

THESE
PROBLEMS
ARE NOT NEW



So What's the Deal with Defunding the Police?

-A Series-

Part 1: The History of Police in the U.S.

“Defund the police.” We’ve all heard this rallying cry for months, now. Whether online, at work, or literally in the streets, this phrase has become a part of our daily lives.

So why are so many people backing this initiative, and what does it really mean for us? What exactly are we talking about when we bring up defunding the police? And is it in our best interest as a nation?

To be able to fully answer these questions, we need to start by looking at the troubled history of law enforcement in our country.

The first police departments didn’t form until 1854. Before this, policing was done informally, with stark differences in how it was organized in the North vs. in the South.

- In the North, the Boston Night Watch used constables and volunteers to protect property and persons. Constables were paid based on the number of warrants they delivered.
- In the South, the first cops were Slave Patrols who were tasked with searching slave quarters, dispersing slave gatherings, and guarding roads and towns from delinquent slaves. They used violence and terror to keep slave populations in check.

From the beginning, true police departments were fraught with problems, many of which continue to this day.

The Boston Police Department, formed in 1854, began the trend of centralized, institutionalized policing across the U.S.

- **Centralized:** Has an authority structure isolated within itself, answerable to specific authority figures rather than to the needs of the public.
- **Institutionalized:** Operates on a set of rules and procedures dictated by the central authority.

Subsequent police forces, including eventual statewide police organizations, followed this type of model. **So who did these cops answer to?**

- Typically it was the politician in power in the city where the force was founded, or it was whichever town had the money to hire a private police force.
- An example of this is the **Pinkertons**, a private police force hired by Lincoln as a proto-secret service. They ended up being hijacked by wealthy elites to break up the organizing labor class.
 - This pattern of “union-busting” culminated in the **Homestead Massacre of 1892**, where the Pinkertons clashed with striking workers leading to martial law and violence.
 - The police brutality in this incident was so bad, the federal government passed the Anti-Pinkerton Act in 1893, limiting the government’s ability to hire private police.

Police reform continued into the 1900s as more cities developed municipal forces. **These reforms did not make things much better... But what did they do?**

- Police forces became further centralized.
- Military veterans in domestic law enforcement brought back **tactics they learned in war to use at home.**
 - The “father of modern policing,” August Vollmer, brought home techniques like **pin-mapping**, where criminal activity is tracked on a map, after using them in the Philippine-American war.
- This began a pattern of increased militarization in an effort to control Black and indigenous populations and the working class.

Through the prohibition era, corruption and bribery ran rampant in law enforcement.

- Politicians hired police to target their political enemies while the Mafia could just pay officers off.
- The **Wickersham Commission** in 1929 revealed many of the inhumane practices commonly used by police.

- o Those who were not so wealthy, such as businesses owned by people of color, were subject to fabrication of evidence and entrapment at the hands of police. Even the courts frequently dismissed many cases due to unwarranted searches and seizures.
- o Police use of brutality and torture during this time came to be known as “The Third Degree.”

Cue another wave of police reforms. What did these entail? You guessed it...

- **More centralization** further separated police from the communities they are supposed to serve. Specialized police units (narcotics, homicide, traffic, etc.) were formed at this time.
- While this was intended to decouple police from politicians, it actually increased the prevalence of Mafia and other gangs bribing the police.
- Through the 1950’s, further militarization took hold as **the method of police organization became an insular bureaucracy, out of touch with their communities’ needs.**

By the 1960’s the people were fed up. Police brutality had not decreased despite reforms. As civil rights became a public priority, protests erupted around the nation.

- That’s right, **protests against police brutality are not a new development.**
- When protests became violent, it was usually sparked by police brutality, as officers frequently sicced attack dogs and used water cannons on peaceful protesters.
- The **Katzenbach Commission** in 1967 revealed that police only deterred crime, failing to prevent it or remedy its causes.
 - o They found that the least-protected communities included low-income demographics, typically people of color.

By the 1970s, police had formed powerful unions that could pressure politicians into increasing their funds. A phenomenon referred to as the “Blue Wall of Silence” began, where cops don’t tell on each other after they commit violence.

Things get even worse. The International Union of Police Association formed in 1979. During a time of recession in the 70s and 80s, cuts to some aspects of police departments led to those departments becoming more specialized and more militarized, **effectively waging war on the people they were supposed to protect.** “Taylorization” reforms led to some more troubling developments:

- The newly-developed 911 system led to the creation of “reactive” patrols, punishing, but not preventing crime.
- Police became more isolated from the public, leading to officers viewing people as a dangerous threat, when in reality it was the officers who were a threat to the public.
- Specialized individual units **focused more on crime fighting, and less on social work.**

In the 1990's, police became further bureaucratized and militarized when the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 was passed by the Clinton administration.

- Mandatory minimum sentencing and a disproportionate focus on urban policing perpetuated a pattern of police targeting Black and indigenous populations.
- The bureaucratization of police was intended to build connections between police and their communities, but it resulted in increased funding for law enforcement.
- And in 1997, the **1033 Program** began to funnel military weapons and technology into local police departments...

If any of this sounds familiar, it is because these problems continue in policing to this day. Militarization, corruption, police brutality, and targeting of people of color have continued to be issues in police organizations all around the U.S. Attempts to address these issues have been unsuccessful, and these problems have gotten worse, not better.

People who call for **defunding the police** today recognize that these systemic issues are inseparable from police in the United States. **History shows us that reform does not work, and often makes things worse.**

Stay tuned for “Part 2: The Problems with Police Today”

Thank you for reading!!!

All of this information comes from publicly accessible sources.

If you think this is important information, please share it with your friends, family, and community.

If you want to dig deeper, check out all of our sources below.

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