

DEFUNDING THE POLICE: A TAXONOMY OF STRATEGIES  
AND THEIR POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to develop a better understanding of what community members believe are the major issues with policing, along with the best ways to solve these issues. The researcher recruited and interviewed six activists and three police officers. The study contains qualitative data, gathered through semi-structured interviews to explore ideas related to issues with police in the United States. Then, the researcher analyzed common themes in the interviews in order to understand the feasibility and effectiveness of proposed strategies to improve policing. This resulted in three general categories: reforming the police, defunding the police, and abolishing the police. Most activists suggested simple reform strategies, most commonly suggesting strategies like increasing diversity in police departments, forming citizen advisory boards, and defunding the police. A key finding showed that most activists recognize systemic issues with police, but strategies for substantial change are not well-known. Participants mentioned the strategies of abolition and defunding the least, but these seem to fall in line better with the issues with police that the participants pointed out. Community members easily pointed out problems with the police, but many failed to actually address these issues with their proposed solutions. In order to move forward and create a fair, just, and safe policing system in America, strategies must go past simple reform. Calls to defund or abolish the police are significant, and researchers should further study these solutions to gain a more comprehensive understanding.

## INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 2020, the United States experienced one of the largest protests in history as people marched in support of the Black Lives Matter movement in reaction to the murder of George Floyd by police (New York Times, 2020). On a local level, especially since the fatal shooting of Atatiana Jefferson in her home in 2019 by Fort Worth police officers, the local demand for police reform grew stronger, and the FWPD recruited a panel of experts to review its policies and suggest recommendations for improvement. Local activist groups have been campaigning for years, asking for the FWPD to listen to their concerns, opinions, and demands.

Although prevalent for years, demands for cultural and systemic change to law enforcement, as well as interest in anti-racism work, skyrocketed among many white Americans this past summer. One might call summer 2020 a “wakeup call” to people living in privilege, ignoring the challenges many Black and Brown Americans face on a day-to-day basis. Demands to reform, defund, or abolish the police have gotten louder, and more people support change in some way. For example, according to a recent Pew Research study, 66% of people believe civilians should have the right to sue police officers for misconduct and use of force (2020). The renewed interest in police reform comes almost seven years after the police shot and killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. The passion for change has grown larger as more people have opened their eyes to the reality of policing and criminal justice in America. This country has ignored pleas for police reform for years, and when police do make changes, it isn’t enough. Black and Brown Americans still fear what might happen if they come in contact with police – the same police that swear to serve and protect.

But the question still remains. What is the best way to move forward? How can we solve the problems of racial bias, use of force, mistrust, police culture, and harm that prevent or hinder American police from protecting and serving our communities and country? The goal of this paper is to address and explain the importance of making a significant change to policing in America, and through answering these questions, conclude feasible and effective strategies that police departments and communities can implement. The recent demands to defund the police are important because more Americans finally understand the depth of the problem – racism and corruption go beyond individual officers; the whole system is corrupt. Simple fixes cannot address centuries of systemic oppression from the police, and in order to begin to liberate BIPOC individuals from the fear and distrust of the police, it is time to advocate for radical change.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **History of Police**

Although media and technology have allowed more people to witness racial bias and excessive force used by police officers - the tension between Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities and police is not new. There is a long history of injustice, unheard pleas for change, and systemic racism that accompany the current outrage after incidents last summer.

Discussions about the beginning of policing in America usually speak about the past through the lens of colonial influence with a focus on the Northern states. According to a historical overview of police by Uchida (2004), the Northern police narrative involves constables and night watchmen in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the London Metropolitan Police and Robert Peel, and patrol officers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, historians often overlook an important part

of policing history, and many modern police scholars and abolitionists identify this history as an essential issue with police culture and a precursor to the current system. Turner, Giacomassi, and Vandiver (2006) analyzed introductory criminal justice textbooks to find a lack of attention devoted to understanding how modern policing relates to slavery and slave patrols (p. 191).

In the South, the origins of modern policing come from slave patrols, which originated in the early 1700s in North Carolina (Durr, 2015). Members of slave patrols monitored plantations to deter slave riots, chased down runaway slaves, and formed a makeshift justice system to punish slaves who broke the rules. This was the beginning of formal social control, especially focused on Black criminality, and white order and safety. In an analysis of the transformation of Slave Patrol to modern policing in the South, Potter (2013) argued that modern police forces formed in response to “disorder” (p. 3), and America defined disorder to fit specific goals and control certain individuals, like managing the workforce to maintain social control and the ability to make a profit. Jim Crow laws led to more policing of Black individuals, as officers enforced segregation laws and other social norms. Beyond slave patrols and Jim Crow laws, the War on Drugs, police brutality, and mass incarceration targeted BIPOC. Modern activists recognize the influence stereotypes of Black criminality and systemic racial bias have had on the way police individually and systemically treat Black communities. In her analysis of how historical policing of Black people has evolved into our modern system, Durr (2015) argues that ‘stop and frisk’ and racial profiling are aggressive modern measures to continue policing Black communities at higher rates than white communities (p. 875).

### **Police Literature – Racial Bias**

Schwartz and Jahn (2020) analyzed FBI data of fatal police encounters and found that police are 3 times more likely to kill Black people compared to white people. A wide variety of

opinions and conclusions on police use of force, racial bias, and inequity exist in current literature. Some research supports the idea that race plays a role in an officer's decision to shoot a suspect, and more specifically that officers use force more often against Black and Brown individuals than white people. According to Terrill and Mastrofski (2002), police treat "males, nonwhites, poor suspects, and young suspects more harshly, irrespective of behavior" in use of force scenarios (p. 243). This is important to take into consideration because Terrill and Mastrofski argue that certain characteristics, including race, impact the way police treat individuals. Other studies state that the way the suspect interacts with the police officer is more important. Garner and colleagues (2002) noticed a difference in how officers treated nonwhite suspects, but when they controlled for resistance and demeanor, these differences were not statistically significant (p. 737), which implies that the way the suspect acts is more influential in use of force decisions than race or other suspect characteristics. However, the way a suspect interacts with a police officer is not completely unrelated to their characteristics, especially race. Lloyd and colleagues (2020) studied how Black Americans differ from white Americans in their mental representation of police officers, which reveals police-civilian tension and distrust from the Black community. The study found that Black Americans have a much more negative and dominant mental representation of police officers' faces than white Americans. Black participants pictured officers as less warm and trustworthy, compared to white participants who report feeling less anxious around police. These implications are important – if many Black Americans have a negative mental representation of police, this can influence the way they interact with officers.

James and colleagues (2016) came to a very different conclusion from previous studies, finding that police officers are more hesitant and more careful in their decisions to shoot Black

suspects. This study also found that police participants “demonstrated strong implicit bias associated Black suspects with weapons” (p. 470). Although police participants had implicit bias and stereotype suspects, the researchers claim that the officers do not have an explicit racial bias against Black suspects. James and colleagues (2016) mentioned that officers worry about appearing racist if they shoot a Black suspect. Roussell and colleagues (2017) countered James (2016), arguing that their literature is dangerous and ignores the narrative and lived experience of communities of color by legitimizing the idea of reverse racism (p. 8).

Tregle and colleagues (2021) analyzed racial disparities in officer-involved shootings using different benchmarks of comparison. For example, when looking at Black and white suspects shot during a traffic stop, Black people were over 3.5 times more likely than white people to be fatally shot (p. 23). However, when using arrests for violent crimes and arrests for weapon offenses, Black citizens were less likely to be fatally shot than white citizens. This has interesting implications and explains why the many different conclusions regarding police use of force: it depends on characteristics of the population and the offense. Tregle and colleagues (2021) suggest that Black suspects are less likely to be shot during arrests for violent crimes, but, for other less violent arrests, Black people are disproportionately shot. The clear racism is a large part of why people protest police use of force – Black people are shot more frequently during arrests and situations that are less violent. Activist Baratunde Thurston identifies this problem as police killing Black people for “living while Black” (TedTalk, 2018). His argument is that police shoot Black people for non-violent offenses and use extreme force even when it is not necessary.

Overall, there is a wide variety of data and conclusions on police use of force and racial bias. Some validate the experience and fear of BIPOC communities, while others touch on topics like reverse racism, or identify no racial disparity in arrests or use of force.

## **Police Reform**

A common suggestion to change policing in America involves simple reforms that aim to mend the relationship between the community and police officers. Advocates of reform argue that there are ways to increase police trust, improve officer-civilian relationships, and hold officers more accountable. Police reform stems from the idea that the main issue with law enforcement is the lack of trust with the community and the lack of accountability when things go wrong. If simple changes can fix these issues, the police and the community will be in a much better place to collaborate and coexist.

Community policing (COP) is an approach to policing implemented in many departments, that many police officers and reformists continue to support. COP looks different in each police agency depending on their interpretation of community policing, as well as the individual needs of their locality. Originating in the 1980s and 90s, researchers and officers designed COP to “engage the community as an equal partner in solving local crime and disorder problems” (Morabito, 2008, p. 565). This acknowledges a primary concern of reformists: community relations, trust, and involvement with the police. According to the U.S Department of Justice, COP has three key components, “community partnerships, organizational transformation, and problem-solving” (p. 1). Community partnerships between law enforcement and community stakeholders, local businesses, nonprofits, and local media are meant to encourage collaboration with the police, and in turn, increase police trust (DOJ, p. 2). Organizational management goes further into cultural and departmental change that allows the police to increase efficiency, efficacy, and transparency. Lastly, problem-solving measures within COP focus on proactive policing and developing solutions to underlying problems in the community. However, this loose and vague theory is inconsistently applied throughout police

agencies, where small departments cannot afford increased patrol or new trainings, and large departments have a huge undertaking if they want to attempt organizational change and proactive policing (Morabito, 2008).

Another commonly suggested police reform is the citizen advisory/oversight board. According to the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), a citizen advisory board is a formal place for officers and community members to engage in conversation, allowing citizens to provide their feedback, concerns, and recommendations (2019). Once again, this type of reform focuses on increasing transparency and improving community trust, which reformists identify as much-needed changes to policing. Police departments should form citizen advisory boards with a variety of community members to make sure everyone has representation. Beyond increased trust, reformists want community oversight to ensure that the court and society take misconduct and abuse of power seriously and holds officers accountable. By creating an oversight body separated from the Office of Internal Affairs, reformists believe accountability and trust would increase. Attard and Olson (2013) identify three primary approaches to citizen oversight, which include “conducting investigations, monitoring police investigations, and civilian review boards” (p. 4). To be successful, citizen oversight/review boards need ample resources, access to officials and information, appropriate training, transparency, and adequate funding (p. 10).

Lastly, many community members support increasing diversity in the police department, which focuses on improving community trust, especially with BIPOC communities. Keating and Uhrmacher (2020) report that many major police forces are significantly whiter than the communities they serve, and scholars argue this can hinder trust and affect crime rates. According to Vélez and colleagues (2015), trust between a citizen and officer increases when the

police agency is more diverse, and trust helps reduce crime. When more citizens trust the police, they feel more comfortable calling the police, reporting crimes, and asking for help when they need it. If an officer is more understanding of certain situations because they have similar experiences, there is less fear and more empathy in police-citizen interactions. Currently, 67% of police officers are white, and 15% of police officers are women. Even though diversity has increased over time, there is still more work police departments need to do, and some reformists believe this is an essential change that would considerably improve community trust.

Overall, police reform is composed of more simple and targeted approaches to increase community trust, police transparency, and police accountability. While community trust and police culture are important aspects of policing, other activists argue that changing the police requires more drastic measures.

### **“Defunding” the Police – Reallocate, Restructure**

Some critics label recent calls to “defund the police” as polarizing and deem them as unrealistic. Although this is the most popular slogan, it refers to the reallocation of police funding, moving some of the police budget into social services and police alternatives. Stemming from the distrust of law enforcement, the call to defund the police also recognizes that law enforcement has systemic problems that simple reforms cannot address. Furthermore, defunding the police involves a more proactive approach to policing, and activists argue that investing money in community programs and services should lead to a reduction in crime.

Most activist groups that support defunding the police emphasize the fact that state and local governments spent \$115 billion on the police budget in 2017, and 96% of that spending goes to operational costs like salaries and benefits (Urban Institute, 2020). State and local budgets vary greatly depending on the size of the community and department. However, across

the board, activists argue that there is too much money in the police budget and communities would benefit from more funding in other areas and a reduction in police presence and power. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, defunding the police involves “reinvesting the police budget savings into nonpunitive programs that benefit public safety and health” (2020). This includes increasing the budgets for housing, education, and violence prevention programs.

Along with the idea that police budgets are too large, activists believe that too many aspects of society involve law enforcement as first responders, which has resulted in the criminalization of mental health, homelessness, and school-related offenses. The police response to mental health crises is not only a problem because of the lack of appropriate training, but it also uses a substantial portion of the budget. The Treatment Advocacy Center found that on average, police budgets devote 10% of funds to responding to and transporting people with mental illnesses in 2017. Instead of using the budget to focus on crime, excessive responsibilities spread the police too thin, taking time and money to focus on situations they are not trained to handle. People with untreated mental illness are 16 times more likely to be killed by law enforcement (Treatment Advocacy Center, 2015). This is why one critical aspect of defunding the police involves reallocating the funding and responsibility of responding to mental health crises to social workers and other trained professionals. The response to mental illness is similar to how police respond to homelessness. Society criminalizes unhoused individuals and people with mental health issues, and instead of receiving the resources they desperately need, they spend time in jail. Reinvesting some money from the police budget into affordable housing, temporary shelters, and mental health care would be a significant change to the current response. Some cities have introduced a new system where social workers and medics respond first to nonviolent 911 calls. By investing police funds into these trained professionals, activists believe

that people will get the help they need, and free up law enforcement to respond to more important and dangerous calls that do require police presence (Kendall, 2020).

Additionally, the defund movement mentions removing police officers from schools and reinvesting this money into hiring trained counselors and social workers. In response to school shootings, the number of school resource officers (SRO) has dramatically increased, along with many schools' policing budget. According to the ACLU (2019), about 14 million students are in schools with police, but no counselor, social worker, nurse, or psychologist present. This touches on the idea that America uses police to deal with any social or disciplinary problem, regardless of its impact on crime and safety. Activists claim that the presence of school resource officers "sends a disproportionate number of non-white students into the justice system at an early age" (Justice Policy Institute, 2020). Although schools introduced SROs to protect students from potential threats and intruders, Fisher (2020) argues that in schools made up predominately of low-income students or students of color, "police perceived students as the primary threat." Calls for defunding the police include school police as well, in hopes that counselors and social workers are better resources for behavior problems in children, and schools can stop pumping students into the juvenile justice system.

### **Abolition**

Beyond defunding the police, some activists believe the only way to deal with police misconduct, deep structural racism, and community distrust is to abolish the police. Abolitionists argue that policing as a system is "inherently flawed" and it represents the longstanding use of state-sanctioned violence to control Black people (Illing, 2020). Thus, they maintain that there is no way to reform this system.

The idea of abolition has been around for a while, with a primary focus on abolishing the Prison Industrial Complex (PCI) and capitalism. The *Critical Resistance* is the most prevalent modern abolitionist group, founded in 1977 with the help of activist Angela Davis. According to their mission and vision statements, the abolitionist vision is “the creation of genuinely healthy, stable communities that respond to harm without relying on imprisonment and punishment” (Critical Resistance, 2021). Another fundamental aspect of the abolition movement is the link to white supremacy – the systems in this country uphold white supremacy and to achieve racial equity, policymakers, activists, and government officials must dismantle these systems. Abolitionists argue that police and prisons are inextricably linked to capitalism – the criminal justice system functions to maintain capitalist social order, so “those who have power can do their business with the least amount of disruption possible” (Fernandez, 2018). The process of abolition will include reimagining a society that meets everyone’s basic necessities, where well-equipped communities can provide for their safety and wellbeing (*8toAbolition*, 2020).

A commonly used slogan within the abolition movement is “Disband, Disempower, and Disarm” which McDowell and Fernandez (2018) analyzed and explained. Activists center their argument for disbanding, or abolishing, law enforcement on the understanding that America created the police to control Black people, and it continues to function this way. In order to achieve abolition, disarming and disempowering the police must happen. *For A World Without Police*, an abolition organization, identifies the core reason behind disarmament: “the only way to end police brutality and murder is to disarm the police entirely” (2016). Police militarization has provided police officers with a wide variety of weapons and surveillance technology that install fear in many communities and help to maintain the power and control of law enforcement. Disempowerment is a long-term goal, which involves “rebuilding community relationships to

solve social problems and oppose police violence” by making police obsolete (For A World Without Police, 2016). Abolitionist groups encourage people to rely on each other instead of calling the cops, so they do not invite the police into their communities.

Overall, activists recognize radical abolition as a long-term goal, with intentions to dismantle all systems of oppression that support white supremacy and achieve a society with “complete freedom and justice” (McDowell & Fernandez, p. 388). By targeting police as an institution, the abolition movement focuses less on trust and community relations, and more on unfixable systemic issues.

### **Critical Race Theory – Importance of Narratives**

When it comes to the issue of policing, racial injustice is an essential topic. Critical Race Theory is an important lens to use when looking at issues that involve racial injustice, as it emphasizes an intersectional approach. There are five principal tenets of CRT according to Solorzano and Yasso (2000), “the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism; challenge to the dominant ideology; the commitment to social justice; the importance of experiential knowledge; and the use of interdisciplinary perspectives.” Experiential knowledge, personal narratives, and acknowledging sources beyond academia is important CRT when looking at issues of racial injustice because it offers essential information that scholars and academics might miss when looking solely at data. After acknowledging the literature on the subject, it is important to hear personal stories and opinions, especially because the status of academia prevents many BIPOC and low-income individuals from accessing this space to share and learn. This study uses interviews and personal narratives to better understand what members of the community see as the best way to fix policing in America and emphasizes the stories and

experiences of these participants. The research conducted in this paper mainly focuses on BIPOC narratives because of the unique and important way they directly experience this issue.

## METHODS

### **Participants**

This study used a snowball sampling method to recruit participants from the Dallas Fort Worth area involved in local activism or local law enforcement. Participants needed to have a passion for racial justice, the criminal justice system, and local politics. In total, the researcher interviewed 6 activists and 3 police officers for this project. The sample started with participants from three activist groups recommended by the research supervisor and familiar to the researcher. These activists then helped identify other individuals who might be willing to participate. Because the sample size was small, the research intentionally chose initial participants who differed in interests and opinions to ensure that the sample was more varied and representative of the discourse surrounding the “best” way to handle the issues with law enforcement in the U.S. The initial activists included one participant involved in an abolitionist group while the others are currently involved in defunding and reform efforts.

### **Procedure**

To obtain consent and schedule interviews, potential participants received an email asking if they were willing to participate in an hour-long interview regarding policing in the U.S. After expressing interest, participants filled out a consent document online, agreeing to both participate in the study as well as video and audio recording during the interview. This study used semi-structured interviews that prompted participants to identify the root issues with law enforcement and the best way to fix said problems. The semi-structured format allowed the

interviewer to ask clarifying and supplemental questions, as well as give more discretion to the participants and what they felt was important to speak about. The study began with activist interviews to gather common themes in proposed police reforms, their justifications, and their anticipated effects. After this, the researcher interviewed law enforcement officers to assess the expected impact of activist proposals from the perspective of someone who works within the system. In this study, the interview questions consider both the how and why of police reform. Activists provided solutions they believe would fix some of the root issues with policing, as well as why those steps are necessary. Police officers shared their ideas and strategies for change, but also explained their opinion on the activists' suggestions.

### **Sample Characteristics/Demographics**

In total, six activists and three police officers (one retired) participated in this project. Of these 9 participants, 77% (n=7) identified as Black/African American, and 23% (n=2) identified as white. Due to the focus on racial injustice and the police impact on specific communities, it was important to make sure participants were diverse in their background, experiences, and identity. All participants were from the greater DFW area, including local activists and local police departments. Only one participant identified as female, the other eight were men. All of the participants are active in either police work or community activism that involves racial justice, equity, and the criminal justice system, making them credible and educated on the topic of police reform.

## RESULTS

### **Importance of personal experience**

Activist participants shared the reasons they stay involved in their community and how their personal experiences have shaped their opinions. For the community activists, all but one had previous negative interactions with police officers, many of which started in early childhood and still happen today. Many of the activists shared that they were from low-income neighborhoods, and as Black men and women, they felt targeted and stereotyped by police. As a result of being profiled and stereotyped, activists expressed a range of distrust, fear, and dislike of the police. However, the way each participant reacted to these emotions and feelings was different. Multiple activists shared that they were at one point interested in becoming a cop so they could be a “better cop” and fix things with their community – and actually protect and serve them. However, after reflection or experience, some decided that this path was not effective – there is no way to be a good apple. The whole system is corrupt, and within the departments, racism and prejudice are still prevalent.

Two participants were Black police officers (one retired, and one is currently on the force), and both started with the same goal and vision – to help their community and use their voices and experiences for good. However, the retired officer found that she could not make any impact as a Black officer because the U.S. and white people built the criminal justice system on racial profiling and racial criminalization, and police officers struggle with the need for power and control. She explained that “police are supposed to serve and protect. But no – in reality, they are here to serve and protect those *that look like them* from those that *don’t look like them*.” Out of uniform, she explained that fellow police officers racially profiled her driving down the street. One of the participants who is currently a police officer shared that he recognized the

problems he has faced as a Black officer but thinks that he is making a difference and can listen and understand concerns from citizens. He believes that he can use his experiences in the past to inform how he interacts with the public, and this can help improve community relationships.

Although some people shared past experiences, they did not necessarily share the same goals and ways to change the police. Personal experience was essential to their understanding of the problems with the police. Furthermore, although different, personal experiences also influenced white participants. Experiencing situations as a cop leads to a very different understanding of law enforcement issues. The white cop participant perspective someone who sees firsthand issues with the way society treats and interacts with police officers. The other white participant understood that his generally neutral or positive personal experiences with police officers was directly related to his status as a white man, so when considering the issues with police in our country, he listens to the stories and experiences of those from different communities to inform his opinions and goals.

Overall, personal experiences with police officers and an understanding of what other people experience were essential to how these activists and police officers understand issues with policing and racial justice.

### **Issues with Policing**

Before understanding what activists believe is the best way to improve policing in our country, it was important to develop an understanding of what activists identify as critical issues with policing. First, most activists identified the lack of trust with the community as a significant issue. Many described this as a “us vs. them” mentality. Although community members want to trust that police officers serve and protect citizens, many activists felt that in reality, police officers believe that citizens are the enemy. With increased militarization and aggression towards

citizens, activists think that the police arm themselves against the community, targeting and harming them instead of protecting them. One activist focused on the power dynamic of police vs. citizens and argued that “police are tools for control and oppression” and that trust is impossible to achieve between police and the community. Along with the problem of lack of trust is the idea that there is a lack of accountability. Activists stated that the criminal justice system does not hold police accountable for their actions, so they consistently get away with racist and criminal actions. Without accountability, police officers maintain their level of power, comfort, and control because they do not have to fear the consequences of their actions. Lastly, all but one participant emphasized that the primary issue with policing is that there is a history of neglecting, profiling, devaluing, and over-policing BIPOC and low-income communities.

### **Police Responses**

Additionally, the officers also shared what they believe are the critical issues with law enforcement in America, and the responses from the two officers were very different, especially due to their personal experiences. The first officer, a Black man who lived in a low-income neighborhood as a child, explained that law enforcement struggles with over-policing low-income communities, there is inadequate training, and there is a lack of community trust. However, he also expanded his response to say that the lack of trust and adversity goes both ways – police do not trust the community. The other police officer focused on his experience as a cop, explaining that the main issues with police were the facts that departments are understaffed and underfunded, and that cops receive “trials by social media” where people are quick to judge and vilify police officers when they see videos and stories in the media. Both officers clearly stated that there is distrust and adversity with the community and that repairing this relationship is essential to improving policing. However, there was a clear difference in what the other

significant issues were. The Black officer with personal experience of being targeted and stereotyped by police shared these stories and understood that racial inequity is a huge issue. However, the white officer focused more on how society and individuals harm the police and described research about racial inequity and reverse racism.

### **Police Reform**

Six out of nine participants advocated for simple police reform – goal-directed solutions to improve community trust and reduce racial bias. The most common suggestions included: increasing police diversity, forming effective citizen advisory boards, and improving the way police respond to mental health calls.

Increasing diversity in law enforcement was the most common police reform suggestion. Three activists and one cop believed that shifting away from a white male-dominated police force will help mend community trust with the police. One problem they identified with the current demographic makeup of many police departments is that it does not match the community they police. In communities where most people are BIPOC, the police department can still be primarily white officers. This can limit the effectiveness of the police force because the officers do not represent the members of the community, so the officers cannot relate to community experiences. Advocates of increasing diversity argue that seeing officers that look like yourself and share similar life experiences can improve trust. These activists believed that shared experiences and identities can lead to more effective communication and more understanding officers, which will help progress community relations with the police. Furthermore, participants explained that the increased diversity goes beyond impacting just the community but can also lead to education and conversations within the police department. Because officers from different backgrounds, racial groups, and gender identities bring unique

experiences and views to the table, they can communicate with each other to improve the police force as a whole. Fellow officers can have conversations, share their knowledge, and in turn, the entire police department can be more effective and develop their connections with the community they serve. However, it was important for these participants to point out that there are systemic and cultural reasons that police departments are not diverse and addressing this is necessary to improving diversity. This is an example of the limitations of simple police reform. Increasing diversity might have good intentions towards mending community relations, but it does not acknowledge systemic issues.

Several activists expressed that as Black men, they would feel like they turned their back on their community by becoming police officers. Even though they believe diversity would help, these activists stated that this might be difficult because many BIPOC individuals are not interested in becoming law enforcement officers and participating in a system that generally targets and harms their community. Even further, for those who do want to become a police officer, some barriers make it more difficult for BIPOC applicants. So, police departments must make efforts to improve the application and recruitment system. Activists advocated for increased community recruitment, especially in low-income areas that typical police recruitment efforts generally overlook. Additionally, one activist specifically argued that the guidelines for applicant disqualification should be more lenient when it comes to aspects like drug history, which can easily prevent many potential diverse officers from getting hired. If diversity is a priority, hiring policy and recruiting procedures should tailor to effectively increase applicants and officers from different backgrounds. However, some activists mentioned that diversity does not work because it does not challenge systemic issues with police, and police culture cannot change and improve completely simply by increasing the number of BIPOC, female, and

LGBTQ+ officers. The retired officer, who tried to use her personal experiences to be an understanding and caring cop, shared that she did not believe diversifying departments was effective at improving police practices. She tried to make a difference, but her “voice was not heard.”

The second most common suggestion was to create citizen advisory/review boards that have the power to subpoena evidence and punish, which would increase police accountability and improve community trust. Citizen advisory boards grant more transparency and communication between citizens and police officers. Many activists believed that the current lack of transparency from the police plays a large role in their lack of trust in the police. When only police officers have access to body camera footage or evidence/information about certain situations, participants felt like internal protection and corruption prevent society from holding officers accountable for misconduct. By involving citizens in the review of police actions, advocates felt increased accountability measures would satisfy the community. This stems from the “us vs. them” mentality issue, where activists think the police will protect each other and overlook corruption, racism, misuse of force, and other unacceptable behavior because they are “brothers in blue.” Forming a diverse and educated citizen review board would allow unbiased members to effectively evaluate officers and situations. Members of the board would have no obligation to protect or cover for the police. One participant made it very clear that the only way a citizen review board would actually work is if they have disciplinary power. With this power, police officers are aware that they cannot go unpunished for misconduct because community members have access to the evidence, and the ability to hold officers accountable for their actions. In turn, this would hopefully decrease the amount of police misconduct, racial profiling, and misuse of force because there would be tangible consequences to these actions. These

activists also point out that citizen advisory boards are helpful to police as well because increased trust can help them with obtaining information and resources from community members.

Although numerous activists supported this idea, the police officers were wary of this idea and felt that the internal affairs office does a great job at enforcing rules and encouraging good behavior. The officers felt that creating an effective, unbiased, and sufficiently educated citizen review board would be extremely time-consuming and expensive. Most importantly, it would be difficult to educate people for these boards because they would need to learn a wide variety of policies, laws, and history in order to properly educate them about law enforcement. Uneducated review boards would cause major problems, and according to the police participants, be more problematic and less effective than internal affairs because they would not properly understand situations involving police policy.

### **Defunding the Police**

Two activists argued that America needs to go further than police reform and suggested that defunding the police and reallocating funds would be the more appropriate response to fix issues with police and improve public safety and quality of life. These participants consistently referenced the systemic issues with police and the history of the police. Defunding the police is better than police reform because only addressing problems with individual police departments or officers would not change the oppression and force police can exert over citizens.

One activist explained that defunding the police involves reallocating police funds as well as reassigning some police duties to more appropriate groups. Police officers are currently responsible for responding to almost every type of problem (crime, mental health, traffic, etc.), these excessive duties overload officers, preventing them from effectively maintaining safety and

resolving conflicts. Reallocating funds involves reducing the funding to the police and moving it into other programs, specifically into resources for the community. This includes things like affordable housing, education, job training, mental health assistance, transportation, and more. Three activists emphasized the importance of relocating funds from the large police budget. The hope is that increased funding into these other areas will be more helpful in preventing crime without using police and punishment to achieve safe and healthy communities. One activist also labeled this as a helpful step in the process of eventually abolishing the police.

Creating alternative groups to take over some current police duties could lighten the load of police officers. Furthermore, these alternative groups would be more qualified and specialized to respond to certain issues. First, one activist believed that police often use traffic stops and enforcement for harassment and racial profiling. Additionally, these officers carry weapons, and traffic stop situations can escalate from a citation for something as minor as an expired car tag to an officer using deadly force. So, this activist argued that government officials should reassign traffic enforcement to an alternative and unarmed group, which would help prevent the wrongful death and racial profiling of many people. Furthermore, there is no need for police to respond to minor traffic accidents, floods, or trees in the road. Reducing police presence in daily life diminishes their power and control over the community and gives them more time to focus on more pressing issues like public safety. Beyond traffic violations, multiple participants mentioned changing who responds to mental health calls and argued that mental health professionals and social workers would be essential in a possible new way to respond to mental health situations.

Although activists advocated for defunding the police, the police officers did not support the idea as a whole. One officer expressing his concern with defunding the police, stated that,

“departments are already underfunded, moving money away would lead to further issues with lack of resources and slower response times.” Even though some activists think that the police budget is too big, this officer believed that the budget is not enough for police to effectively do their job and attend to every aspect of police work. This officer also stated that police departments are understaffed and if they have less money, the quality of candidates they will hire will be significantly lower, which would not be beneficial to improving community trust. However, although both current police officers did not indicate blanket support for defunding the police, they did support improving the mental health response in some way.

First, improved training would be essential to helping police respond better to calls that involve de-escalating mental health situations with the possibility of a violent outburst. The officers feared that sending a social worker or mental health professional without an officer would be very dangerous because they have no way to protect themselves if a situation escalates. One officer explained that there are many different types of mental health calls, some of which involve repeat callers who call for medication, transportation, or housing concerns. These individuals pull officers away from their other duties while mental health professionals could easily handle repeat mental health callers. So, while the officers did not generally support defunding the police, they do support alternative agencies taking over some of the duties that other groups are better equipped to handle because it takes unnecessary duties off their plate.

### **Abolition**

The most radical suggestion gathered from interviews was police abolition. One participant shared a detailed understanding of what abolition is and how to achieve it. First, the abolitionist addressed the problem with police reform. Simple reforms like increasing training and diversity can lessen the negative impact of police on the community, but they expand the

system (increase funding to pay for reforms, legitimize the policing system as it is). Abolition involves accepting that “there is no way to make the current system work in a way that doesn’t harm anyone,” so the best way to eliminate harm and racial inequity is to dismantle the current system, and restructure/reimagine a new way to keep communities safe. According to this abolitionist, safety is not connected to the police.

Abolition is broken up into a “diversity of tactics” that proactively work towards the end goal of a society that focuses less on punishment and crime, and more on safety and harm reduction. The tactics vary from grassroots organizers calling for abolition and creating plans for a world without police, to achieving short and long-term goals in policy change and public safety. For example, working towards abolishing the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, defunding the police, and increasing community support efforts are all goals to make abolition a more concrete and possible concept. All changes to the police should work to reduce their power and presence and should not hinder the feasibility of abolition in the future.

According to the abolitionist participant, a primary focus of abolition is investing in the community and decriminalizing social problems. On a local and personal level, one can help the abolitionist movement by refraining from calling the cops whenever possible. By calling the cops, people invite the police into their community or neighborhood, which could result in a dangerous or oppressive situation. By relying on neighbors and friends for safety (when possible), communities can form their own sense of protection and safety that does not require police. Abolition supports removing police officers from schools and replacing them with counselors, as well as involving mental health professionals or social workers in non-violent mental health calls. Furthermore, the healthcare system should handle social issues like homelessness or drug addiction, not the criminal justice system. This participant emphasized that

funding for community healthcare, mental health resources, and shelter would be more effective in helping unhoused individuals or those with substance abuse problems, than police and punishment.

Abolition acknowledges the racist and patriarchal history of the police and explains that because of this, there is no way to simply reform the system. The system is flawed from the beginning, and no police officer can do good when the laws and policies are inherently problematic. Although drastic and “imaginative,” abolition challenges the need for systems that perpetuate consistent harm on many communities. The abolitionist activist stated that abolition is not necessarily a goal, but a commitment to continued progress in dismantling systems of oppression while investing in communities to make society a better and safer place for everyone.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of what we can do to improve policing and why. By including a variety of perspectives, the results showed that there are some common suggestions for how to improve the police, but there is still a wide variety of strategies that stem from the same understanding of the issues with police. Even though most participants identify similar issues with police, they come to different conclusions on how to solve those issues. There seems to be a disconnect between what people identify as the main issues and how they propose to solve them. Although this study intended to answer the question “what *really* is the *best* way to fix these issues,” it showed that fixing these concerns is difficult and nobody knows the best way to address these problems. Most participants acknowledged the fundamental flaws of the policing system in America, but only some suggested solutions that try to stop/mitigate the perpetual systemic harm. A majority of the activists and officers advocated

for simple reforms that touch on accountability and trust with the police, which only touch on how race, gender, and other identities influence police relations.

Although some of the suggestions overlapped, activists and police officers strongly disagreed on ways to change policing. Both current police officers failed to acknowledge the severity and significance of the issues at hand, mainly the way the system and individual police officers treat low-income communities and people of color. Activists shared stories during interviews that revealed instances where they were racially profiled, and how this contributed to their fear and distrust of the police. The systemic and interpersonal racism from the police influence the quality of life of many people of color, but the police officers in this study focused more on the positives and simple changes they could make.

Increasing police diversity was a common suggestion throughout the interviews. Some research supports the idea that diverse police departments have better community relations. Ba and colleagues (2021) found that Black and Latinx officers use less force and make fewer arrests, especially against Black citizens. This suggests that increasing the diversity of police can lead to better treatment of BIPOC individuals by police. However, this does not acknowledge that the U.S. built the criminal justice system to uphold white supremacy, so officer demographics cannot completely change the treatment of Black people. Diversity sounds like a simple and effective fix to reduce racial tension and improve trust with police officers, but it distracts from the racist structure and policies of law enforcement.

Defunding or abolishing the police are drastic strategies but the significant issues with police are cultural, individual, and systemic, which all require radical solutions. Reallocating funds seems like a feasible and appropriate first step in the long-term goal of dismantling systemic oppression. Although radical, shifting some police responsibilities to alternative groups

and putting more funding into the community, addresses the main concerns people have with police. Some departments/cities have already begun this process. In Denver, healthcare professionals have replaced police officers on calls to non-violent mental health or public health calls. The STAR Program started around 6 months ago, and since then, nobody they have interacted with has been arrested (Sachs, 2021). Most calls have involved trespassing, unhoused individuals, or people struggling with mental health or substance abuse. Although new, this program has shown that it is feasible to start shifting some police responsibilities to better-qualified people.

The time for simple reform is over. Activists are continuing to identify broad systemic flaws with the police but are slower to grasp the understanding that reform cannot and will not make substantial change. The “wake-up call” this summer was just the beginning of a more widespread consensus that something needs to happen because the police unfairly murder too many people, especially Black individuals. This study shows that activists see the problem, they understand that police systematically and individually target BIPOC individuals and perpetuate significant harm. However, police officers fail to see their role in this problem, because they have the desire to protect and serve. Protection and service are unattainable goals when the policies and system actively harm and oppress certain groups. A need for community safety is undeniable, but this research shows that significant change needs to happen and taking steps towards defunding the police and reimagining public safety address the harm and oppression head-on.

The study originally attempted to find the solutions that were the most feasible so action steps could be made, and people could advocate for clear and effective strategies for change. However, when it comes to this issue, ideas that are easy and feasible are not always the most

effective. The end goal is not flawless or well-defined. There are no simple steps to unravel a system that has oppressed and targeted BIPOC individuals while supporting white supremacy for years. What is important is continuing conversations, listening to the stories of others, and pushing change in the right direction.

### **Limitations and Implications**

There are several limitations in the study methodology. First, the sample size was limited. The researcher only interviewed nine individuals, which is not representative of the wide variety of activists and officers in the DFW area, let alone the country as a whole. Furthermore, snowball sampling limits the scope of participants. Although snowball sampling was the most effective way to find and interview activists and officers in the DFW area, sampling bias was difficult to avoid. Sampling bias limits the generalizability of the data because the population of participants generally shares similar characteristics since participants in snowball sampling tend to recommend individuals like themselves. In this study, many individuals recommended people from their same community group or activist organization. It was challenging to find a variety of opinions because of the connections and opinions people shared.

Also, most participants offered insight into police reform, and only one participant was an abolitionist. Increasing the sample size would lead to more variety in opinions and suggestions for police improvement. Additionally, all participants were from the area, so it would be helpful to expand the number and geographical variety of participants in future research. Listening to more community members, activists, and officers is essential to a broader understanding of what citizens think America should do to fix issues with police. Researchers should have more conversations with people from outside the DFW area. Every police

department, city, and community need something different, so listening to activists on the local level is important.

As discussed in the literature review, there is a lack of literature on the more radical suggestions like defunding and abolition. These suggestions need to be further studied to better understand how to apply these concepts and goals to policy and change. Again, researchers should interview more abolitionists to continue building a better understanding of how to work towards this drastic and radical change.

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## APPENDIX A

### **Activist Interview Questions**

1. How did you become involved in this cause?
2. What do you see as the **main issues/problems** surrounding law enforcement in the United States?
  - a. What are the **root causes** of those issues?
3. **How** should we address these issues? What do you think are essential policies or changes that need to occur in order to fix these problems?
  - a. **Why** are those the best solutions?
4. What reforms, if any, do you think have made positive change in the **past**?
5. How does [*proposed solution from Q3*] interact with changes in **other systems or society**?
6. What would a **realistic timeline** be for implementing [*proposed solution*]?
7. Are there any **organizations, resources**, or personal **experiences** that have helped you come to these conclusions?
  - a. How has your work in the community influenced or changed your opinion?
8. Is there anything else you would like to add?
9. Are you able to provide **contact information** for other activists in your community who would be willing to talk about police reform?

### **Law Enforcement Interview Questions**

1. How viable is [*proposed solution from activists*] — Repeat for additional proposed solutions
  - a. What are the challenges around this proposal from a law enforcement perspective?

2. How has your work as an officer influenced or changed your opinion on issues surrounding law enforcement over time?

The law enforcement interviews also contained questions 1-4 from the activist interview.