

## Reading One

### Police Reform and Abolition

Since the murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin in May 2020, mass protests around the country have demanded serious change to our nation's policing practices. In the past year, states and localities have begun to implement some changes. The New York Times has [reported](#) that over 30 states have passed more than 140 new police reform bills since Floyd's death. However, these efforts have highlighted a divide between two different visions for how to approach questions of policing and racial justice: One vision — “police reform” — calls for making targeted, pragmatic changes to improve America's police forces in the near term. Those supporting a second vision — “abolition” — argue that such changes do not go far enough. This vision calls for dismantling the system of policing itself.

#### The Argument for Police Reform

Aaron Ross Coleman, a politics reporter for Vox, discussed the perspective of police reform in a July 2020 article. He [wrote](#):

The police reform movement stands atop two premises. Good policing is good. Reams of research show it does, in fact, reduce violent crime. But bad policing is bad. It's bad on its own terms, because it harms the people it brutalizes, and it's bad because it delegitimizes the police in the eyes of the community they're meant to serve.

In Milwaukee, for instance, an important study showed that 911 calls fell after a publicized case of police brutality. The harm of bad policing, in other words, was both the police brutality and the severing of the relationship between the community and the public agency meant to keep them safe.

Police reformers, then, are trying to do two things at the same time: Make sure there are enough police to keep violent crime low, and make sure those police are both well-trained enough and tightly constrained enough not to abuse their power....

Thomas Abt, [an] Obama administration alum and author of *Bleeding Out*, a book on policing urban violence, said in principle he supports conversations around what roles police served and how they might be scaled back. Yet he... and other more traditional reformers continued to see a central role for American police in society. Abt supports a mix of police reforms to increase transparency and curtail the use of force while also deploying surges of concentrated policing in the most violent neighborhoods.

<https://www.vox.com/21312191/police-reform-defunding-abolition-black-lives-matter-protests>

#### The Argument for Abolition

While proponents of police reform focus on promoting changes that might be politically viable in the short term, abolition is oriented toward the longer-term goal of bringing about a more truly just world. In a June 2020 article, New York Times staff editor Spencer Bokor-Lindell provided an overview of abolitionists' thinking, [writing](#):

The idea of eliminating policing as we know it is foreign to most Americans, but it is not new. A concept with roots in the midcentury civil rights and prison abolition movements, it has certainly become more mainstream in recent years: In 2017, Tracey L. Meares, a professor at Yale Law School who served on the Obama administration's President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, wrote that "policing as we know it must be abolished before it can be transformed."

The rationale for abolition traces back to the genesis of American policing. As Mariame Kaba, an activist and organizer, explains in a Times Op-Ed, policing evolved in the South in the 1700s and 1800s from slave patrols, white vigilantes who enforced slavery laws by capturing and "returning" Black people who had escaped enslavement. In the North, policing emerged as a way to control an unruly "underclass," which included African-Americans, Native Americans, immigrants and the poor, in service of the rich. "Everywhere," she writes, "they have suppressed marginalized populations to protect the status quo."....

In his book "The End of Policing," Alex S. Vitale writes, "It is largely a liberal fantasy that the police exist to protect us from the bad guys." Most officers make no more than one felony arrest per year, he says; they spend most of their time responding to noise complaints, issuing parking and traffic tickets, and making arrests for petty misdemeanors. Most violent and property crimes go unsolved. And despite what pop culture teaches, the idea that putting more officers on the street reduces crime is hotly contested. (And what constitutes a crime is itself a political question.)

Ms. Kaba argues that the goal of a safer, less cruel society would be better served by redirecting the \$115 billion allocated to police departments every year toward providing healthcare, housing, education and good jobs for everyone. Fellow thinkers in this vein include Angela Davis, the scholar and activist, who recently told the newscast "Democracy Now!": "Abolition is not primarily a negative strategy. It's not primarily about dismantling, getting rid of. It's about re-envisioning, building anew."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/25/opinion/george-floyd-police-abolition.html>

In some cases, police reformers and abolitionists will agree on proposed changes to America's system of policing. In other cases, as we will see, differences in philosophy will lead them to disagree about whether a given reform is worthwhile.

#### **For Discussion:**

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
2. According to the reading, what are the premises that form the basis of a "police reform" perspective?
3. Why does abolitionism take a more skeptical view of the history of policing and the prospects for improving the existing system?
4. In the reading, scholar Angela Davis states that "Abolition is not primarily a negative strategy. It's not primarily about dismantling, getting rid of. It's about re-envisioning, building anew." What do you think she means by this?

## Reading Two

### How Reformers and Abolitionists Agree And Disagree

Abolitionists and reformers each say that they hope to create a society that both promotes safety and upholds racial justice. However, they have very different approaches for how they propose to reach these ends.

Reformists may be supportive of increased training or additional equipment for police, while abolitionists might oppose these same proposals, arguing that they could lead to a direct increase to the budgets of police departments, thereby bolstering the current system. And yet, advocates from both perspectives might agree on reforms such as demilitarizing police departments and taking away equipment that they have acquired from the federal government over the last few decades that makes police look and feel like they are ready for the battlefield.

In a October 2020 Columbia Law [blog post](#), Bernard E. Harcourt, a law professor, highlighted some of the overlap between the demands of reformers and abolitionists. He [noted](#) that advocates from each camp might agree on "creating greater or total democratic or community control of policing, or accountability." Proposals in the vein, he explains, range from "granting total control over policing to select communities (such as those who have been adversely affected by the policing) to increasing civilian oversight of the police (through civilian complaint review boards, for instance)." Harcourt further argues that "both reformers and abolitionists agree about the need to find alternative paradigms to punitiveness, such as restorative justice models; harm reduction; or other non-punitive approaches."

At the same time, there are also many points of divergence between the two positions. Cultural critic Noah Berlatsky [discussed](#) some key disagreements in a February 2021 NBC News article about the work of Mariame Kaba, a popular abolitionist author:

In a 2014 piece titled "Police 'Reforms' You Should Always Oppose" she [Mariame Kaba, author of "We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice"] provides a brief, simple, insightful rubric for determining whether proposed policies are beneficial or not.

Giving more money to the police, or expanding the number of police, should be opposed, she says, because such actions allow police to harass and incarcerate marginalized people with greater efficiency. Instead, she suggests advocating for reparations for victims of police violence.... She also recommends moving resources from police to social programs — mental health resources, schools, healthcare....

As an example of how these principles work in action, Kaba pointed to body cameras. Body cameras are a popular reform with politicians because they seem like a technological fix. But Kaba argues that from an abolitionist perspective, body cameras are worse than useless. Paying for body cameras, she says, "is giving money into the very system you want to actually shrink. The cameras are turned on you, the citizen, not on the cop. The cops will have control over all the footage." If you assume cops are basically good and just need help doing their job better, then body cameras make sense. But if you have a realistic view of how police actually treat marginalized people, giving the cops the ability to do more sophisticated surveillance is just going to give them more tools to harass people.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/abolishing-police-prisons-lot-more-practical-critics-claim-ncna1258659>

Because it shapes their perspective on different proposals for change, the question of whether someone might be oriented toward reform or abolition is more than a philosophical issue. It is a difference that can have significant practical consequences.

**For Discussion:**

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
2. According to the reading, what are some changes that abolitionists and reformers might agree on?
3. Why might abolitionists reject reforms such as better police training?
4. What is your reaction to Mariame Kaba's thoughts about body cameras? How does her abolitionist perspective give her a different take on this reform than some might expect?
5. What kind of changes would you make to policing? Do you think your ideas are more likely to fit with the police reform or abolitionist paradigm — or some combination of both? Why?

## Reading Three

### How Derecka Purnell Became An Abolitionist

Mainstream politicians and civic leaders are more likely to identify as police reformers than abolitionists. And yet abolitionism, which has a rich history, has become an increasingly prominent perspective in recent years.

Derecka Purnell, a writer, organizer, and human rights lawyer who grew up in St. Louis, once considered herself a reformer. But the more she worked on issues of policing and racial justice, the more she moved toward an abolitionist perspective. In a July 2020 article for *The Atlantic*, Purnell [wrote](#) about how her thinking changed over time:

“Police abolition” initially repulsed me. The idea seemed white and utopic. I’d seen too much sexual violence and buried too many friends to consider getting rid of police in St. Louis, let alone the nation. But in reality, the police were a placebo. Calling them felt like something, as the legal scholar Michelle Alexander explains, and something feels like everything when your other option is nothing.

[But police] couldn’t do what we really needed. They could not heal relationships or provide jobs. We were afraid every time we called. When the cops arrived, I was silenced, threatened with detention, or removed from my home. Fifteen years later, my old neighborhood still lacks quality food, employment, schools, healthcare, and air—all of which increases the risk of violence and the reliance on police. Yet I feared letting go; I thought we needed them....

[In law school] I met, studied, and struggled alongside students and movement lawyers who explained the power and the purpose of the prison-industrial complex through an abolitionist framework. Black abolitionists have condemned the role of prisons and police for centuries... They imagined and built responses to harm rooted in community and accountability. In recent decades, abolitionists have developed alternatives to [calling] 911, created support systems for victims of domestic violence, prevented new jail construction, reduced police budgets, and shielded undocumented immigrants from deportation. Abolition, I learned, was a bigger idea than firing cops and closing prisons; it included eliminating the reasons people think they need cops and prisons in the first place.

We never should have had police. Policing is among the vestiges of slavery, tailored in America to suppress slave revolts, catch runaways, and repress labor organizing. After slavery, police imprisoned Black people and immigrants under a convict-leasing system for plantation and business owners. During the Jim Crow era, cops enforced segregation and joined lynch mobs that grew strange fruit from southern trees. During the civil-rights movement, police beat the hell out of Black preachers, activists, and students who marched for equality wearing their Sunday best. Cops were the foot soldiers for Richard Nixon’s War on Drugs and Joe Biden’s 1994 crime bill. Police departments pepper-sprayed Occupy Wall Street protesters without provocation and indiscriminately teargassed Black Lives Matter activists for years—including me, twice....

So if we abolish the police, what’s the alternative? Who do we call? As someone who grew up calling 911, I also shared this concern. I learned this: Just because I did not know an answer didn’t mean that one did not exist. I had to study and join an organization, not just ask questions on social media.

I read Rachel Herzing, a co-director of the Center for Political Education, who explains that [creating small networks](#) of support for different types of emergencies can make us safer than we are now, and reduce our reliance on police. The [Oakland Power Projects](#) trains residents to build alternatives to police by helping residents prevent and respond to harm. San Francisco Mayor London Breed just announced that trained, unarmed professionals will respond to many emergency calls, and Los Angeles city-council members are [demanding](#) a similar model. This is the right idea. Rather than thinking of abolition as just getting rid of police, I think about it as an invitation to create and support lots of different answers to the problem of harm in society, and, most exciting, as an opportunity to reduce and eliminate harm in the first place.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/07/how-i-became-police-abolitionist/613540/>

Purnell has since worked with groups organizing racial justice protests and has written extensively about how an abolitionist model might be realized.

**For Discussion:**

1. What did you find most compelling about Derecka Purnell's story?
2. What were some of the factors that changed her thinking about the role of police in society?
3. Are there aspects of abolitionism that are surprising or new to you? How did these come out in the story?
4. Are there situations you have witnessed or heard about where the kind of approach Purnell advocates would have led to a better outcome? A worse outcome?
5. Are these two different visions of policing and racial justice evident in your community? How is this discussion and debate playing out where you live?