decisions people make,

often without even realizing they are promoted by bias. The idea behind implicit bias training for police officers is that they have implicit biases that cause them to act violently toward certain people (usually minorities), and those biases can be trained out of them. It usually takes the form of seminar style classes that teach about the psychology behind implicit bias and how to overcome it so that it doesn't affect their work in the field. There hadn't been much research into the effectiveness of implicit bias training until 2018 when a study was conducted on officers in the New York City Police Department. The study recorded the attitudes and behaviors of police officers within the NYPD before and after the training. They found that the officers seemed to have more awareness of implicit bias, and expressed more willingness to change it after taking the training. However, the study found no significant change in the officers behavior when looking at the race of people who were arrested or had interactions with officers after the training. The researchers declared the findings as "null", where they did not prove that implicit bias training changes officer behavior, but they could not definitively disprove it either (Kaste 2020)

Like implicit bias training, there is not much research on the effectiveness of de escalation training for police officers. De escalation is known as an alternative to the use of force, where instead of physically assaulting someone with a taser, pepper spray, baton, or gun, officers find ways to communicate with people so that everyone feels safe. Whether it is out of fear or other environmental factors, in many situations police are the ones who escalate a situation. As soon as an officer pulls out a weapon because they feel unsafe, the situation becomes more dangerous and potentially lethal. Only 17% of police departments in the U.S. currently have their officers undergo some form of conflict

resolution training. What counts as “de escalation training” varies widely as well. There is no federal regulation of police training, so departments can largely implement whatever training they choose (Schumaker 2020).

An example of a city that has instituted reforms like these is Minneapolis, MN. Five years before the murder of George Floyd, with nationwide uprisings against police violence and their own history with violence, MPD was under pressure to institute new reforms. The police department implemented: body cameras, implicit bias training, de-escalation training, more diversity in leadership, and stricter use-of-force rules. Then, they funded a \$4.5 million project that used psychology and data collection in an attempt to fix the relationship between the community and police (Vitale 2020). Despite all of the efforts for reform, Minneapolis police department still has a reputation for violence. Police have used force against black people at seven times the rate it has been used against white people in the last five years (Bazelon 2020). In the last year alone officers with the MPD have been responsible for the deaths of George Floyd and Daunte Wright, both of whom were unarmed at the time of their death.

As seen in Minneapolis, reforms often require more money being given to police budgets. For abolitionists, this is the exact opposite of what needs to happen. When cities continue to put more money into policing, they take away what could be given to other programs. There are some reforms, however, that could potentially be steps toward abolition. For some, defunding the police is considered a reform, and it is one that abolitionists support. The money given to police budgets for reform efforts could be given to education, mental health, food and other social programs that help the community. In many cities, defunding the police takes the form of leaving job vacancies

unfilled, which reduces the size of the police department and makes them require less funding (Vitale 2020).

Another popular reform that doesn't put more money directly into the hands of police is civilian oversight. The idea behind civilian oversight is that making police accountable to the members of the community they serve will make them less likely to use violence against them. Civilian oversight usually takes the form of committees composed of local community leaders. These committees oversee budget changes, hear complaints, and hold officers accountable when their misconduct comes to light. These committees require funding, but that money does not go directly to police for them to do whatever they choose with it. The problem that many jurisdictions have with implementing civilian oversight is that police departments, unions, and even individual officers disapprove of it. As a result, many boards that are meant for civilian oversight have no investigative authority, cannot access internal affairs files, and have no standing to even recommend discipline against officers. Police unions and departments argue that civilian oversight is not necessary because departments already have internal affairs investigators, and that civilians do not have the expertise to judge officer conduct (Abelson 2021). However, outsiders' perspectives on policing can be important, especially when it comes to discipline. Taking investigations of misconduct and officer discipline out of the hands of law enforcement is an important step toward accountability. Civilian oversight is also important in that it gives power back to the community, which is one of the main goals of the abolition movement. Reforms can be avenues for abolition, as long as they do not strengthen police departments. It is important that we

begin to take power and funding away from the police, so that eventually we will be able to live in a world without them.

Moving Toward a World Without Police

First Steps

When it comes to police abolition, it is important to acknowledge that it cannot and is not intended to happen all at once. The U.S. will not wake up one morning to a country without police. There are a few steps that are generally agreed upon by abolitionist theorists as those that must first be taken in order to eventually live in a world where police have not simply vanished, but are obsolete.

Defund the Police

Defunding the police is widely considered to be the first step toward a world without them. As previously stated, defunding the police can be seen as police reform. Defunding the police is pretty much exactly what it sounds like. Taking funds away from police budgets and putting them toward other programs. In 2017, state and local governments spent \$115 billion on police budgets (Asher 2020). The amount spent on policing has tripled in the last 40 years, despite research that shows that more police funding does not actually reduce crime (Thomas 2019). Many abolitionists point to defunding as means to abolition, where the money taken from police budgets is put toward programs that address the root causes of crime and poverty. Education, healthcare, and social welfare programs are some of the places the money could be invested. By funding these programs and allowing them to take on more responsibility, the need for police is greatly diminished. Many cities have already begun reducing police budgets and putting the money into these programs. After the uprisings in 2020 for the murder of

George Floyd, police budgets were cut by \$840 million nationwide, while an additional \$160 million was invested in community services (Levin 2021). An example of this is in Austin, Texas, where \$20 million was directly cut from the police budget while \$80 million was moved from the police department when certain responsibilities were removed from law enforcement. These funds were then put toward mental health responders, community medics, services for the homeless, food access, and other programs that address the needs of the communities in Austin.

Invest in Social Programs and Community Development

When looking at all of the things that police are responsible for, one may realize that society asks police to do far too much. In our society, police officers are often meant to function as social workers, mental health specialists, traffic monitors, and also do the things required of them for “public safety”. Usually, police officers are not properly trained in handling mental health crises, or de-escalation tactics that can save lives. Also, many of these cases simply do not require the services of someone with a gun and the legal right to use it in lethal ways. Several recent police murders have started as domestic violence calls, chases, and traffic stops (Eligon 2021). After being stopped for a traffic violation, Philando Castile informed the officer that he was licensed to carry a firearm, and that he had one in his car. When Castile reached for his wallet, the officer shot him five times at close range, killing him. The officer was later acquitted of all charges. If it hadn’t been an armed officer pulling Castile over for a traffic violation, he would still be alive today. Simple, non life threatening situations can very quickly turn lethal when fearful, armed officers are allowed to respond to them. This is why abolitionists often

point to the funding of social programs and community development as an alternative to policing.

After defunding police departments, the money would then be used to fund programs that are meant to target the root causes of most crime: mental health treatment, education, drug rehabilitation, housing, and poverty relief. The money can also go toward the training of community members in de-escalation and other safety measures. One of the rallying cries of the abolitionist movement, “We keep us safe!” aims to create a sense of trust and family within communities. Many believe that the safest communities are those without police, and that crime is reduced in communities that learn to depend on and trust each other with their safety. Community engagement is important to this end; when we stop fearing our neighbors and instead begin to see them and ourselves as part of a community, we can learn to trust each other (Vitale 2020).

Reinvesting funds in social programs and community building will decrease the need for police in the first place, since most of what police do is enforce laws that criminalize poverty and mental health issues. Social workers or trained community members could do mental health checks when someone needs help. Addicts can enter drug rehabilitation programs for free, instead of being arrested and put in jail. These programs would work much in the same way that emergency services work now. The only difference is that instead of sending the police, a social worker or community member would be dispatched to help. All of these solutions take the responsibility of nonviolent crime away from the police and give it to more qualified and safer options (Kaba 2020).

Conclusions

A world without police would look very different from the one we live in today. However, it is also one where people are not murdered or assaulted by police officers. The world without police that abolitionists imagine is one where police are obsolete. Police in the United States were created for two reasons: to protect capital, and uphold racist systems. Although there have been a lot of reforms over the years, it is clear from recent events that police largely still work to serve that same purpose. A world much different from ours is possible, we just have to be willing to look past what we know and past what feels comfortable. There will always be those who claim that inherently unequal institutions in our society can not be changed, and there will always be those who are willing to maintain those institutions because it benefits them. But a better world is possible. We just need to be willing to imagine it.

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