

# Defunding the Police

## Fact Sheet

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### Background & Introduction

For centuries, police, prisons, and punitive judicial and penal systems have oppressed Black and brown people in the U.S. Long before the COVID-19 pandemic took hold, Black folks and other people of color living at the intersection of multiple identities including Black women and femmes, LGBTQIA+ folks, young people, sex workers, people with low-incomes, those experiencing homelessness, immigrants, and undocumented people have been and continue to be the most affected by police and state violence.

The uprising against police and state violence against Black people coincided with the global Coronavirus pandemic. In response, most states implemented emergency orders and curfews, requiring people to shelter in place and adhere to mask mandates. Many of these orders were enforced with escalated policing, criminal charges, and exorbitant fines that disproportionately impacted communities of color. Police — who have not been required to comply with mask mandates or social distancing guidelines<sup>1</sup> — took advantage of these rules to arrest, fine, and brutalize marginalized people demanding justice for Jacob Blake, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, Nina Pop, Elijah McClain, and the countless other Black lives that have been lost to police violence.

These interactions forced Black and brown people into jails and prisons across the country even as they emerged as COVID-19 hotspots, with recent data showing more than 143,000 people in U.S. prisons having tested positive for the virus.<sup>2</sup> This overcrowding coupled with inadequate testing, treatment, and inadequate response from elected officials has left people behind bars at great risk of Coronavirus transmission and death.

The common denominator of police, prisons, and COVID-19 is that each disproportionately impacts Black people. From the number of Black people who experience police violence<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It Matters that Police Officers Aren't Wearing Masks. VOX. Accessed August 18, 2020.

<https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2020/6/12/21288340/police-officers-masks-protests-coronavirus>

<sup>2</sup> A State-By-State Look at Coronavirus in Prisons. Accessed October 11, 2020. The Marshall Project.

<https://www.themarshallproject.org/2020/05/01/a-state-by-state-look-at-coronavirus-in-prisons>.

<sup>3</sup> Poll: 7 in 10 Black Americans Say They Have Experienced Incidents of Discrimination or Police Mistreatment in their Lifetime, Including Nearly Half Who Felt Their Life Was in Danger. Kaiser Family Foundation. Accessed August 18, 2020.

<https://www.kff.org/disparities-policy/press-release/poll-7-in-10-black-americans-say-they-have-experienced-incidents-of-discrimination-or-police-mistreatment-in-lifetime-including-nearly-half-who-felt-lives-were-in-danger/>.

and are arrested and detained<sup>4</sup>, to rising COVID-19 cases among Black and other people of color<sup>5</sup> — deeply engrained racism, white supremacy, and cis-heteropatriarchal systems have functioned exactly as they were designed to, creating generational cycles of violence, oppression, and public health crises for Black communities.

### What Does Defunding the Police Actually Mean?

To defund the police is to reject any initiatives to expand police departments, with the specific demand for reducing their budgets and reallocating funds to public goods like health care, housing, education, and employment.

Organizations like #8toAbolition<sup>6</sup>, The Movement for Black Lives<sup>7</sup>, among others, have published comprehensive demands calling for the immediate reduction in funding, resources, and power until police departments and prisons are completely defunded and made obsolete. The demands include, but are not limited to: eliminating the power and influence of police unions; ending police contracts with schools, government entities, and other social services; and retroactively decriminalizing, releasing, and expunging drug-related offenses, sex work charges, and more.

The police do not keep Black, brown, and other marginalized communities safe. Demanding that police be defunded is an invitation for society to envision and manifest a future without police and build upon the work abolitionists have led in creating community care networks, mutual aid infrastructures, and restorative justice practices. By defunding the police and reallocating billions of dollars from their budgets into community-centered systems, people can access basic resources and social services needed to protect and care for themselves, their families, and their communities.

### The Origins of the Police

In the U.S., the history of the police is inextricably linked to colonization and slavery. In the early 1600s, night-watch officers were created to monitor the activity of colonists after dark. As cities developed and began to commercialize in the early 1700s, police departments began to formalize in an effort to protect merchants' property and shipments of cargo<sup>8</sup>. However, in the South, the forces that drove policing were less about protecting

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<sup>4</sup> Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2020. Prison Policy Initiative. Accessed August 18, 2020. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2020.html>

<sup>5</sup> The Fullest Look Yet At Racial Inequity of Coronavirus. The New York Times. Accessed August 19, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/05/us/coronavirus-latinos-african-americans-cdc-data.html>

<sup>6</sup> Defund The Police. #8ToAbolition. <https://www.8toabolition.com/defund-the-police>. Accessed August 26, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> The Time Has Come to Defund the Police. The Movement For Black Lives. Accessed August 26, 2020. <https://m4bl.org/defund-the-police/>

<sup>8</sup> Protests Against Police Have Broken Out Across the Country. Here's How Policing Has Evolved in the US.. Since its Beginnings in The 1600s. Insider. <https://www.insider.com/history-of-police-in-the-us-photos-2020-6>. Accessed August 27, 2020.

cargo but were instead designed to preserve slavery<sup>9</sup>. These slave patrols were created to catch runaway slaves, prevent slave revolts, and to enforce segregation.

Slave patrols continued until the end of the Civil War, but even as these patrols ended, policies such as Black Codes were enacted in the South as a legal way to force Black citizens into indentured servitude, take away voting rights, and control where they could travel and live<sup>10</sup>. From the post Civil-war era until 1965, Jim Crow laws replaced Black Codes and legalized racial segregation of Black people from white people in the South. Jim Crow laws mandated the segregation of all public spaces, schools, transportation, restrooms, courts, restaurants, and more, creating long standing institutionalized economic, educational, and social disadvantages for Black Americans. Those who resisted racist Jim Crow laws were met with police brutality, arrest, lengthy prison sentences, and death.

Only by understanding the origins of the police and carceral system can we understand how inherently racist, anti-Black, and violent our modern-day police and prisons are.

### **Why Not Police Reform?**

Make no mistake: the policing system functions exactly as it was intended: to control and oppress Black people. Reformist approaches to “improve” police departments have never worked. Empty implicit bias and diversity, equity, and inclusion training haven’t stopped the police from kneeling on Black men’s necks or made them be held accountable to misconduct complaints lodged against them. This is largely a result of the powerful and corrupt nature of the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) unions. Local FOP unions are deeply entrenched in police departments across the country and negotiate compensation, benefits, labor rights, and legal representation for officers. In addition to their collectively bargained benefits, FOP unions spend millions of dollars each year lobbying federal and state elected officials and contributing to candidates’ campaigns that support their agenda.<sup>11</sup> FOP unions also provide protection and political cover for individual officers and the departments they belong to, continuing a culture of secrecy and lack of accountability. To defund the police, FOP contracts and unions must also be dismantled.

### **Alternatives to the Police**

Defunding the police does not equate to communities being abandoned or subject to violence and instability. In fact, it’s the opposite. By reallocating funding and resources from the police to spending on education, housing, health care, and other critical social services,

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<sup>9</sup> How the U.S. Got its Police Force. Time.com. <https://time.com/4779112/police-history-origins/>. Accessed August 27, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Jim Crow Laws. History.com. <https://www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/jim-crow-laws>. Accessed August 31, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Why the Fraternal Order of Police Must Go. The Marshall Project. <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2017/10/11/why-the-fraternal-order-of-police-must-go>. Accessed August 31, 2020.

communities can build the infrastructure to self govern and establish community-based public safety approaches that do not involve police.

Alternatives to the police provided by various Black-led abolition organizations include, but are not limited to:

- ★ **Specialized traffic patrol employees.** The vast majority of police-civilian interactions occur on the road, with Black Americans being pulled over more than white and non-Black people. There is no need for armed police officers to be called for traffic-related incidents. Specialized traffic patrol employees will be trained in highway navigation, emergency response, accident reporting, and citation writing.
- ★ **Establish neighborhood councils as representative bodies that hold decision making power in their communities.** We need real democratic control and influence at the local, state, and federal levels. Community members must be represented and hold influence in legislative processes, budget appropriations, and in school districts and county boards.
- ★ **Deploy community mediators and safety professionals.** Most minor disputes can be deescalated by unarmed trained persons who are specialized in conflict resolution, relationship management, and psychology.
- ★ **Comprehensive, universal health care for communities.** Reallocate city budgets to create and sustain health care infrastructure that provides culturally appropriate and gender-inclusive primary care — specifically for queer, trans, and gender non-conforming folks — non-coercive mental health care, abortion care, and substance use treatment. This includes establishing trauma centers, rehabilitation facilities, and wrap-around services for youth and low-income people and families.
- ★ **Safe and secure housing for all.** Prohibit evictions and make public housing accessible to everyone by ending discriminatory laws that prevent people from accessing resources based on their income, race, gender, sexuality, immigration or documentation status, previous felonies, and incarceration history. Alternative housing without police is needed for folks experiencing homelessness, survivors of gender-based violence, and those seeking asylum.

### Alternatives to Incarceration

The U.S. locks up more people than any other country in the world with 2.3 million people currently in jail or prison.<sup>12</sup> The majority of people who are incarcerated are there for

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<sup>12</sup> Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2020. Prison Policy Initiative. Accessed September 1, 2020. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2020.html>

low-level and nonviolent offenses, including the overcriminalization of drugs, sex, and technical violations of probation or parole.

Mass incarceration, private prison systems, and prison labor — which disproportionately impacts Black, Indigenous, and Latinx folks — is modern-day slavery and must end immediately. Alternatives to incarceration include but are not limited to:

- ★ **Deep investment in restorative justice programs.** Rather than focusing on punishment for perpetrators, restorative justice is centered in healing those who have been harmed through rehabilitation, accountability, and conflict resolution.
- ★ **Accessible rehabilitation and treatment centers.** Increase accessible and affordable drug, alcohol, and mental health facilities, especially inpatient programs that are comprehensive and non-coercive.
- ★ **Work programs and skill building.** Increase programs focused on professional development like resume writing, interview prep, learning trades, customer service, and language services to connect people to living-wage jobs and benefits.
- ★ **Increase education opportunities.** Expand GED and technical programs and make all education free, including higher education.

### Young People, Police, and Prisons

Police and school resource officers (SROs) are in elementary schools, colleges, and universities across the country. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, during the 2017-2018 school year 58 percent of public schools had either SROs or a law enforcement officer.<sup>13</sup> Reports of the impact of police in schools show that students of color and those with disabilities are more likely to have encounters with school police — which are often violent — and are arrested at higher rates.<sup>14</sup> A 2013 Congressional Research Service Report concluded that there was little evidence connecting the presence of police officers or SROs with decreased crime or changes in student behavior in school.<sup>15</sup> Instead, school police officers reinforce the criminalization of young Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people, including those who are LGBTQIA,<sup>16</sup> and serve as an entry point into the

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<sup>13</sup> Diliberti, M., Jackson, M., Correa, S., and Padgett, Z. (2019). Crime, Violence, Discipline, and Safety in U.S. Public Schools: Findings From the School Survey on Crime and Safety: 2017–18 (NCES 2019-061). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved September 1, 2020 from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>.

<sup>14</sup> Which Students are Arrested the Most? Education Week. <https://www.edweek.org/ew/projects/2017/policing-americas-schools/student-arrests.html#/overview>. Accessed September 1, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> School Resource Officers: Law Enforcement Officers in Schools. Congressional Service Report. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R43126.pdf>. Accessed September 1, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Preston Mitchum and Aisha Moodie-Mills (2014), Beyond Bullying: How Hostile School Climates Perpetuate the School-to-Prison Pipeline for LGBT Youth. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/lgbtq-rights/reports/2014/02/27/84179/beyond-bullying/>. Accessed October 11, 2020.

school-to-prison pipeline, where, on any given day, more than 48,000 young people are being held at juvenile detention centers across the country.<sup>17</sup>

Schools should be safe havens where young people can learn and flourish. However, when they walk the hallways and see armed police officers, this is not the message they receive. Instead, many feel anxious and develop a distrust for education. School board members and elected officials must act swiftly to remove SROs and police officers from schools and deploy social workers, guidance counselors, and implement trauma-informed teaching practices that will work to keep young people truly safe.

## Conclusion

We cannot progress as a nation until we defund the police and prison industrial complex. Police, prisons, and punitive judicial and penal systems are deeply intertwined and function together to devastate Black communities and other communities of color. This is why Black community members and Black-led organizations have spent years calling for the police to be defunded and dismantled.

We deserve a better world. A world without police. We cannot reform a system so deeply rooted in slavery, anti-Blackness, and poverty. We must envision new alternatives to prisons and police. We must organize community members and create policies that lead to a better, more just world. We must fight for a more equitable society for historically marginalized communities including Black, Indigenous, and brown people, young people, queer, transgender, and gender nonconforming people, immigrants, and people with disabilities. And we must do so everyday.

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<sup>17</sup> Youth Confinement: The Whole Pie 2019. Prison Policy Institute.  
<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/youth2019.html>. Accessed September 1, 2020.