

# **What Will It Take to Stop the Police from Killing?**

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We've reached a breaking point. The murders of George Floyd—and Breona Taylor, Tony McDade, and the other Black people whose lives were ended by police *just this month*—are only the latest in a centuries-long string of tragedies. But in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the state is openly treating Black communities as a surplus population to be culled by the virus, the arrogance and senselessness of the murder carried out by Officer Derek Chauvin crossed a line. Supported by hundreds of thousands across the US and beyond, the people of Minneapolis have made it clear that this intolerable situation must end, no matter what it takes.

Since the Ferguson uprising of 2014, considerable attention has focused on racist police killings in the United States. Reformers of many stripes have introduced new policies in hopes of reining in the violence. Yet according to the Police Shootings Database, the police killed *more* people in the US last year than in 2015. If police killings are continuing or even increasing despite widespread public attention and reform efforts, we need to revisit our strategy.

How can we bring an end to racist police murders once and for all?

## **Criminal Charges and Civil Lawsuits**

It's widely known that the chances of individual officers or departments suffering real consequences for killing people, especially Black people, are next to nothing. It makes sense that protestors and grieving families often demand criminal charges against murderous cops—the US criminal legal system offers no other model for “justice,” and by refusing to press charges, the authorities show how little they value Black lives. But locking ordinary people in cages doesn't prevent anti-social activity—and considering that police violence is legitimized by exceptional laws and powerful institutions, this deterrent seems to be even less effective for police. Johannes Mehserle, the officer who murdered Oscar Grant in Oakland in 2008, was one of very few police to serve prison time; yet the 2018 killing of Joshua Pawlik and many other police murders in the region suggest that this precedent has not deterred Bay Area police from fatally shooting people.

Nor do lawsuits seem to make a difference. The family of Justine Damond received a \$20 million settlement after her murder by Minneapolis police—an extremely rare occurrence, likely related to the unusual circumstance of a Black male officer killing a white woman. But forcing the city's taxpayers—some of whom suffer police violence daily—to shell out millions to pay for their murderous activity doesn't work to stop police killings.

If it did, George Floyd would still be alive.

## **Civilian Review Boards and Police Accountability Measures**

Minneapolis already has a civilian review board, but this didn't prevent Chauvin from killing George Floyd. In fact, the review board had failed to impose consequences for any of the eighteen previous complaints made against Chauvin. It also didn't prevent the murders of Justine Damond, Jamar Clark, or any of the other people killed by the city's police.

Police commissioners themselves are now calling for oversight and accountability, likely in hopes of preventing further rioting. This shows how little threat such measures pose to their power.

## Body Cameras and Filming the Police

Most of the police killings that have taken place over the past few years have been carried out by officers wearing body cameras. This hasn't stopped them from killing—and it has almost never resulted in criminal convictions. An independent 2016 Temple University study concluded that on the contrary, the use of wearable body cameras correlated with an *increase* in fatal shootings by police, disproportionately threatening males, young people, and people of color. Other research efforts that have touted the technology's benefits, such as the 2017 University of Nevada Las Vegas study, were conducted in part by police departments looking to save money on complaints.

Although it doesn't seem to reduce killings, body camera footage does put the rest of us in danger, as it provides evidence that prosecutors sympathetic to police can cherry-pick to find ways to blame us when officers attack us.

We don't need more thorough information about what the police are doing. We need to stop them from doing what they do. We're not looking for transparency or accountability. We're looking for a world without police.

-“Cameras Everywhere, Safety Nowhere; Why Police Body Cameras Won't Make Us Safer”

Civilian filming also isn't enough. Derek Chauvin knew he was being filmed, yet he still murdered George Floyd without hesitation. The officers who murdered Philando Castile, Eric Garner, and countless other people weren't stopped by the cameras trained on them. Even if “the whole world is watching,” more surveillance won't make us any safer as long as killer cops can act with impunity.

## Pressuring Politicians

Perhaps we should direct our rage at politicians rather than police, as New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio suggests?

Of course politicians are complicit for their cowardly support for the police. But they're not the ones who harass and bully us every day, who invade our privacy and spy on us, who physically stand between us and the resources we need, who beat and shoot and kill us. In fact, unlike the police with their guns, tear gas, and tanks, the power of politicians is an illusion; it only exists because of the ways we cede our power to make decisions to them. If not for the police protecting their privileges and enforcing their orders, politicians wouldn't matter at all. Without the military, Homeland Security, Secret Service, and armed vigilantes to ensure that we do his bidding, Trump would be nothing more than an especially obnoxious bully. As long as the police regulate everything we can do, directing our anger against politicians will make little impact.

In a time of increasing social tension and volatility, when power structures increasingly rely on brute force rather than the consent of the general population, politicians of all stripes are especially fearful about losing the loyalty of the armed wing of the state. If they don't guarantee police officers impunity, they risk undermining their own power; in an extreme case, they might even be deposed, as we have seen in coups from Chile to Egypt. Why did a Black president with “social justice” credentials stand by and watch as the killers of Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Eric Garner, and so many others got away with murder? Perhaps because it was more important to

Barack Obama to protect the stability of his regime than to pursue justice for racist killings. This makes it even more unlikely that appeals to politicians will make a difference.

## Voting

Should we be registering to vote and making our voices heard in the ballot box, as Atlanta Mayor Keisha Bottoms insists?

Again, what happened in Minneapolis implies that this doesn't work. If a city with a progressive mayor and a city council composed entirely of Democrats and Green Party members still can't prevent out-of-control racist cops from killing people *again and again and again*, there's no reason to believe that voting differently in those elections would have made any difference. Racist police violence is only on the national agenda because the courageous, defiant resistance of people in the streets has put it there. Police murder has never been on the ballot as an item to vote for or against. Their violence is the glue holding together a system we never chose. It won't be votes that abolish it, either. It'll be by action.

## Peaceful Protest

Well then, if direct action is the only way to address police murders, then certainly the most effective way to make change is through strict non-violence, as Martin Luther King Jr.'s granddaughter tells us.

Unfortunately, that's rhetoric, not history. In fact, the civil rights movement drew its successes from a combination of militant direct action, armed self-defense, rioting, and non-violent civil disobedience. King's appeal as a civil rights leader—and the interest politicians today have in promoting his legacy to the exclusion of all others—arose in no small part because he offered an alternative to the threat of ungovernable urban riots and Black Power militancy. Condemning all action that falls outside the paradigm of nonviolence divides movements, protecting the reigning order and concealing the history of how change really happens.

## Riots

If not strictly nonviolent protests, are riots the only way to ensure that police stop killing and are held accountable?

Riots can accomplish many things that peaceful protesting usually does not. They raise the economic and political costs of police violence for the regimes that perpetrate it. They enable marginalized people to meet their needs directly via empowering group action—their needs for collective grieving, for vengeance, even for material goods. They dispel the myth that the police are invulnerable and rupture the illusion of political consensus. They expand the horizons of our collective imagination about what we can do together and how the world could be different.

But riots alone aren't enough, either. While they have forced reluctant authorities to press charges against killer cops—in Oakland, in Ferguson, in Baltimore, and now in Minneapolis—they don't secure convictions, as the court cases in Ferguson and Baltimore make clear. And even if they could discourage further killings by some specific police forces, the consistent rate of police murders over the past five years show that they haven't made a dent in the overall

problem. The flames of Ferguson were just dying down when St. Louis police fatally shot Isaac Holmes, despite the threat of further unrest.

If we have to burn down whole neighborhoods just to get a single officer indicted, that's not a viable program to make the US justice industry accountable. The courage and determination of the rebels in Minneapolis and around the country represents an inspiring first step. But to cut the problem out at the roots, we've got to go deeper.

## So What Do We Do?

If none of the "solutions" that governments, police departments, and some community activists have proposed will suffice, what could put a stop to racist police murders once and for all? It is not easy to answer this question, but we have to ask it in earnest. We have to move into action before the next police killing.

The assumption that Black and Brown lives are expendable is fundamental to all of the institutionalized power structures of our time. We will answer the question of what will work to abolish police murders in practice, through a lifelong process of experimentation—but it is clear that it will require us to abolish or utterly transform all of these power structures. Starting from the model of collective defiance we have seen over the past week, we have to \_ . Here are some long-term objectives \_ stars to navigate by.

### Disarm and abolish the police.

As long as police have weapons and impunity, they will go on killing us. All of our efforts have only made a dent in their impunity; it's time to go all the way. Only when the highway patrol *cannot* end our lives during a routine traffic stop will the terror that so many of us feel every time we see blue lights flashing begin to ease. Only when *no* group of uniformed thugs feels entitled to pin anyone to the ground and ignore his pleas will all of us be free from the threat of becoming the next George Floyd.

Once police are disarmed, it will become clear to everyone how useless they are at the things we think we need them for. When mentally ill people act in ways that seem erratic to others, we need counselors and advocates, not armed gunmen. When romantic partners and neighbors have conflicts, we need people with conflict resolution and de-escalation skills, not violent escalators enforcing a patriarchal agenda. When kids need traffic directed so they can cross the street, we need friendly elders and neighbors who know them, not people toting lethal weapons who have little experience working with children. When we lose things or find things, we need a community center to exchange them, not a precinct. When our cars break down by the side of the road, we need a community of Good Samaritans, not a mercenary looking to write us a ticket. The majority of what the police do is harmful and should be immediately eliminated to make us all safer; much of the rest could be done much better by skilled, unarmed volunteers of good will.

As an institution, policing itself is violent and oppressive to the core. The thousands of murders individual officers perpetrate are just the tip of the iceberg. How can we measure the daily anxiety, the acute terror, the petty humiliations, the impact of family members being kidnapped and shaken down that so many people experience every time they must engage with infuriating arrogance grinning from behind a badge? From their origin in slave patrols to today's high-tech spy drones and predictive policing algorithms, police have never existed to protect us.

It's not a question of bad apples. The entire barrel is rotten.

### **Promote collective self-defense.**

The chant “Who keeps us safe? We keep us safe!” is more than a slogan—it’s a necessity. There is no safety we can count on that is not built on our trust and relationships with each other. To be certain of our safety, we must be able to define for ourselves what risks we face and how to address them together.

Critics argue that it’s naïve to talk about disarming and abolishing the police, citing the aggression and chaos we will supposedly unleash on each other without the violence of the thin blue line to keep us in check. But what’s truly naïve is to continue believing that an institution responsible for killing a thousand people every year is somehow keeping us safe.

Collective self-defense will not be easy, but it’s our only hope. It will mean organizing to prevent the violence of the far right—of those encouraged by Trump to shoot looters and by state governments to run over protestors. It will mean taking responsibility for developing new skills in conflict resolution and new structures for rapid response in times of crisis. The indications that Minneapolis gangs are organizing a truce to collaborate on protecting protestors from far-right violence are encouraging. We will need all of our courage and creativity to develop new approaches that value and protect *all of us*, rather than sacrificing millions of us to be caged or killed in order to secure the safety and property of some.

### **Share resources freely through mutual aid.**

Want to prevent looting? Ensure that everyone has housing, enough to eat, and enough resources to live a dignified life. When they don’t, who can blame them for taking out their rage against those who stand between them and the resources they need?

In Minneapolis, local communities are establishing supply depots where resources redistributed during the riots can be freely shared, both to support the protests and to enable neighbors to live. The COVID-19 crisis has popularized mutual aid networks; the riots are taking them to the next level. The police exist to ensure that resources are distributed not according to need, but according to an archaic system of property rights that benefits those who hoard them for themselves rather than sharing them. The protestors have turned this upside down. Contrary to critics who see looters of a Target as “destroying their own community,” it’s more accurate to say that they have transformed an institution that existed to siphon profits out of their neighborhood to outside investors into a project that actually serves their immediate material needs. Destroying the barriers that separate our communities from the resources we need is one of the most crucial things we can do to transform our society. Abolishing the police is a step towards accomplishing this, while ending the killings they perpetrate.

### **Delegitimize and disempower all the institutions that excuse police murder.**

One of the reasons why cops get away with murder so often is that the Supreme Court has interpreted laws to grant police “qualified immunity” for killing people—which has happened in over half of the cases that reached appellate courts in the past five years. Why should an unrepentant rapist and his cronies be in the position to authorize cops to kill us whenever they

see fit? For that matter, why should they be able to determine whether we can have abortions, or how we can organize unions, or the limits of indigenous sovereignty, or *anything else*?

The persistence of police murder is just one of the risks we engender by relinquishing our power to nine black-robed figures. To ensure our freedom, we must take back our self-determination from the clutches of the courts.

“The more we can delegitimize the authority of Supreme Courts to shape our lives, and the more powerful and creative we can make our alternatives, the less we will have to fear from the Trumps and Kavanaughs of the world. Let’s build a society that enables everyone to engage in genuine self-determination—in which no man can decide what all of us may do with our bodies—in which no state can take away our power to shape our future.”

-“Kavanaugh Shouldn’t Be on the Supreme Court. Neither Should Anyone Else.”

While we’re at it, what about those politicians? If electing new officials can’t stop the police from killing us, what good are they? If we really want to secure our future against the arbitrary power of the authorities, we can’t go half way. As we organize in our neighborhoods to share and distribute resources, let’s lay the groundwork for a new grassroots form of political organization that can exercise power directly without need for representatives. Inspired by the council system in the Kurdish territories of Rojava, the assemblies of the Greek anarchist movement, the student strikes in Montréal, and many other examples, we can build a new world from the bottom up, without politicians at the top to boss us around.

## **To End Police Murder Once and For All**

So what will it take for us to end police murders once and for all? Nothing short of *revolution*.

But that revolution isn’t a distant utopia, or a single spasm in which we storm the Winter Palace. It’s an ongoing process of building relationships, sharing resources, defending ourselves, undoing the interlocking structures of white supremacy, and organizing to meet our needs together without police or politicians—and it’s already happening. It’s time for each and every one of us to choose a side and take a stand. The stakes are high—the life you save might be your own. But as the courageous protestors in Minneapolis and beyond have shown us, not even the power of the police is absolute. Together, we can overcome their violence and build a new world.



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