



A WORLD
WITHOUT
POLICE

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Imagine a world without police.

We live in a society where almost every social problem--from noisy neighbors to broken taillights--has become a point of police intervention. The result is an epidemic of harassment and violence. But what if we found other ways to solve our issues? What if we rolled back police power, and abolished the institution entirely? Here you are invited to think and act with other visionaries, and find ways to achieve a police-free world.



Police officers arrest a demonstrator during a march held for Kimani “Kiki” Gray in East Flatbusb, Wednesday, March 13, 2013, in New York. The 16-year-old was shot to death by plainclothes police officers. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)

I. THE PROBLEM

Police brutality activists often say that police are *supposed* to protect and serve, and then denounce them for not doing so. But these assumptions about the purpose of the police are mistaken. From their inception down to the present, police forces have protected and served the wealthy few against the many, and the white against the rest. Unequal enforcement and violence aren't aberrations: they are a necessary part of the job.

Historically, police forces were created to protect the property of businesses and the wealthy and enforce white supremacy. In cities they formed to repress the growing numbers of poor people that accompanied the rise of industrial capitalism, while on plantations and in agricultural colonies they formed in response to the threat of slave revolt.

In England, the first police force was funded by wealthy merchants to prevent theft on the commercial docks of London. This effort laid the basis for the establishment of the London Metropolitan Police, the first modern police force in the world, in 1829. In the U.S, police departments were established in the mid-1800s in the urban Northeast to control the riots and disruptive street culture of the immigrant poor, protect the property of the

middle class, and enforce fugitive slave laws. In the South police evolved out of slave patrols, and focused on preventing slaves and free black people from aiding escapes or carrying out insurrections.¹

In every case, the police were invented to defend the property and interests of the white ruling class. They prevented the exploited from disrupting capitalist society, whether through antisocial behaviors or conscious rebellion.

Today, despite the diversification of police services, **the main activity of police remains street patrol.** Street patrols enforce a range of ordinances to manage the poor and other populations seen as disorderly or insubordinate. They use race—and especially blackness—as a key identifier



Tompkins Square police riot, New York City, 1874. Police attacked an unemployed people's demonstration demanding public works programs.

for potential targets. Police rarely focus on workplace abuses by bosses or “white collar” crime by the wealthy. Instead they protect commercial areas, and to a lesser extent, the property of the middle classes. Crucially, the most widespread form of oppression in capitalist society is not policed at all: our exploitation on the job, where the value we create for employers is stolen as profits. Exploitation of this kind is considered entirely normal and lawful, a crime hidden in plain sight.

Today as in the past, police protect the living, working and commercial arrangements that keep capitalism running, and those who benefit from them.²

Because the fundamental role of the police is to defend this unequal system, **it is impossible for police to protect and serve everyone equally.** Police departments direct their attention toward the racialized poor and away from the wealthy, and leave everyday capitalist exploitation untouched.

As exploitation continues, the rich are made richer, and elites acquire even more power to direct police attention. “Equality under the law” is an empty phrase in this kind of society, much like “freedom of speech” when airtime is bought and sold by corporations.

Because police work for the government rather than any particular capitalist, **policing appears to serve the public as a whole, and those targeted by police appear to be enemies of the public.** Everyday policing vilifies the poor and nonwhite, and invites better-off workers to seek protection from the police alongside the ruling class. In the U.S. police this process of division has always been racist. Slave patrols united poor white yeomen with wealthy slave masters, while enforcing the subjugation of black slaves. In the same way, contemporary policing divides first-class citizens from second-class ones, in the name of universal rights.



Community policing officers partner with nonprofit organizations, Philadelphia, 2011.

Because the police maintain capitalist inequality, **policing always requires the threat and use of violence.** This is what sets the police role apart from all other state institutions. Unlike other bureaucracies, police have the authority to take away individual rights by force—including taking your life. Regardless of the legal limits placed on them, the police role requires the power to detain, beat, imprison and kill in the service of law and order.

Police are also violent in a second sense: as long as they do their job, everyday exploitation continues. When police enforce “equality under the law,” poor people are paid starvation wages while their bosses profit, they get

evicted by the landlords who own their homes, and so on. No matter how nonviolent police forces become, this systemic violence will always remain. No amount of training, legal oversight, or reform can alter the fundamental violence of the police institution.

The only way to end police violence is through a revolutionary transformation of society, making wealth and resources freely available to all. Far from reforming the police while maintaining their current role, this aim requires abolishing the police altogether.



*Police patrol skid row in Los Angeles, July 2014.
Eight months later LAPD officers would shoot and kill “Africa,” a
skid row resident, while attempting to evict him from his tent.
(Los Angeles Times / Jabin Botsford)*



Protesters rallying against police violence block both directions of Interstate 80 in Berkeley, California. December 9, 2014. (Photo: Noah Berger, AP)

II. THE STRATEGY

Cops don't just kill. They patrol schools, hospitals, and public transit. In most cities, they roam the hallways and walkways in housing projects and apartment complexes. They are stationed in the welfare office, the Walmart, the movie theater and the park. In all these spaces, they enforce white supremacy and protect property and commerce over human life. In fact, they carry out a vital task for capitalism: disciplining poor, Black, queer, indigenous, trans, non-white and disabled people into accepting deteriorating living conditions, reproducing their social difference and isolation, and punishing any and all dissent against this status quo of alienation and exploitation.

You can't reform a landmine, but you can dismantle it, destroy the factories that made it, and dissolve the governments and businesses that profit off of its existence. In the same way, we're not fighting for a new police—nicer, more diverse, with better training than their predecessors—nor even a new justice system. **We're fighting for a world without police.** We're working to disempower, disarm and disband police units and entire agencies wherever they operate, and revolutionize society as a whole.

DISEMPOWER

If, as the case of rapist Oklahoma cop Daniel Holtzclaw demonstrates, our bodies are not our own; if, as the cases of Eric Garner and Alton Sterling demonstrate, everyday survival in a capitalist world is punishable by humiliation, assault and death, then the struggle can not be one to get a more diverse, “softer” or more “community-based” policing. **The absolute and unanswerable power the police have over our lives is directly proportional to the power we lack. This reality can only begin to change when we disempower the police in all the spaces they operate.**

How can we disempower the police and empower ourselves? This is a long-term project, which will involve rebuilding community relationships to solve social problems and oppose police violence, and replacing capitalist fragmentation with free association.



A cop body slams a teenage girl before dragging her across the classroom at Spring Valley High School in South Carolina, Oct. 2015.

First, we can rely on each other rather than the police. Anytime we call the police for help, we risk someone we know being hurt or killed. But if we develop lines of communication, opportunities for self-education, and collective conflict resolution in many different settings, we can start to exclude police from our lives. Instead of police mediating our conflicts, we can begin resolving them ourselves.

Second, we can build fighting organizations against police

violence. These could include groups specifically geared toward monitoring police conduct or challenging their legitimacy in our communities. At the same time, community, school and workplace groups of all types can oppose the expansion of police powers and respond to police violence when it happens.

Third, we can develop “cop free zones” in our communities, once we are strong enough to solve social problems ourselves and confront police impunity. This will involve reclaiming public spaces to air grievances, imagine alternatives and socialize, while challenging the fragmentation that capitalism produces and police enforce.³ They could begin as temporary “No Cop Zones,” and expand as semi-permanent occupations that a community holds, supports, and defends.

Here are some concrete ideas for how to begin disempowering the police:

At Home

- Develop community “phone trees” and **rapid response networks** to relay important information, alert folks to police checkpoints, raids or surveillance, and respond to threats from the police in real time. Record police conduct, take collective action to stop police violence when it is happening, and care for those victimized by it.
- Study and share **conflict mediation skills**, so that minor beefs like noise complaints can be settled between neighbors without involving the police. Begin building these skills in neighborhood and tenant associations.
- Build survivor-led groups to **defend against domestic violence and sexual assault**. People turn to the cops when they have no other way to address violence in private spaces, but alternatives like support networks, crisis centers and self-defense groups can begin to leave police intervention behind.
- Fight against eviction, whether from a house, an apartment, or a tent. Police exist to protect the property of landlords and bosses and enforce their ability to make working class folks pay for access to it. **Build tenants’ unions, solidarity networks, eviction defense groups**, or other organizations that can defend a neighbor’s access to keeping a roof over their head, regardless of their ability to pay for it. When the police

get called in to enforce an eviction, be there to keep them out and keep a neighbor in their home.

In the Streets

- Encourage neighbors to **refuse to talk to the police** when they come snooping around the neighborhood. Protest and discredit police programs that incentivize neighbors to snitch and thus contribute to each others' criminalization and incarceration.
- Build **neighborhood networks** to intervene in police activity wherever it happens. Forms of this are already popping up around the U.S. and can be activated through existing lines of communication from ongoing community, workplace or housing organizing. Draw examples from copwatch on how to record police interactions, but don't stop at monitoring the police. Create a collective culture of resistance that intervenes and deters police from using force and arresting vulnerable targets.
- Build women, queer and trans led groups to **defend ourselves against street harassment and queer bashing**. When we are able to defend ourselves, we won't have to rely on the same police who harass us in times of crisis.
- Organize campaigns to **repeal repressive police policies** at local, state and federal levels, like Stop-and-Frisk in New York City or Civil Gang Injunctions in Houston.
- **Prevent the construction of police stations** and other facilities through protests and blockades. Set up informational tables outside of police stations and storefront locations to raise awareness about attempts to expand heavily policed areas.
- Support a **militant protest culture** to stop police from controlling and undermining demonstrations, and prevent arrests in the streets.

At School

- Wage campaigns to **remove police from schools**, including elementary, secondary and higher education institutions. These efforts can be led by

student groups, teacher's unions, or parent associations, on their own or in coalitions.

- Protest and **shut down police recruitment campaigns**, for example at job fairs or career days.
- **Oppose police institutions using schools** for their own purposes, whether through research partnerships that “reform” police while rebuilding their legitimacy, or efforts to house riot police during major protests.



Graffiti covers part of a police message that encourages snitching in New York City.

On the Job

- Join with co-workers to **disrupt material support for police departments** or refuse service to cops, like the UPS workers who carried out a Hands Up, Don't Ship action in Minneapolis. Remember, there is strength in numbers! Coordinate with co-workers to minimize the bosses' retaliation for these kinds of actions.
- Demand that labor unions **disaffiliate from police unions**, like teaching assistants in California recently demanded of the AFL-CIO.
- Within existing job-related organizations, develop the collective's capacity to **defend against police repression**. Study and develop strategies &

tactics for out-maneuvering the police when you need to defend picket lines, building occupations, or other protest actions. Bosses and cops work hand in hand to keep workers from winning any power on the job.

- Organize **Know Your Rights workshops** to minimize the legal impact of police interactions, whether on strike or at any other time.

DISARM

The BLM movement was born out of violence. The list of Black and Brown people that have been murdered by police is longer than many of us would like to acknowledge: in 2015, the police murdered 1,146 people nationally, and 2016 is shaping up to be just as deadly with 611 killed by the month of July.

Out of all the victims of police terror, only a handful make headlines or become active martyrs in our struggle. Slogans such as “I can’t breathe” or “Hands up, don’t shoot” serve as reminders of the violence we endure. And



A woman holds a sign during a demonstration in Union Square, New York City. May 2015.

the violence continues when we stand up and fight back: millions watched as protesters from Baltimore to Baton Rouge were brutalized by the police.

Police are granted an immense array of weapons that many of us have experienced first hand. The Ferguson rebellion offered a perfect

example: in Ferguson, police showed out in force with armored vehicles, LRAD systems, stun grenades, short barreled assault rifles, camouflage and military grade body armor. As if this weren't enough, police still carried standard weapons such as handguns, tasers, batons, handcuffs and pepper spray, and they were trained in hand to hand combat to "subdue" civilians.

Surveillance and cyber technology are also major weapons in the hands of law enforcement agencies. An assortment of equipment such as stingray devices, license plate scanners, facial recognition and behavioral analytics software assist police in monitoring our actions and anticipating our next moves. They monitor social media and arrest people for daring to express anti-police sentiment. There have already been documented cases of the Department of Homeland Security surveilling BLM activists.

Police armaments are used every day to injure and kill poor people and people of color, and are further employed to repress protests and resistance. **The only way to end police brutality and murder is to disarm the police entirely.**

Disarming the police involves more than taking away officers' deadly weapons. It also includes removing the "less than lethal" weapons, and cyber and surveillance tools, that police departments use to repress us. Ultimately it requires a revolutionary transformation of society as a whole, since removing their ability to inflict violence prevents police from maintaining capitalist exploitation and oppression. However, every effort to disarm the police provides our movement breathing room to survive, grow, and work toward this ultimate goal.

Here are some ways to begin disarming the police:

- **Close the pipeline between the military and the police**, by shutting down programs that sell military equipment to police departments, provide military training to officers, or find veterans jobs in the police force.
- **Expose and denounce political repression**, including the use of paid informants, undercover officers, and social media monitoring of activists by police departments.
- Study and **share security techniques for activists**, including practical methods of preventing internet surveillance and decreasing the likelihood and effectiveness of infiltration.

- Launch campaigns to **remove police weapons in specific settings**, such as schools, hospital, and ultimately on street patrol.
- Protest local, city and state budget appropriations for police forces and work to **defund the police**. This will disrupt departments' ability to buy weapons, hire more officers, and make the job desirable by providing pay incentives.

DISBAND

We're not the first to envision a world without police. Residents of Marinaleda, Spain have lived for 30 years without municipal police. In Mexico, indigenous communities in Guerrero developed their own security in 1995 to replace the corrupt police force, while Zapatista communities in Chiapas have resolved conflicts autonomously since driving out state authorities in 1994. All these efforts seek to disband police institutions and replace them with forms of collective, democratic power and conflict resolution. None of them is perfect, but they all indicate a way forward. Achieving police free communities is not a question of "if," but how.

Disbanding the police means more than the creation of "community peacekeepers" who will continue to enforce capitalist exploitation, oppression and inequality through other means. Along with disempowering and disarming, disbanding police institutions aims at a larger goal: the abolition of police and policing entirely.

As police murders continue and superficial reforms prove unable to stop them, more and more people are recognizing that the problem is not within police institutions—it is the institution of policing itself. As we stated in "The Problem" section, the only way to end police violence is to transform society, and make wealth and resources freely available to all. Far from reforming the policing while maintaining their current role, this aim requires abolishing the police altogether.

In other words, we're not fighting for a new police—nicer, more diverse, with better training than their predecessors—nor even a new justice system. We're working to disempower, disarm, and disband individual police units and entire agencies, and transform society as a whole. We're fighting for a world without police.

Here are some steps to disband the police:

- Transform how we think about crime, conflict and identity. We can break the association between crime and violent punishment, justice and jail cells, and criminality and certain kinds of people. We can expose how “crime” talk is used to dehumanize black, indigenous, NBPOC, poor, queer, unruly and rebellious people. When we don’t think in terms of punishment, control and division, we can begin to imagine what real justice might entail.
- Fight to disband particular police units when they are involved in scandals or otherwise politically vulnerable, as happened to the NYPD Street Crimes Unit that murdered Amadou Diallo in 1999.



Protester holds a disarm HPD sign at a Baltimore solidarity rally in Houston, TX. May 2015.

- Decommission police precincts when they’re threatened by funding shortages, demographic changes, or challenges by popular protest.
- Organize to drive police forces out of specific institutions, such as schools or hospitals. Instead of replacing them with private security, develop community safety teams that are democratically elected and directed by those they protect.
- Demolish the political power of police unions, including lessening their influence in local governments, and ultimately decertifying and disbanding their unions entirely.

- Once our movement is strong enough, disband police forces entirely in democratic self-governing areas, and replace them with systems of community safety and conflict resolution.

The fight to disempower, disarm and disband the police will be long and complex. Strategies will vary from place to place depending on conditions. Do you have ideas for campaigns in your community, or are you already involved in one? Follow and contribute to [A WORLD WITHOUT POLICE](#) to stay connected with the fight for a police-free world.

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1. On the origins of the police in England and the U.S, see Miller, Wilbur. (1977). *Cops and bobbies: Police authority in New York and London, 1830-1870*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Williams, K. (2004). *Our enemies in blue: Police and power in America*. Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press; and Hadden, Sally. (2001). *Slave patrols: Law and violence in Virginia and the Carolinas*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
2. See Neocleous, Mark. (2000). *The fabrication of social order: A critical theory of police power*. London: Pluto Press.
3. Mike Davis provides a historical look at this changing landscape in the context of Los Angeles. Davis, Mike. (2006). *City of Quartz*. New York: Verso Press.



March For Our Future, Philadelphia Pennsylvania. January 8, 2016.

ABOUT US

A WORLD WITHOUT POLICE is maintained by a collective of organizers from across the U.S. and internationally. We work to connect people struggling against the everyday violence of the police, and to provide practical, organizational and theoretical tools for use in our movement.

We believe police violence and exploitation cannot be ended through reforms (better trained, better monitored, more friendly cops) but only with the total abolition of the police as an institution. As we explained in this pamphlet, this is because police forces maintain the inequalities of capitalist society, and will continue to be violent and racist as long as they exist.

At the same time, we know police abolition is only possible as part of a broader revolutionary project to abolish the state in its entirety, along with capitalism, white supremacy and patriarchy. The struggle against the police cannot be divided from the broader movement or treated as a single-issue campaign.

This is because “the police” is more than just a group of men and women who wear badges: it is also a historical project of division, upholding a social order where the lives of black, POC, poor, queer and trans people’s lives are forfeit. If we only disband police departments, their role could be replaced by non-uniformed security guards, white supremacist militias and patriarchal family networks without fundamentally transforming our social relations. A world without police—not simply as police exist now, but as a

form of division—requires revolution.

For these reasons, we build our movement with police abolition as a goal, while recognizing that our struggle includes the total abolition of the state and capital. Local campaigns can work toward these ends by degrading the power and effectiveness of police forces on the ground, and building the capacity of our communities to govern themselves and keep themselves safe. Instead of providing police new tools and legitimacy through reform, this strategy lays the basis for a truly free society.

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FURTHER READING

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