Redefine, Reinvent, Redirect.
Looking at contemporary police challenges in the light of today's social movement.
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The police are not immune to reforms and societal changes. Throughout history and in different sociopolitical contexts, police and policing have been shaped by new ideas coming from outside the institution.

Reforms were implemented to protect police departments from political pressure and prevent them from being taken over by private interests. Law-enforcement institutions were professionalized to improve their effectiveness and their integrity. New units were created to make policing more community-oriented.

Police were reorganized, their strategies were redefined, and some of their services were even privatized in order to make police work more efficient. In the last three decades, some countries (El Salvador, Iraq), provinces (autonomous region of Bougainville in Papua New Guinea), and cities (Camden, NJ) went further by disbanding their police forces and rebuilding them from scratch, with mixed results. Although these reforms were not often welcomed with great enthusiasm and were regularly resisted by actors from both inside and outside law-enforcement institutions, they all had an impact on police and policing.

Police reforms arise in different contexts. They might be triggered by increasing levels of crime and violence. Sometimes, they can stem from a wider reforming project, such as attempts to modernize the State, or efforts to democratize the security sector in post-conflict and transitional societies.

In other cases, they are related to particular events, to research results or to investigations – by the media, the judiciary, parliament, or the police itself – that highlight problematic aspects of the police and of policing that need to be dealt with.
The recent killing of George Floyd by a US police officer in Minneapolis and a series of high-profile cases involving the use of disproportionate and even lethal force by police against racialized minorities are once again putting law-enforcement institutions under the spotlight. That is why calls to reform the police are rising again, not only in the United States, but elsewhere too: in Canada, in Quebec, in Australia, in New Zealand, in South Africa, in Kenya, in St. Petersburg, in Barbados, in France, and in the United Kingdom. This time, these demands are rallying behind a new slogan: “Defund the police”. What does it mean? Where does it come from? What is new about this idea? What does it entail? How is it different from previous calls to reform or to abolish the police? In this policy brief, we want to look at some of the main demands of today’s movement and to contribute to the discourse by clarifying concepts and ideas that can sometimes be confusing.

A global movement for a global problem

To better understand these demands, it is important, first, to address the global context in which the movement takes place. Even though it started in the United States, the “Defund the police” movement has gained traction elsewhere, especially in Canada. It shows that police brutality and racist bias in police forces are not limited to the US context. Global trends and the diffusion of policing practices have contributed to the problem. Indeed, in different countries, police and police work have been shaped by different global transformations – neoliberalization, securitization, militarization, and technologization – that complement each other and explain the widespread calls to reduce police budgets.
Meanwhile, the success of zero tolerance ideas since the 1990s – strongly influenced by the highly controversial ‘broken window theory’ – shaped the way police work is carried out. Police agents are asked to crack down on minor offenses and social disorder (vandalism, public drinking, loitering, etc.) because they are supposedly the first steps of criminal careers. This has led to the criminalization of many social behaviors and of marginalized and impoverished groups, in particular young men, racialized minorities, and homeless people. The global war on terror in the aftermath of 9/11 only reinforced the trend towards deterrence, punishment, and the incapacitation of individuals perceived as security threats. As the rhetoric of fear and the internal enemy were permeating society, law-enforcement agencies were given more authority and resources. Now, in France, in the United States and elsewhere, counter-terrorism measures are being applied by governments and law-enforcement agencies to violently control and police social activists and political opponents.

The worldwide spread of neoliberal ideas with their focus on reducing government spending has led to the dismantling of social programs in many countries. This has put a burden on the police who are now first responders in numerous safety-related issues (mental health, homelessness, squabbles between neighbours, drug addiction, sex work, cohabitation and coexistence within public spaces, youth-related issues, etc.) because there is no one else to call, as exemplified by the wellness checks conducted by police agents. These responsibilities were not theirs in the first place and police officers are not equipped to act as social workers in such situations. The current COVID-19 crisis accentuates the role given to police in public health problems. As a result, police interventions in such cases are more likely to end with police use of force against citizens when another approach could have been prioritized.
Because of the war on crime and the war on terrorism, exchanges between police forces and armed forces were officially promoted to allow the former to emulate the latter. In doing so, the lines between both the police and the military have become increasingly blurred as police forces are being increasingly militarized.

Therefore, there is a problematic discrepancy between, on the one hand, the growing involvement of the police in safety, social, and mental health-related issues and, on the other hand, its focus on control through heavily armed and minatory agents.

This is particularly counterproductive when distrust is high between the police and the community it is supposed to serve and protect. For instance, both the colonial legacy of police violence against Black citizens and Indigenous communities and the contemporary emphasis on punishment and control of social disorder foster the stigmatization of at-risk groups and the criminalization of racialized and marginalized communities. In this context, police officers are more prone to use disproportionate force or deadly violence against citizens, especially against those from ethnic minorities.

The technologization of police forces is also a global trend that affects the way police work is carried out. While housing, health, and education are suffering budget cuts, security agencies are benefiting from over-investment. Their increasing resources are not only used to purchase expensive military equipment, but also to invest in costly high-technology surveillance devices. These kinds of expenditures contribute to isolating police forces from communities and citizens.
An attempt to reframe the debate from beneath

First, unlike previous police reforms, the calls to defund the police are coming directly from civil society. They are not limited to left-leaning or anarchist groups as the demands are being made by a coalition of grassroots organizations, human rights activists and academic researchers that has formed around the prominent Black Lives Matter network.

This global movement embraces a range of overlapping issues regarding law-enforcement institutions and police work: racial profiling, police misconduct and brutality, police accountability, systemic racism, mass incarceration, death penalty, colonial legacies in policing practices, criminalization of racialized and marginalized citizens, police use of firearms, significant and sustained repression of social dissent and protests, police attitude towards victims of sexual abuse or rape, etc.

Second, it is worth mentioning that although “defund the police” is a new slogan, the problem it highlights is not new. According to those who want to defund the police, the circumstances of George Floyd’s death – and of many victims of police brutality – expose once again the violent and racist nature of law-enforcement structures. In doing so, the movement relies directly on critical approaches in criminology that show how the police has historically been an instrument of social control and surveillance of the people, especially of the working class and organizations promoting social change.

The movement is also continuing the long-time struggle of the penal abolitionists who, even though they focus on the prison system and not on the police per se, have long denounced the way mass incarceration and harsh punishment are used to oppress, alienate and dehumanize marginalized groups and serve to maintain the capitalist regime. In addition, social research shows that prison is not only ineffective at preventing crime, but also counterproductive since it reinforces patterns of marginalization and criminal behavior.
Third, unlike most of the previous police reforms, calls to defund the police entail a profound shift. Throughout the last decades, the police have been shaped by different reforms inspired by different ideas and multiple goals (effectiveness, efficiency, integrity, proximity, etc.). However, none of these questioned the expansion of police authority in our societies and the centrality of the police in public safety and crime prevention. Yet, that is precisely what “Defund the police” intends to do. Although advocates of defunding the police could differ on the exact meaning of the slogan, there is a consensus on both the unsatisfying results of recent responses – such as body-worn cameras, sensitivity or de-escalation training, code of conduct, hiring of a racially diverse police force – to address police misconduct and racially biased policing, and the urgent need for more radical reform. In light of the repeated use by police of excessive and discriminatory force, the movement proposes to depart from the “bad apples” conversation by giving a structural or systemic explanation of the problem. It denounces the prominent role of the police in contemporary societies and its growing lack of accountability. It wants to initiate a larger reflection on its mission, its functions, and its resources. The purpose is not to make police more effective or more efficient: it is to reinvent the whole institution so it would be in tune with the principles of democratic governance. Thus, “defund the police” can be understood, not as another police reform, but rather as a global project for the society.

The challenges of police representativeness

In various countries, ethnic communities are critical about the lack of police representativeness. As it turns out, academic research shows that greater ethnic diversity of police forces can help to decrease racial profiling as a policing tactic. Indeed, police representativeness induces a change in the way minorities are often implicitly represented as more unlawful than whites. Also, by being more representative of their community, police agencies could enhance their democratic legitimacy and police-citizen relations. Nonetheless, considering a more encompassing and structural definition of the problem, measures implemented to increase the ethnic diversity of police forces, although useful, are no panacea. First, these measures sometimes only serve a symbolic purpose as agents from minorities are only hired to fill low-level positions and keep being excluded from high-ranking positions. Second, officers from ethnic groups can also internalize negative representations about other minorities, whether Black, Indigenous, Arab or Asian, and even about their own. That is especially the case if they work in an institution that, either explicitly or implicitly, favours the spread of stereotyped images and racist discourses. That can occur through problematic professional training, counterproductive reward systems, or by leaving misconduct and discriminatory attitudes unpunished.
Reinventing police and policing in contemporary societies

Defund the police: what it means and to what end.

Advocates of the current social movement are calling to reduce police budgets as a means to foster a societal change. First, they argue, it would help to stop the growth of police forces and the expansion of police authority that have been going on for decades and have been recently reinforced by exceptional-turned-permanent counter-terrorism measures. It would be a major shift from the dominant law-and-order vision. As exemplified by the case of Bogotá since the mid-1990s, an improved quality of life can very well be achieved without an increase in the number of police agents and patrols.

Second, despite what some might say, “Defund the police” is not about decreasing salaries of police officers or taking away their welfare benefits. Lower budget does not mean lower salaries. Resources given to law-enforcement agencies are to be spent differently in order to build more democratic organizations; this means much less on weapons and military equipment, and much more on training for intercultural sensitivity and de-escalation skills, on police oversight bodies, on psychological attention for police officers, and on activities aimed at improving the relationship between police and the community.

Third, the reduction in police budgets would also allow for the reallocation of valuable resources to services that can lift people out of poverty and empower disadvantaged communities. For instance, public money could be used to invest in universal education; to develop educational and vocational programs for at-risk people and people who have been convicted; to ensure universal access to health and social services in every community; to enhance public transportation accessibility in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods; to improve social security; to empower communities through decision-making processes related to urban safety.

Abolish the police: is it desirable and possible?

Abolishing or disbanding the police does not mean to suppress it forever—except for anarchist activists who have joined the movement. Rather, it means to rebuild it so it will no longer be detrimental to marginalized and racialized people. The re-foundation of police institutions is seen as a genuine way to democratize and decolonize the police. That means embracing a wide and inclusive definition of community and citizenship, not seeing marginalized and racialized citizens as threats who need to be incapacitated, and developing alternative approaches to the Western-centred and punitive model of policing.
Until now, only a few countries, regions or cities have disbanded their police and these initiatives can hardly be considered as successful. Yet, lessons can be drawn from these experiences.

That is why other measures are necessary for the reform to be successful, whether they have to do with recruitment (establishing new prerequisites for candidates; fostering ethnic representativeness), training (modifying the curricula; forming a teaching staff with different academic and professional backgrounds), rewards and incentives (reviewing the evaluation of police work based on performance and quantitative measures), policing (banning choke holds), or the use of police budgets (adopting participatory budgets; stopping the spending on expensive and counterproductive military gear).

Second, efforts to radically reform the police can be undermined along the way. Indeed, savings can result from disbanding initiatives; and political authorities, pressured by powerful police unions, are tempted to use it to hire more police agents. While the dismantling of the police is driven by the desire to democratize and decolonize it, such a move would be in complete opposition to this goal as it would not only mean an increase in police efficiency (doing more with less resources) but also a strengthening of its authority.
Third, the dismantling of law-enforcement institutions poses another challenge regarding the social and professional reintegration of ex-agents who were trained to use coercion and violence. Indeed, having to find a new job, these ex-police officers will likely enter the lucrative private security field where they will be held even less accountable for misconduct and violent behavior. Through a network effect, it can also increase the links between police departments and private security companies, and that can be problematic in terms of transparency and accountability.

Fourth, communities have to be involved in the rebuilding of police institutions. Their voices are to be heard and taken into account in order to succeed in democratizing and decolonizing police forces. If not, the process is likely to be overtaken by powerful veto actors, especially police unions converted into lobbies that will rather seek to resist accountability and advance their own private interests at the expense of collective safety. Communities will neither feel represented nor empowered and will have no genuine interest in participating if radical police reforms are conducted from above, in a technocratic manner.
References


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