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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Not if – but how – to defund the police: Response to our critics

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Our article (Fleetwood & Lea, 2022) advocated a strategy of 'minimal policing' oriented to dismantling institutional racism, sexism and class oppression in policing. Our approach aimed to do this by breaking down the institutional isolation and autonomy of the police as a state agency. This would involve, first redefining the police role essentially as backup to other (mainly welfare) agencies far better suited to intervention in the vast majority of local crime and conflicts than police and, second, placing police intervention under the direction of a 'Controller' – an expanded and democratised variant of the (Scottish) Procurator Fiscal. We further specified that a continued role for police in governance of public space would become an administrative role under the direct control of mayors. Rather than debating *whether* police should be defunded, our focus is on *how*.

There are two main points of difference between McElhone et al. (2023) and ourselves. The first is *how we understand 'defunding'*. McElhone et al. say that defunding is 'not a stand-alone policy demand' and cannot be set apart from abolitionism. However, we found that many US cities *had* responded to the slogan by cutting budgets for police. In 2020, Austin City Council Texas voted unanimously to cut their police budget by a third, redirecting funding to state social services (ABC News, 2020). There is no indication that Austin (or any of the other cities which have cut budgets) intend to abolish their police. So, as we stated in the article, we approach defunding as both a possible step on the road towards abolitionism, but also as a project in and of itself.

We wholeheartedly support the kinds of non-reformist reforms proposed by abolitionists – withdrawing lethal weapons, repealing police powers with racist outcomes (i.e., Prevent, stop and search) and scrapping 'net widening' legislation (Abolitionist Futures, 2019). But, taking

seriously the need to prioritise security over punishment, to re-imagine social problems as requiring social (and not criminal) solutions, also requires radical changes in policing. While abolitionists have devoted considerable attention to thinking through community alternatives to police, far less attention is devoted to what a reduced police force might look like, and how it might function with other – now better funded – agencies. This is the question we sought to address. If this is a 'realist' question, then so be it. But, we would resist attempts to characterise this as a debate between 'abolitionists' and 'realists', a debate in criminology that goes back several decades (see, e.g., Hulsman, 1986; Lea, 1987; Matthews, 2018).

This leads us to our second point of difference – *the role of the state*. Our premise is that the state ought to play a primary role in protecting its citizens, ensuring basic safety and security. By contrast, McElhone et al. seem to work from the premise that state policing is fundamentally and unavoidably repressive. They argue that our proposal for police reform is 'contradictory and unrealistic' because 'it treats inequality and discrimination as unfortunate side effects of policing, rather than core to police function'. However, the notion that enforcement of inequality and discrimination is 'core' to *any* form of policing is never argued for, it simply functions as a starting point in their argument. Our assumption is that the police function is contradictory: capable of embracing both repression of opposition to inequality, and at the same time support for victims of various forms of violence. Which aspect predominates is a question of the balance of historical and social forces. To counter our arguments our critics need to show why this perspective is flawed, something they fail to even attempt.

Instead, having simply asserted that oppression is 'core to police function' they declare the desirability of 'social change that involves building alternative systems of care, support and reparation that eliminate the need for prisons, police and punishment'. Well. we couldn't agree more! But how is this to be achieved? A level of 'care, support and reparation' sufficient to eliminate the need for *any* police intervention is unlikely in the immediate future. Even if the response to violence is reparation rather than criminalisation, the role of police in identifying and restraining perpetrators cannot be entirely eliminated. These are tasks that require professional expertise and which cannot be simply decentralised to community volunteers or groups. How would a murder investigation in which the killer was unknown to the local community be conducted if not by police detectives? This would be the case even if police no longer acted as lead agency, as we propose.

We suggest that in reality our critics realise this. They do not seek the immediate abolition of all police but talk rather of 'reducing the size, scope and power of police'. This is precisely what we advocate although, unlike our critics, we elaborate in some detail how this might work. We consider the relation between police and welfare agencies, the role of the Controller and of mayors. Our critics argue that police 'rarely keep communities safe from violence, and often cause more violence'. We quite agree, and this is why we want to radically reorganise policing!

Our critics attribute to us a 'naive, even romanticised view of the state and state institutions'. This rather characterises their own view of the state as a monolithic fortress concerned only with repression rather than as a more complex set of interlocking institutions and a 'terrain of political struggle' involving conflicting social forces (Poulantzas, 1978). Thus, for our critics any notion of police being replaced by welfare agencies is immediately intercepted by the 'fact' that the welfare agencies, as part of this monolithic fortress 'are entangled with punitive practices of policing and control' and therefore 'engage in policing, even if they are not "the police"'. And by policing is meant, of course, repression. The historic role of welfare agencies in disciplining the poor is well known as is the fact that the welfare state was a gain for working people. Presumably our critics would agree that recent privatisation and authoritarian restructuring of welfare state agencies should be resisted precisely because welfare has played a vital role in defending and sustaining

working-class communities. From this standpoint our proposed shift from police to welfare as first responders to numerous problems of conflict and violence cannot be seen as simply a shift from one form of repressive policing to another.

But our critics believe that it is precisely this and what have they to put in its place? Again, we are greeted with recitations of the need for 'dismantling carceral norms and cultures across society, while simultaneously building viable strategies to prevent violence, address inequality, repair harm and meet people's basic needs'. How precisely is this to be achieved if not by substantial efforts at reform of the type we specify in our article? Throughout our critics' polemic we find not a single suggestion for practical reform. Indeed, practical reforms are denounced as 'dead-end reform campaigns' and in their place we get simply more variations on the theme of 'only by building political power in social movements, capable of overcoming the resistance of the political and police establishment, that meaningful change can be made'.

Community initiatives can be tremendously powerful. In our article we highlighted the work of the People's Budget in Los Angeles in successfully redirecting police funding towards housing, health care and public services. But something notable – and important – about examples of US defunding is that moves to restrict police funding, and therefore power, have often come from *within* local government and city mayors. It is this audience that we especially have in mind. And, as we note in our article, there are already examples of state responses to crime that are not police led.

But how is such meaningful change to be conceived? The problem is that if you take the existing state of affairs as an indication, not of the necessity of reform but of its impossibility, then you have no strategy. By contrast, as communities and social movements build their strength to deal with violence and social problems they are likely to organise precisely the type of reforms we have advocated in our article.

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