

OUR COLUMNISTS

WE SHOULD STILL DEFUND THE POLICE

Cuts to public services that might mitigate poverty and promote social mobility have become a perpetual excuse for more policing.

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Illustration by Jamiel Law

This summer's uprising has forced a reckoning within the United States about the deep imprint of racism on our society. The public lynching of George Floyd pierced the veil of segregation that typically shrouds the realities in which millions of African-Americans live—straining under the mounting weight of Black death. Tens of thousands of African-Americans killed by the rapid spread of COVID-19, the taped execution of Ahmaud Arbery by two white men in Georgia, the reports of Breonna

Taylor's brutal killing by Louisville police, and then Floyd's horrifying murder in Minneapolis brought home for a broader public the police state that exists in Black America.

By June, the persistence and duration of the protests had produced historic changes in white people's perceptions. A national poll recorded an unprecedented shift in opinion: seventy-one per cent of whites said that they think racism and discrimination are a "big problem" in the United States, and fifty-five per cent said that the anger of the protests was fully justified. In a different poll, sixty per cent expressed support for the Black Lives Matter movement. This sea change in opinion was mirrored by a wave of public gestures of racial reconciliation, as a host of corporate executives acknowledged—if not accepted genuine responsibility for—their roles in sustaining regimes of racial inequality.

Nascar renounced the flying of the Confederate flag at its events. Juneteenth, long an informal day of celebrations among some African-Americans, was suddenly institutionalized as a paid holiday. Former President George W. Bush condemned "systemic racism." At one level, the rapid, reflexive default to offering symbolic recognition of racism was quite typical. No other country engages in the cavernous nothingness of the fake apology as frequently as the United States. In the case of Black Americans, it is most recognizable in the form of big-sounding civil-rights legislation that is eventually, as the historian Leon Litwack has written, "compromised, deferred and undone."

It is clearly a craven gesture when multibillion-dollar corporations claim that "Black lives matter," even as they refuse their Black workers hazard pay, paid time off, or a living wage. Nevertheless, these elite searches for absolution from the sin of "systemic racism" have reaffirmed that racism is not only about burning crosses and the N-word: it is also present in the housing market, in institutions of higher education, in the job market, and most certainly in policing and the criminal-justice system. In this moment, when both the coronavirus pandemic and the uprising are laying bare structural flaws in U.S. society, there has been a renewed discussion of structural remedies. This is why "defund the police"—a demand that only a marginal handful dared to put forward just months ago—has become a central slogan of the reëmergent B.L.M. movement.

The echoes of the nineteen-sixties' freedom struggles are easy to find. Then, as now, Black revolutionaries, including Martin Luther King, Jr., countered racist claims that poverty and social marginalization were the products of domestic dysfunction specific to Black families. In doing so, they made room for a deeper interrogation of the Black condition in the United States. Then as now, radicals stepped into that space and linked Black poverty to pervasive racial discrimination from public schools to employment opportunities to the availability of good housing. They also showed that there were financial interests that benefitted from maintaining Black inequality. Black radicals described the financial plight of ordinary Black people as evidence that their segregated communities were "colonies" within the U.S. "Internal colonialism," as some referred to the particular oppressive conditions faced by Black people, could be found in white landlords charging exorbitant rents for rat-infested apartments and in rent-to-own stores demanding unconscionable interest rates, all because African-Americans were a captured market, isolated by relentless residential segregation.

In response to this organized theft, the Black radicals Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton coined the term "institutional racism" in their seminal book "Black Power," published in 1967. Carmichael and Hamilton distinguished between "individual" acts of racism and the dispassionate "institutional" variety, in which the attitudes of the perpetrators were less important than the outcomes in the lives of ordinary Black people. They describe institutional racism as "less overt, far more subtle, less identifiable in terms of *specific* individuals committing the acts. But it is no less destructive of human life." Carmichael and Hamilton went on to

describe how institutional racism kept “black people locked in dilapidated slum tenements, subject to the daily prey of exploitative landlords, merchants, loan sharks and discriminatory real estate agents. The society either pretends it does not know of this latter situation, or is in fact incapable of doing anything meaningful about it.”

The recognition of institutional racism as the controlling factor in Black inequality, rather than some pernicious “culture of poverty,” pointed to the need for institutional solutions. This was the backdrop to the Johnson Administration’s vast expansion of the federal government. From 1963 through 1968, Congress, at the President’s urging, passed nearly two hundred pieces of legislation as part of the War on Poverty and the Great Society. From the Department of Housing and Urban Development to Head Start to food stamps and Medicare, these programs created a bottom through which average citizens could not fall. Spending on anti-poverty programs grew by tens of billions of dollars during the nineteen-sixties, producing dramatic declines in the number of people living in poverty across the country. By the early seventies, the poverty rate had dropped to eleven per cent, from a high of twenty-two per cent in 1959, when the federal government began keeping track.

The big spending of the era was not limited to eradicating poverty. By the mid-sixties, crime rates had begun to tick upward for a variety of reasons, including how crime was counted and reported. Black uprisings against racism and police brutality contributed to the rising rates, as did the continuing Black migration into cities that offered no meaningful employment opportunities. The rising rate of crime also meant a greater police presence, creating a greater likelihood for police abuse and violence. By 1964, even as Democrats were celebrating the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the legal end to Jim Crow in the South, frustrations in the epicenters of northern Black life began to boil over. That summer, Harlem and Philadelphia exploded in revolt against unemployment, low-paying jobs, poor housing, and ever-present police brutality. There were hundreds of arrests and millions of dollars in property damage, announcing a new stage in the movement for Black rights inside and outside of the South. As the rebellions against urban conditions accelerated, President Johnson turned to law enforcement to regain control of imploding cities. More and better trained police, both Democrats and Republicans believed, was a solution.

On March 8, 1965, the day after the historic “Bloody Sunday” march on Selma, Alabama, led by the late John Lewis, Johnson introduced new legislation that was aimed at using federal dollars to beef up law enforcement across the country. Despite the nationally televised brutal beating of civil-rights activists by Alabama state troopers a day earlier, on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, Johnson focussed his comments on crime in cities. “No right is more elemental to our society than the right to personal security, and no right needs more urgent protection,” he said.

By the end of the sixties, the Johnson Administration and the incoming Nixon Administration had converged on a depiction of the Black, urban rebellions as Black lawlessness that would require more professionalized police and intense law enforcement. As the historian Elizabeth Hinton pointed out in her 2016 book, “From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime,” even as liberal local and national leaders decried the root causes of crime, they also relied on the expanding powers of law enforcement to quell the protests that erupted in response to the lack of meaningful opportunities in cities. Even the Kerner Commission—which advocated for a vast expansion of government programs in order to remedy the racial inequality that was fuelling the uprisings, in a report that was the quintessence of big-government liberalism—called for the exponential growth of police forces in urban areas, warned that Black youth were the source of a pending crime wave, and advised methods of riot control. Declarations of “Law and Order,” which had been the white South’s bellicose response to “Freedom Now,” became the establishment’s rejoinder to “Black Power.” But, more importantly, Nixon bemoaned the riots as the spawn of the Great Society and the root of a disintegrating social order. His 1968 speech accepting the Republican Party’s Presidential nomination pulled these different strands together. “Tonight,

it is time for some honest talk about the problem of order in the United States,” he said. “Let those who have the responsibility to enforce our laws, and our judges who have the responsibility to interpret them, be dedicated to the great principles of civil rights. But let them also recognize that the first civil right of every American is to be free from domestic violence, and that right must be guaranteed in this country.” He continued, “We have been deluged by government programs for the unemployed, programs for the cities, programs for the poor. And we have reaped from these programs an ugly harvest of frustration, violence, and failure across the land.”

Johnson’s, and then Nixon’s, descriptions of the Black insurgency as lawless disorder pivoted the national focus away from systemic racism and toward crime. As the political scientist Naomi Murakawa has pointed out, “the United States did not face a crime problem that was racialized; it faced a race problem that was criminalized.”

Crime was used as a political tool to deflect attention away from the causes of the riots; at the same time, it was also a reality in the lives of the Black working class. In the early seventies, the long postwar economic boom gave way to an economic downturn, causing more suffering and desperation. From 1972 to 1975, Black unemployment rose from ten per cent to nearly fifteen per cent. During that same brief period, federal statistics suggest that there were nearly four million more violent crimes committed, which led to a palpable desire in Black communities for more to be done—including, as the legal scholar James Forman, Jr., has explained, more policing. Funds that were siphoned from the dwindling Great Society could have mitigated the worst aspects of the recession that lasted from 1973 to 1975, including rising rates of crime. Numerous polls taken in the aftermath of riots indicated that a majority believed that better jobs, housing, and opportunities were a remedy to inequality—and that crime was one of its key expressions. However, as the affluence of the sixties turned into recession and stagnation in the seventies, the politics of racial resentment gained new traction and defined solutions to ongoing social crisis.

The turn to the politics of punishment was not a political gimmick that would change from one Administration to the next. It marked a transition in all of U.S. politics. This turn could be measured in the growing reluctance of Democrats to embrace social welfare and the “root causes” explanation for crime. It could also be gauged by changing spending patterns across the entire criminal-justice system.

From 1977 to 2017, state and local spending on police increased from forty-two billion dollars to a hundred and fifteen billion dollars, adjusted for inflation. This skyrocketing increase continued even after crime rates began to fall in the early nineties. Today, the Center for Popular Democracy found, Chicago, Oakland, Houston, Minneapolis, Orlando, and Detroit each spend at least thirty per cent of their general, or discretionary, fund on their police departments. Police-spending figures do not include the hundreds of millions of dollars paid by municipalities across the country to settle lawsuits connected to police violence. ABC News reported that, in the last year alone, lawsuits against police cost the public more than three hundred million dollars. For many city leaders, it has sadly become the cost of doing business.

The Democratic Party has spent forty years governing in fear of the accusation that it is “soft” on crime. As a result, in both national and local politics, the Party has championed “tough on crime” policies that prioritize police budgets over other programs that are essential to the fulfillment of racial justice. It is no coincidence that Philadelphia, which has the highest poverty rate of any major U.S. city, has had no public hospital since 1977. Meanwhile, the city spends hundreds of millions of dollars annually on its police force, even as crime has gone into decline.

In the days after the uprising boiled over into the streets of Philadelphia, Mayor Jim Kenney had planned to go ahead with a nineteen-million-dollar increase in funding to the police department, despite the fact that he also planned to make three hundred and seventy million dollars' worth of cuts to the city's budget. Kenney's proposed cuts included a twenty-one-per-cent reduction in anti-violence initiatives and an eighteen-per-cent cut to the Police Advisory Committee, which oversees complaints about police brutality. He also planned to axe millions more from affordable-housing programs, even as COVID-19 has created enormous housing precariousness for poor and working-class Black renters and owners.

But the uprising in Philadelphia stopped the Kenney administration in its tracks. On June 6th, tens of thousands of people jammed the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, in Center City, for a hastily organized demonstration against the budget under the banner of Black Lives Matter. The largest protest in Philadelphia in years, it forced the mayor to rescind the police-budget increase and to restore some cuts to youth programs. But even with these changes the Philadelphia Police still walked away with seven hundred and twenty-seven million dollars, the largest chunk of money in the municipal budget, and no layoffs, even as hundreds of city staffers lost their jobs because of the pandemic. Kenney claimed to be in solidarity and sympathy with the demonstrators, but it is in city budgets that you can really see if "Black Lives Matter" to the people who govern them.

The Floyd uprisings have created new urgency in the struggle for genuine safety in working-class Black communities, highlighting the need for well-resourced public services, good and plentiful jobs, and secure and beautiful housing without the menacing presence of the police. But creating this other world is complicated by the reality of crime and violence in the existing one. As the uprising erupted, so did a dramatic rise in gun violence in Black communities across the country. In Philadelphia, shootings are up nearly thirty per cent from a year ago; twenty-three people were shot over the course of twenty-four hours during the Fourth of July weekend. In Atlanta that weekend, thirty-one people were shot in eleven different incidents, leaving five dead. In New York City, there were sixty-four shootings during the Independence Day holiday, and ten deaths. In Chicago, the shootings began almost simultaneously with the anti-brutality rebellion in the streets. Six days after the murder of George Floyd, on May 31st, eighteen people were murdered in Chicago, most of them Black. Never before in the sixty years during which such statistics have been kept had that number of people been killed by gun violence in a single twenty-four-hour period.

Black Chicagoans and African-Americans elsewhere who suffer the brunt of gun violence have been marching, organizing, and speaking out against the crime that threatens to devour their neighborhoods. Their efforts are typically ignored, because they don't fit with the conventional "law and order" wisdom. Instead, Donald Trump and a host of right-wing bigots have twisted the scale of Black death in Chicago into a racial slur. For them, the pain in Black communities from reckless gun violence is secondary, if it registers at all. Trump and his Republican Party cohort don't actually care about the life and death of Black people in the United States—that much has been obvious for many years. Trump once described Baltimore as a "disgusting, rat and rodent-infested mess," where "no human being would want to live." The tenor of that statement made clear that any city with a sizable Black population could be inserted for Baltimore. For more than fifty years, Republicans have been the chief champions of policies that increased the tribulations that have become synonymous with Black life. But most African-Americans know this—which is why, when the Republican Party lectures Black America with the stench of white supremacy on its breath, its speech falls mostly on deaf ears.

Beyond the exploitation of Black death for cheap political gain by the right, the rhetoric of "Black-on-Black crime" muddies the important distinction between interpersonal violence and state-sanctioned violence. To clarify this difference is not to minimize

the deep despair and loss that accompany the senseless murders causing fear in the Black neighborhoods of Chicago and other cities. Instead, calling attention to the police's presence and behavior in these communities underlines the violence and intimidation that pervade them in every respect.

Police brutality has been the single most important political rallying cry across Black communities for decades, because it is the most visceral evidence of the second-class citizenship of poor and working-class African-Americans. When the police can stop and question you, frisk and beat you, potentially arrest and occasionally murder you, then you are not an equal citizen. The consequences of Black encounters with the police and the broader criminal-justice system are life-altering and often life-shattering. Of course, the loss of a loved one from gun violence is also catastrophic, but it comes without one element that is specific to encounters with state violence: the abrogation of fundamental human and social rights.

This is not hyperbole: it is the lived experience of ordinary Black Chicagoans, among others. The Chicago Police Department has a notorious history among African-Americans in the city, from its participation in the assassination of the Black Panther Fred Hampton, in 1969, to the police torture scandal that spanned the nineteen-seventies through nineteen-nineties, for which city officials finally took responsibility in 2016, when reparations were paid to the men who survived. The legacy of racism and brutality continues today. Consider the [Chicago Police Accountability Task Force report](#), from 2016, which was commissioned by the mayor at the time, Rahm Emanuel, after the killing of a seventeen-year-old named Laquan McDonald. According to the task force, McDonald's death

exposed deep and longstanding fault lines between black and Latino communities on the one hand and the police on the other arising from police shootings to be sure, but also about daily, pervasive transgressions that prevent people of all ages, races, ethnicities and gender across Chicago from having basic freedom of movement in their own neighborhoods. Stopped without justification, verbally and physically abused, and in some instances arrested, and then detained without counsel—that is what we heard about over and over again.

The investigators came to this stunning conclusion: "[CPD's own data](#) gives validity to the widely held belief the police have no regard for the sanctity of life when it comes to people of color."

It has become easy for those on the right, and for many of the Democratic Party leaders in Chicago, to reduce the issues of crime and violence to bad actors, even including an occasional police officer. It is much harder to acknowledge and address how Black communities have been strangled by racial segregation, housing discrimination, and other exploitative real-estate practices for more than a hundred years. From one administration to the next, Chicago's city government has done nothing but make a bad situation worse. From closing public schools to detonating public housing to shuttering mental-health clinics, the city's leaders have abandoned the Black poor and working class. [About thirty-two per cent](#) of Black Chicagoans live under the official poverty line—a number that has scarcely changed in [more than fifty years](#), and which is six points higher than the national poverty rate for Black people. Chicago is a wealthy city, but its spoils do not go to those who need it most.

The city [spends more per capita on police today](#) than it did fifty years ago, but Black Chicago is not any safer—and the toll of interpersonal and state violence is being borne out in a crisis of mental health. A small 2017 study found that [twenty-nine per cent](#) of Black women in one South Side neighborhood were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, while another seven per cent were found to have many of its symptoms. A [more recent study](#) in Chicago has shown that the overlapping effects of police violence and community violence increase social isolation, loneliness, and hypervigilance. All of these untreated factors add to the stress and unhealthy conditions that have made African-Americans susceptible to the worst outcomes of COVID-19. Meanwhile,

Black suicides in Chicago in 2020 have already exceeded the total number of such cases from 2019. Instead of policing, these communities need treatment and care and the resources to recover from decades of racism and institutional neglect.

Successive city governments have done little to make Chicago more livable for ordinary Black people, and instead each new administration adds its new twist on the old formula of investing in police instead of the neighborhoods that need it. The failure to address the desperate need in Chicago's Black working-class communities has pushed people to leave. Between 2000 and 2016, more than two hundred thousand Black Chicagoans fled the city on net. Against the conventional wisdom that they are trying to escape "Black-on-Black" crime, consider that, of the Black people who left between 2012 and 2016, sixty per cent of them did not have jobs.

The coronavirus pandemic revealed, and the Floyd uprising has confirmed, that big, structural interventions are the bare minimum for making Black lives matter in the United States. The call to defund the police captures both the enormity of the crisis and the need for an enormous response. It draws attention to the continuity of police funding even as other parts of the public sector have been depleted. Cities across the country are a living testament to this, with privatization and other market-oriented solutions summoned to fill the gaps. Public housing has been replaced by for-profit housing; public schools and hospitals have been closed and turned into condos; library hours have been reduced to the bare minimum. Youth and jobs programs are from a distant era. And, all the while, police departments remain almost entirely immune to layoffs and austerity that all other public workers are subjected to. In fact, the cuts to public services that might mitigate poverty and promote social mobility become a perpetual excuse for more policing.

When Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez recently suggested that a crime spurt in New York City might have to do with the financial strain of the pandemic, she was greeted incredulously. She continued, "Maybe this has to do with the fact that people aren't paying their rent and are scared to pay their rent, and so they go out and they need to feed their child and they don't have money, so they're put in a position where they feel like they either need to shoplift some bread or go hungry that night." She went on to say that "the idea that violent crime is somehow immune, or totally separated, from the economic situation that people are going through right now, I think that's mistaken." She continued, "It's true, the desperation, even if we're not talking about petty theft—there is a ladder that escalates into violent crime that is very much connected to the economic situation of a given community."

Naturally, Ocasio-Cortez's remarks caused a frenzy on the right. The White House took the opportunity to denounce the demand to "defund the police," while calling Ocasio-Cortez "preposterous." Representative Ted Yoho, of Florida, confronted Ocasio-Cortez on the Capitol steps, claiming that she was "out of her freaking mind" for linking poverty to crime. He called her a "fucking bitch" as he walked away from her, channelling the misogyny that is typically tightly bound to the hatred of the poor. But it isn't just the right wing. The Democratic governor of New York, Andrew Cuomo, also chimed in, saying that it was "factually impossible" to blame the crime wave in the city on fears of evictions. Cuomo seemed to think that because there is a moratorium on evictions in New York, poor people no longer worry about how they will pay their rent.

Making matters decidedly worse, many consequences of poverty have been turned into crimes, including sleeping in cars or public places, panhandling for money or food, public urination, shoplifting, and many other things that poor people do when they do not have the privacy and discretion of their own residence. The criminalization of poverty deepens its inescapability by putting the poor into direct contact with the police.

These developments have outsized impacts on African-Americans, who are far more likely than whites to be poor. Arrest records and felony convictions entrap African-Americans, in particular, in a suffocating chamber of low-wage or illegal work, underscoring a sense of meaninglessness that pervades the Black Lives Matter generation. In Jesmyn Ward's memoir, "Men We Reaped," she describes her younger brother's fruitless efforts to carve out a life on the Gulf Coast of Mississippi as a "cycle of futility." Ward writes,

He never got a legitimate job, perhaps dissuaded by the experiences of the young men in the neighborhood, most of whom worked until they were fired or they quit because minimum wage came too slowly and disappeared too quickly. They sold dope between jobs until they could find more work as a convenience store clerk or a janitor or a landscaper.

Her brother was killed by a drunk driver at nineteen. Ward concludes, "He saw no American dream, no fairy tale ending, no hope."

Ward's memoir follows the life and death of her brother and four other young Black men, all trapped in similar cycles of futility that ultimately lead to their untimely deaths. When this elemental hopelessness contributes to premature deaths among white people, it is universally viewed more empathically. When trying to understand the phenomena leading to the recent decline of life expectancy among ordinary white men and women, social scientists coined the term "deaths of despair." These deaths, most immediately caused by opioid addiction, alcoholism, and suicide, have come to be understood as related to deepening personal instability and insecurity amid a social crisis. Compared to an earlier era of cocaine use and addiction, opioid addiction today is more likely to be regarded as a public-health problem, and the public discussion surrounding the addiction often emphasizes treatment over imprisonment.

Some elected officials mischaracterize the need to shift funds away from the police, saying that resources must be redirected to social services because police are being asked to respond to crimes stemming from drug abuse, homelessness, and mental illness. Representative Karen Bass, a Democrat from Los Angeles and the chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, who described "defund the police" as "probably one of the worst slogans ever," recently asked, rhetorically, why "police officers have to clean up society's problems." She continued, "Why doesn't a city deal with its social problems so not so much money would have to go to law enforcement?" But it is simply not true that police have become caretakers, mental-health professionals, and social workers. To make such a claim degrades these professions, which require years of studying and training for the purpose of improving people's lives. Bass's mischaracterization also sows confusion about what the police are generally doing in such cases—which is arresting people who are in crisis or just poor. They are not intervening for the sake of reducing harm.

Meanwhile, the despair that clouds the lives of ordinary Black people is ignored or pathologized. The second leading cause of death for Black children and teens aged ten to nineteen is suicide; their suicide rate is rising faster than that of any other racial or ethnic group in the U.S. From 1991 to 2017, suicide attempts rose by seventy-three per cent for Black adolescents of both sexes. Black people have rates of drug abuse and alcoholism that are almost on par with white Americans, yet the alienation that typically underlies their drug use rarely gets the sympathetic portrayals afforded to white America. Even in sickness and sadness, Black people are viewed and treated differently. Instead of investigating the underlying causes of a spike in shootings that overwhelmingly affects young Black men, we revert back to simplistic and ultimately racist explanations that dwell on the defective Black individual. In doing so, our society renders many young Black men and women invisible and ultimately disposable. There is no empathy, only policing and punishment.

The political fusion of race and crime plays a critical role in manufacturing racist ideology here and abroad. The overwhelming presence of police in presumed Black spaces—from typical police patrols in neighborhoods to officers' menacing and intimidating role in public schools to their offices in public housing—mark these places as sites of disorder and therefore in need of the hard hand of the law. This hyper-surveillance of Black communities then produces a disproportionate number of arrests, which legitimize calls for even more aggressive policing and more punishment. These are the daily policing practices that conflate race and crime, thereby criminalizing African-Americans. This is what makes policing institutionally racist in the United States.

In 1960, James Baldwin wrote that “the only way to police a ghetto is to be oppressive.” He went on to write, of policemen,

Their very presence is an insult, and it would be, even if they spent their entire day feeding gumdrops to children. They represent the force of the white world, and that world's real intentions are, simply, for that world's criminal profit and ease, to keep the black man corralled up here, in his place. The badge, the gun in the holster, and the swinging club make vivid what will happen should his rebellion become overt.

The practice of intimidation is so deep in the marrow of American policing that it exists whether the administrator or officer is Black or white. Perhaps the most significant change in U.S. policing since the nineteen-sixties era of reform has been the recruitment and training of thousands of Black officers across the country. But the multiracial character of post-civil-rights policing has not meant less racism, brutality, or arrest. Instead, it has coincided with the rise of mass incarceration and the explosion of Black Lives Matter.

Implicit-bias training and other kinds of “cultural competency” are utter failures in stopping rampant police racism and the objective of social control. All the training in the world cannot change the deployment of police in some neighborhoods versus others. It cannot transform the cultural assumptions about who commits crime. Previous encounters with the criminal-justice system already mark people in ways that make them vulnerable to even more encounters with police. In her book “The New Jim Crow,” Michelle Alexander states that, in Chicago, “an astonishing 80 percent of the adult black male workforce” have a felony record. It is as if only Black people commit crime. But it only looks that way when the police are deployed in certain neighborhoods to surveil people who fit the composite of a criminal. These arrests, and eventual prosecutions, constitute what Alexander means by the phrase “New Jim Crow”—widespread social death, as the wholesale exclusion of the formerly incarcerated is legitimized.

“Defund the police,” and even calls to abolish the police, seem like reasonable propositions when the institution appears immune to any more moderate reform. But in the immediate aftermath of the Floyd uprising, nervous liberals and smug conservatives agreed that “defunding the police” was a bridge too far for most Americans. The American Enterprise Institute pointed to polls declaring its unpopularity, especially a poll in which sixty-one per cent of Black voters said that they opposed “defunding” the police, even though the poll's only question with that response rate asked about eliminating and replacing police departments. Yet in that same poll, sixty-two per cent of Black people and thirty-seven per cent of whites said that they favored “cutting some funding from police departments in your community and shifting it to social services.”

This reflects the contradictory views of African-Americans, in particular, as well as the newness of this iteration of the B.L.M. movement. The political leaders of our country have spent the better part of fifty years trying to convince the public that the biggest threat to their lives is the possibility that they might become the victim of a violent crime. Those ideas will not just melt away in a matter of weeks.

The importance of social movements is that they force people to more deeply engage with an issue than they otherwise would. In the case of police brutality, the ubiquity and the duration of the recent protests have forced a much broader layer of society to grapple with the issues that Black people have been mobilizing around for more than a hundred years. Consider the transformation of opinion concerning the B.L.M. movement more generally. Today, several years after its formation, it is finally experiencing wide public support. Now that millions of white people understand the severity of police brutality against Black people, the possibility that they ultimately see the end of policing as a solution is hardly utopian, especially as each passing day seems to bring more visual evidence of the racism and brutality of police across the U.S.

We need to start over. No one should expect that to be a popular conclusion overnight. But neither should anyone conclude that it is unrealistic to defund and eventually abandon an armed layer of agents intent on maintaining a social order that is deeply racist, unequal, and violently deprives ordinary people, especially Black people, of the basic necessities of life.

Defunding the police is the first step in a longer process that may culminate in the end of policing in the United States. The repeated failures of substantive and meaningful reform have brought us to the point where concepts like “defunding” and “abolition” have penetrated mainstream conversations. Their suggestion does not mean that activists are impervious to the violence and crime that exist in working-class communities. Instead, the argument to defund the police begins with the recognition of the relationship between robust funding for police and the consistent lack of adequate funding for the programs and institutions that may have the most impact on improving the quality of life for poor and working-class Black people. In this case, robbing Peter to pay Paul can reduce crime, reduce violence, and reduce the harm that ensues. Bottoming out police budgets will not, on its own, create the resources necessary to build communities anew. But it would shift the balance away from the decades-long orientation on law and order toward treatment and care. The abolition of policing may seem farfetched to some, but, in effect, the racist batter of the police has already been baked. We cannot go back now and decide to take out this or that thing. The whole cake has to be discarded, starting with its most vile ingredient—the presumption of Black criminality and guilt. The reimagining of a just society has inevitably come into conflict with the racist barbarism of American police. We must begin again.



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