

Big Dreams and Bold Steps Toward a Police-Free Future

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Police scanners, Tasers, increased data collecting and sharing, SWAT teams, gang injunctions, stop-and-frisk, “quality of life” ticketing – all of these policing reforms have been taken up to improve the quality of policing in the United States. The dominant school of thought on police reform has suggested that reforms like these make for safer communities and that improving policing will allow us to escape its violence.

This orientation toward police reform imagines that documentation, training or oversight might protect us from the harassment, intimidation, beatings, occupation and death that the state employs to maintain social control under the guise of safety. What is missing from this orientation, however, is the recognition of the function of policing in US society: armed protection of state interests. If one sees policing for what it is – a set of practices empowered by the state to enforce law and maintain social control and cultural hegemony through the use of force – one may more easily recognize that perhaps the goal should not be to improve how policing functions but to reduce its role in our lives.

Today, calls for policing reform in the United States are louder and more frequent than they have been for many years. The protest movements fueled by bold, dynamic resistance in Ferguson, Baltimore and other cities across the country have raised awareness about police killings, especially of Black people, and brought new voices and ideas to the fore. Those same movements are also making recommendations about policing reforms. Some recommendations have been broad and ideological such as Ferguson Action’s demand for an “end to all forms of discrimination and the full recognition of our human rights.” Others have involved collecting data and holding hearings, such as Ferguson Action’s demand to call “a Congressional Hearing investigating the criminalization of communities of color, racial profiling, police abuses and torture by law enforcement.” Others, such as the Organization for Black Struggle’s recommendation that police should receive “enhanced personal unarmed combat training” or Campaign Zero’s recommendation that body and dash cameras be required and funded, are more focused on the day-to-day aspects of policing practice. And these examples are merely representative of the range of recommendations currently being circulated.

This wave of reform recommendations comes within the context of an increased public focus on police killings, during a presidential election cycle, and in the age of social media dominance.

Context matters in determining what will be understood as viable or politically advantageous, what is perceived as legitimate and who is accepted as having expertise. And, of course, the media are serving as an amplifier, turning up the volume on certain voices, recommendations and critiques, while rendering others silent.

A reform is merely a change. When people experience harms being done by the systems that govern their interactions, movements and behaviors, some of them will undoubtedly be moved to improve those systems in hopes of reducing that harm. Eager for relief, they craft plans designed to bring that relief quickly and in a way that generates as little resistance as possible. Similarly, they may recommend reforms in reaction to a set of incidents or a pattern of harm of which they are newly aware, suggesting tools or vehicles they imagine are most expedient to address that specific set of incidents or patterns. In the case of law enforcement, if the primary goal is to eliminate deaths at the hands of cops, the focus of reforms may be on the fastest way to curb those deaths by targeting the practices that most frequently lead to fatal incidents.

Making incremental changes to the systems, institutions and practices that maintain systemic oppression and differentially target marginalized communities is essential to shifting power. Taking aim at specific aspects and demanding change helps build power among repressed communities in ways that are more lasting and sustainable. Without a strategic long-term vision for change, however, today's reforms may be tomorrow's tools of repression.

In the 1990s, under the influence of Police Commissioner William Bratton, the New York City Police Department (NYPD) embraced CompStat, a data tracking and analysis system used to monitor incidences of "crime and disorder" precinct by precinct. This system is meant to track, in detail, crime complaints, arrests and summonses, with corresponding locations and times. The information from all the precincts in a jurisdiction is combined and used to generate a weekly report used in management meetings among departments' leadership.

Decreasing crime and increasing officer accountability were just two of the benefits CompStat was purported to have, and it represented a reform to the previous methods for documenting daily policing practices. CompStat has spread widely among law enforcement agencies across the county and the world and has become one of the standard tools of modern police forces. And while advocates like William Bratton maintain that CompStat is crucial in decreasing crime rates, time has shown that these decreases tend to initially be dramatic and then increase again. Time has also led to more and more cops coming forward to describe the coercion they felt to overreport or underreport certain types of incidents to generate particular kinds of CompStat results. The accountability that CompStat was supposed to encourage among individual cops was supplanted by pressure to deliver the kinds of crime statistics desired by the city's political leadership, including police chiefs and commissioners. When crime rates continued to fall in fairly predictable patterns, police had to demonstrate their effectiveness and legitimate their role by continuing to prove that they were making contact with people that would do harm to residents if not for their intervention.

In New York City, stop-and-frisk was one way that cops were able to demonstrate the power of these interventions. Before CompStat, cops had usually stopped and questioned people of whom they were suspicious and generally only searched them under reasonable suspicion of danger (usually involving suspicion of carrying a weapon). The broken windows orientation underlying Bratton's mode of policing, which also extended to CompStat, suggested that the very presence of suspicious persons was a danger to the community. Through CompStat, the police could demonstrate that they were neutralizing that danger.

Soon, “stop and question” transitioned to “stop and question and frisk,” and eventually to stop-and-frisk. By 2011, the NYPD was doing over 684,000 street stops per year, nearly 90 percent of which resulted in no arrest or summons. These stops disproportionately targeted people of color (especially Black people), young people, homeless people, and queer and trans people. The depth and breadth of the physical and psychological harm done by the practice of stop-and-frisk ignited a citywide campaign to eliminate the practice and resulted in a lawsuit against the city based on the practice’s racial bias. While CompStat is still prized by departments across the country, the longer it is used, the more clearly the problems inherent in its use become evident.

The specialization of policing is another reform meant to reflect responsiveness to the changing needs of police forces and the residents they police. As modern policing has evolved, many forces created units to focus on specific areas of crime such as homicide, gangs or vice. One of the most notorious of these units is special weapons and tactics (SWAT) teams.

First used in the mid-1960s as small, elite units designed to respond to situations requiring paramilitary force and precision, SWAT and other paramilitary policing units have ceased to be the exception in policing and have become the rule. Roughly 90 percent of all police departments in cities with populations over 50,000 have some type of SWAT team as do federal departments including the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Education. Additionally, SWAT teams routinely run training for new cops. They are used in a wide range of policing activities from traffic stops to seeking informants, to more high-impact policing. And although SWAT is a reform initiated from within law enforcement, its overwhelming expansion and mission creep are consistent with other forms of police specialization.

Keeping the function of policing in focus – armed protection of state interests – increases clarity about what policing is meant to protect and whom it serves. Further, that clarity helps us reflect on what asking for police accountability really means. Police forces tend to be very accountable to the interests they were designed to serve, and those interests frequently clash with the interests of the communities targeted most aggressively by policing. Recognizing policing as a set of practices used by the state to enforce law and maintain social control and cultural hegemony through the use of force reveals the need for incremental changes that lead toward the erosion of policing power rather than reinforcing it. This recognition may also move us toward ways to reduce the impacts of the violence of policing without ignoring the serious issues that lead to violence within our communities.

For anyone with experience dealing with the grinding harassment, psychological or physical harm, or death meted out by policing, it’s clear that the best way to reduce the violence of policing is to reduce contact with cops. Plans for change must include taking incremental steps with an eye toward making the cops obsolete, even if not in our own lifetimes. Taking incremental steps toward the abolition of policing is even more about what must be built than what must be eliminated. Further, it requires steps that build on each other and continue to clear the path for larger future steps while being mindful not to build something today that will need to be torn down later on the path toward the long-term goal.

The context created by the powerful protest movements referenced above has created an opportunity to make bigger, bolder changes than we have seen in a very long time. Now should be the time to draw from the organizations that have been hard at work making that change on the ground and to test out creative new approaches rather than attempting to develop brand new platforms or repackaging reforms already in the Department of Justice pipeline, or reintroducing

old reforms such as civilian review boards that have a demonstrated track record of being more theater than substance.

Here are just a few examples of ideas that have received less attention than body cameras or special prosecutors, but are promising incremental steps toward eroding the place and power of policing in US communities: Youth Justice Coalition's 1% Campaign advocates for just 1 percent (roughly \$100 million) to be diverted from the Los Angeles Police Department budget and directed toward programs and services for young people that are alternatives to youth suppression. Similarly, Los Angeles Community Action Network's (LA CAN) Share the Wealth Campaign advocates for more equitable distribution of investments in Los Angeles' Downtown neighborhood such that they benefit all residents without displacement or fear from police violence. Given adequate resources and an opportunity to develop, imagine what incremental shifts of funding priorities of this sort could create.

Projects such as the Harm Free Zone project in Durham, North Carolina, and Audre Lorde Project's Safe OUTside the System Safe Neighborhood Campaign are testing grounds for community responses to harm that do not rely on law enforcement interventions. The Harm Free Zone is building community knowledge and power to enable community members rather than the police to be called upon as first responders. The project educates and trains interested Durham residents to intervene in situations of harm without police intervention. Based in Brooklyn, New York, the Safe Neighborhood Campaign focuses on reducing harm to lesbian, gay, bisexual, two spirit, trans and gender-nonconforming people of color by working with local businesses and community spaces to provide safe haven for people in need without contacting the police. The campaign also trains campaign partners on combating homophobia and transphobia and developing strategies for addressing violence without calling the police.

These projects have been replicated in cities across the country and could serve as models in scaling up these kinds of community-based interventions. Meanwhile the StoryTelling & Organizing Project reminds us that people are already using creative means to address interpersonal harms everyday without police intervention. These projects take seriously harms that generate fear, violence and even death, but also understand that police intervention is not the right remedy.

Broader reaching ideas such as eliminating the use of police forces in addressing mental health crises instead of creating special teams of mental health cops, ending the use of broken windows policing or banning cops that use excessive force from any employment in any type of law enforcement (public or private) are just some of the bolder recommendations currently being circulated.

This is the era for bold ideas and big dreams. While the whole world is watching and monitoring how the United States will address its policing crisis, why not take steps forward toward a future free of the violence of policing rather than one that has improved the functioning of a killing machine? The surest path toward a future free of the violence of policing is one that aims to eliminate contact between those violent forces and the people it targets. Why not start taking steps down that path today?

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Editor's Note, July 7, 2016: On Tuesday and Wednesday, within the space of 24 hours, two Black men were killed by police officers: Alton Sterling and Philando Castile. These brutal murders make it all the more apparent that it is necessary to uproot the racist institution of policing in the United States and create new paths toward collective safety. Today, we are republishing this crucial essay by Rachel Herzing, which highlights the need for a wholly new approach, in the face of rampant state violence. The essay appears in Truthout's anthology, Who Do You Serve, Who Do You Protect? Police Violence and Resistance in the United States.

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