

# De-funding the Police in the UK

Jennifer Fleetwood and John Lea, Goldsmiths, University of London

---

De-funding the police involves shifting funds from police budgets towards social services and community-based crime prevention initiatives. As Critical Resistance (2030: 3) articulate, it is a movement to:

... invest in things that actually make our communities safer: quality, affordable, and accessible housing, universal quality health care, including community-based mental health services, income support to stay safe during the pandemic, safe living wage employment, education, and youth programming.

For some, de-funding is a step towards police abolition. For Alex Vitale, a leading US academic supporter of police abolition, "any real agenda for police reform must replace police with empowered communities working to solve their own problems." (2017: 30). Vitale's work builds on what McDowell and Fernandez (2018: 377) describe as 'radical' abolitionist writing. This work (inter alia Chazkel et al. 2002; Gilmore 2007; Davis 2011) understands criminal justice as integral to maintaining racial inequality. Racial justice therefore demands abolishing prisons and police. This work is allied with, but distinct from, European liberal abolitionism (McDowell and Fernandez 2018; Ryan and Ward 2015) which – like British criminology – has struggled to integrate race (Phillips et al. 2019).

In the USA, de-funding advocacy is well established (Williams 2004; Critical Resistance 2009; Kaba 2014; Murakawa 2014; Vitale 2017) but has been invigorated by contemporary Black Lives Matter protests. Indeed, several US cities (where police funding is a city matter) including Minneapolis (Levin 2020), and Baltimore (Hellgren 2020) have been prompted to undertake de-funding initiatives. In Los Angeles, local councillors propose reducing the LAPD budget by 8% (amounting to savings of \$150million) (Los Angeles Times 2020). Seattle looks set to defund their police by half (Associated Press 2020).

In the UK, calls to defund the police are comparatively novel but have support from academics and activists (Abolitionist Futures no date; Duff and Kemp 2020; Elliott-

Cooper 2020). The debate has different starting points in the two countries, however. In the US, de-funding demands confronting expanding police budgets - in Los Angeles police spending has expanded by 58% over the last decade to absorb half the city budget (LA Times 2020). In England and Wales, by contrast, police have been steadily de-funded since the economic crisis of 2009, resulting in about 19,500 fewer police officers (about 14% of 2009 levels) (Home Office 2019b: 4). Moreover, in the UK the balance between police and social services has moved against the latter with police, despite financial restraint, retaining a wide range of prevention and emergency responsibilities previously undertaken by social services (Millie 2014). In part due to massive financial cuts in social services over the last decade, the police are often the only state agency available in a crisis, despite themselves experiencing de-funding.

This 'de-funding from above' has in no way reduced police violence toward Black people in the UK. Since monitoring was introduced in England and Wales in 2017, police use of force has increased by 36%, from 313,000 incidents in 2017/8 to 428,000 in 2018/9 (Home Office 2018, 2019a). Further, they report that use of force against Black people constitutes 16% of the total (Home Office 2019b), despite Black people representing only 3% of the population of England and Wales (ONS 2011). In London, use of Tasers is racially disproportionate (Noor 2018). Black people are also still six times more likely to be searched than white people for drugs (Eastwood et al. 2013) and are more likely to die in police custody (Inquest 2020) for which, since 1969, no officers have been held accountable. The past decade in England and Wales makes clear that disinvestment in police alone is insufficient to reduce violence against Black people.

The language of 'de-funding' has been effective in prompting rapid change in the USA, but if the idea is to gain credence in the UK then it needs to be attuned to our particular institutional arrangements. In the following we take inspiration from BLM and police abolitionism and ask questions about ways forward for police abolition in the UK context. We start with the left realist commitment to take seriously the problems of crime and lack of security; as BLM protests attest, security and safety are highly racialised. Kinsey, Young and Lea's (1986: 205) claim that the state can and should protect us remains apt, despite – or perhaps especially because of – the contemporary context of austerity and neoliberalism.

## **Shifting the balance**

Given the established limitations of the police for managing social problems, it is hardly contentious to argue for social rather than criminal justice responses for a whole range of social problems:

Rough-sleeping, mental health crises, drug and alcohol-related problems, domestic violence, issues relating to Covid-19.... could be far more effectively and humanely addressed by well-funded, community-based emergency support teams, crisis intervention and violence de-escalation workers (Duff and Kemp 2020).

'De-funding' is part of a wider strategy of 'structural reforms' aimed at eliminating the necessity of the police as the agency of first response, and removing their legitimacy as the only institution responsible for social control and security. But, we contend that the state retains responsibility for keeping people safe and maintaining public order, at least in the interim. Given that abolition is a process, we might start by considering if or how police and social services might work together in the interim as producers of social order, as resources and legitimacy move from police to alternatives. To illustrate, domestic violence, could be supported by properly funded urgent social services. Reflecting the shift in power, police may be necessary as backup but acting on the direction of social workers. This kind of response would be better placed to reflect the diverse justice needs of domestic violence survivors (McGlynn and Westmarland 2019). All this would require profound changes in social work as well as police training. Social work must be rescued from its status as a forgotten, and under-resourced emergency service (Allen 2013).

With the aim of shifting the balance, police could withdraw from spheres where there already exist better alternatives, reversing what Andrew Millie (2013) describes as 'policification' - the encroachment of police on issues better handled by other agencies. Disaster management is currently undertaken by police but could arguably be done by the fire brigade, for example (Millie 2014). Police not only enforce school attendance (Millie 2014) but are actually present in schools in England and Wales (Joseph-Salisbury 2020). The case for care rather than punishment is especially compelling in

relation to children and young people (Goldson 2005). Clearly a social worker, rather than a police officer, would be better equipped to deal with children in school, including violence on campus (Millie 2014). The criminalisation of children in care (Scruton and Haydon 2002; Hunter 2019) is also a key site for immediate reforms, especially given that so many are Black and minority ethnic. Under the hostile environment, border control is undertaken in a variety of settings which ought to prioritise duty of care – the NHS, housing, schools and universities. Removing responsibilities to report is essential in rolling back criminalisation of foreign nationals, who are disproportionately of ethnic minority.

Likewise, responsibility for a range of crime problems could be shifted from police to public health. An obvious example here is drug and alcohol related problems where public health approaches focus on reducing harm, as is already happening in Scotland (Scottish Government 2018). In London, the Mayor's office has adopted a public health approach to knife crime, hoping to emulate success in Glasgow. Thus, de-funding can be conceptualised as a shift in resources to public health combined with a residual minimal policing response to these issues.

Yet, despite community problem solving, individual incidents of violence will remain. Some US abolitionists propose these could be solved by "skills-based education on bystander intervention" (8toabolition 2020). Yet, bystander interventions alone place onerous responsibilities on individuals and it is easy to imagine wealthy or even working-class communities with resources outsourcing the task to private security (see Fitzgibbon and Lea 2020). Rather, there needs to be a radical change in the relationship between the public and the police, in which police autonomy is radically curtailed, and in which communities democratically determine policing priorities.

## **Minimal Policing**

Whilst the language of de-funding is new, similar ideas of minimal policing were first developed by Left Realists during the 1980s (see Kinsey, Lea and Young 1986). A key part of minimal policing is to actively reduce police autonomy and radically increase their accountability. Even while maintaining the goal of abolition, radically restricting police powers – rather than merely restricting their resources - is a necessary step.

Police respond to calls, period. Further checks on the methods and priorities of police action are provided by channels of democratic accountability reflecting the needs of the local community regarding both police and social service agencies.

Mindful that police use of force is disproportionately against Black people and especially young men, this might be an important starting point for restricting the legitimate use of coercive force. Doing so would acknowledge and seek to remedy the damage wrought by generations of police racism. Gone would be the autonomy of police to decide when and how to intervene in which incidents. Gone also would be forms of policing which have racially disproportionate outcomes. Decades of reform and good intentions since the Scarman Report of 1981 have failed to remove stop and search as the most contentious and unproductive of police practices particularly as regards young Black men. It is singularly unproductive in terms of endearing police to Black communities, or in terms of gathering useful information (Bowling and Phillips 2006; Eastwood et al. 2013 Delso and Shiner 2015). Along with stop and search would go Met Police's controversial gang database (Williams and Clarke 2016) and also the policing of drug consumption which has long provided the police with cover to stop and search young black men. The racialised expansion of surveillance and policing demanded by hostile environment policies (see Parmar 2020) could be abolished with little impact on public safety.

Radically reducing the scope of police powers needs to be accompanied by radical forms of democratic accountability (Kinsey, Young and Lea 1986). Police would respond to, rather than initiate policing campaigns. Information would be in the hands of community groups and social services who would call in police only when other methods of conflict resolution or restorative justice failed or required backup. Police of course already often work with 'multi-agency' teams involving social work, health, education, probation etc. But they frequently see themselves as taking the lead role and guard their decision-making autonomy. Minimal policing would make police the servant of these other agencies, obliged to undertake specific types of action - e.g. arrest or caution - only when directed by other agencies. Such situations may exist in practice from time to time but they are rare and purely the outcome of 'good working relationships' e.g. between police and probation, not a result of statutory requirements.

The UK experience shows that de-funding is insufficient on its own. Thus, we argue that – taking lessons from left realism’s idea of minimal policing – de-funding must be accompanied by changes in legal powers and responsibilities both for the police and, importantly, for other social service agencies. It also requires developing radical forms of public and democratic accountability, to which we now turn.

## **Politics?**

De-funding has proven to be an effective campaign strategy in the USA, precisely because city councillors control the budgets for social care and police, and (as described above) and can reallocate funding through voting. This is not the case in the UK where police funding is (mostly) centralised (Brogden and Ellison 2013). For de-funding to become more than a grass roots demand in the UK, proponents need to identify where in the current political structure this can happen.

One hope for change might be through the Labour Party. We have not got off to a good start. Sir Keir Starmer, new Labour leader and former Director of Public Prosecutions, told BBC Breakfast (29 June) that calls for de-funding the police were "just nonsense". This actually is not so much a shift to the right than consistent with the Labour manifestos of both 2017 and 2019. Both simply promised to restore cuts in police funding by previous Conservative governments combined with encouragement of police to "work collaboratively with youth workers, mental health services, schools, drug rehabilitation programmes and other public agencies" (Labour Manifesto 2019: 43). This is precisely where the debate needs to start rather than conclude. Kindred concepts such as 'justice reinvestment' (Brown et al. 2016) may be easier for squeamish political leaders to voice. The current government meanwhile says it plans a Royal Commission into the effectiveness of the criminal justice system. It might seem a forlorn hope that the issues raised by BLM will echo in political debate. Yet, as this article hopefully shows, the success of de-funding campaigns in the US pose important questions for British criminology.

## **References**

8toabolition (2020) *Invest in Community Self Governance*.  
<https://www.8toabolition.com/invest-in-community-self-governance>

Abolitionist Futures. No date. *For social + transformative justice, against prisons + policing*. <https://abolitionistfutures.com/>

Alexander, M., (2012) *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. The New Press.

Allen, Ruth (2013) Social workers: the forgotten emergency service. *The Guardian*, 31st July.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/social-care-network/2013/jul/31/social-workers-forgotten-emergency-service>

Associated Press (2020) Most of Seattle council pledges to support police defunding. *The News Tribune*, 11th July.  
<https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/state/washington/article244167062.html>

Bowling, B. and Phillips, C. (2007) Disproportionate and discriminatory: Reviewing the evidence on police stop and search. *The Modern Law Review*, 70(6): 936-961.

Brogden, M., and Ellison, G., (2013) *Policing in an age of austerity: A postcolonial perspective*. Routledge.

Brown, D., Cunneen, C., Schwartz, M., Stubbs, J. and Young, C. (2016) *Justice reinvestment: Winding back imprisonment*. Springer.

Chazkel, A., Kim, M. and Paik, A.N. (2020) Worlds without Police. *Radical History Review* (137): 1–12. doi:  
<https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-8092738>

Critical Resistance (2009) *On Policing*.

<http://criticalresistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/CR-statement-abolition-of-policing-2009.pdf>

Critical Resistance (2020) #DefundPolice #FundThePeople #DefendBlackLives: Concrete Steps Toward Divestment from Policing & Investment in Community Safety  
[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1gZz\\_k20UY0JQADf2UKbIS5ivMqo-53Rx](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1gZz_k20UY0JQADf2UKbIS5ivMqo-53Rx)

Davis, A.Y. (2011) *Are prisons obsolete?* Seven Stories Press.

Duff, Koshka and Kemp, Tom (2020). Would 'Defund the Police' Work in the UK? Novara Media, 13th June.  
<https://novaramedia.com/2020/06/13/would-defund-the-police-work-in-the-uk/>

Eastwood, N., Shiner, M. and Bear, D. (2013) *The numbers in black and white: Ethnic disparities in the policing and prosecution of drug offences in England and Wales*. LSE/Release.  
<https://www.release.org.uk/publications/numbers-black-and-white-ethnic-disparities-policing-and-prosecution-drug-offences>

Elliott-Cooper, Adam. (2020) 'Defund the police' is not nonsense. Here's what it really means, *The Guardian*, 2nd July.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/02/britain-defund-the-police-black-lives-matter>

Fitzgibbon, Wendy and John Lea. (2020) *Privatising Justice*. Pluto Press.

Gilmore, R.W. (2007) *Golden gulag: Prisons, surplus, crisis, and opposition in globalizing California*. Univ of California Press.

Goldson, B. (2005) *Child imprisonment: A case for abolition*. *Youth Justice*, 5(2): 77-90.



Hellgren, Mike (2020) Baltimore Police To Move 70 Specialized Units Members To Patrol, No Officer Layoffs Expected After \$22M In Cuts. *CBS Baltimore*.

<https://baltimore.cbslocal.com/2020/07/01/baltimore-police-commissioner-michael-harrison-on-defunding-police-reform-wjz-exclusive/>

Home Office (2018) *Police use of force statistics*, England and Wales April 2017 to March 2018.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/764894/police-use-of-force-apr2017-mar2018-hosb3018.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/764894/police-use-of-force-apr2017-mar2018-hosb3018.pdf)

Home Office (2019a) *Police use of force statistics*, England and Wales April 2018 to March 2019.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/853204/police-use-of-force-apr2018-mar2019-hosb3319.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/853204/police-use-of-force-apr2018-mar2019-hosb3319.pdf)

Home Office (2019b) *Police workforce*, England and Wales, as at 30 September 2019, National Statistics. Home Office

Hunter, K. (2019) *Institutionalised criminalisation: Black and minority ethnic children and looked after children in the youth justice system in England and Wales* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Liverpool).

Inquest (2020) *BAME deaths in police custody*.

<https://www.inquest.org.uk/bame-deaths-in-police-custody>

Joseph-Salisbury, Remi (2020) *Race and Racism in English Secondary Schools*. Runnymede Trust.

<https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/Runnymede%20Secondary%20Schools%20report%20FINAL.pdf>

Kinsey, Richard, John Lea, and Jock Young (1986) *Losing the fight against crime*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Labour Party (2019) *Labour Manifesto*.

<https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Real-Change-Labour-Manifesto-2019.pdf>

Levin, Sam (2020) Minneapolis lawmakers vow to disband police department in historic move. *The Guardian*, 8th June.

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/07/minneapolis-city-council-defund-police-george-floyd>

Los Angeles Times (2020) Editorial: Defund the LAPD? It's time to rethink public safety in Los Angeles. *Los Angeles Times*. 8th June.

<https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-06-08/defund-the-lapd-public-safety>

McDowell, M.G. and Fernandez, L.A. (2018) 'Disband, Disempower, and Disarm': Amplifying the Theory and Practice of Police Abolition. *Critical Criminology*, 26(3): 373-391.

McGlynn, C. and Westmarland, N. (2019) Kaleidoscopic justice: sexual violence and victim-survivors' perceptions of justice. *Social & Legal Studies*, 28(2):179-201.

Millie, Andrew (2013) The policing task and the expansion (and contraction) of British policing. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 13(2): 143-160.

Millie, Andrew (2014) What are the police for? Re-thinking policing post-austerity. In *The future of policing* (pp. 52-63). Routledge.

Murakawa, N. (2014) *The first civil right: How liberals built prison America*. Oxford University Press.

Noor, Poppy (2018) Met police use Tasers and restraints more often against black people. *The Guardian*, 5th December.

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/dec/05/met-police-use-tasers-and-restraints-more-often-against-black-people>

Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2011) *Population of England and Wales by Ethnicity*.

<https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/population-of-england-and-wales/latest#by-ethnicity>

Onapa, Emmanuel (2020) Keir Starmer Is Wrong. Defunding The Police is The Only Option. *Huffpost*, 29th May, 2020.

[https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/keir-starmer-defund-the-police\\_uk\\_5ef9b193c5b6ca970912202e](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/keir-starmer-defund-the-police_uk_5ef9b193c5b6ca970912202e)

Parmar, A. (2020) Arresting (non) citizenship: The policing migration nexus of nationality, race and criminalization. *Theoretical Criminology*, 24(1): 28-49.

Phillips, C., Earle, R., Parmar, A. and Smith, D. (2019) Dear British criminology: Where has all the race and racism gone? *Theoretical Criminology*, DOI: 10.1177/1362480619880345

Ryan, M. and Ward, T. (2015) Prison abolition in the UK: They dare not speak its name?. *Social Justice*, 41(3 (137): 107-119.

Scottish Government (2018) *Improving Scotland's Health: Rights, Respect and Recovery*.

<https://www2.gov.scot/Resource/0054/00543437.pdf>

Scruton, P. and Haydon, D. (2002) Challenging the criminalization of children and young people. *Youth Justice: Critical Readings*. London: Sage publications.

Simon, J. (2007) *Governing through crime: How the war on crime transformed American democracy and created a culture of fear*. Oxford University Press.

Vitale, A. (2017) *The end of policing*. London: Verso.

Williams, Kristian (2004) *Our Enemies in Blue: Police and power in America*. New York: Soft Skull Press. Afterword.

Williams, P. and Clarke, B. (2016) *Dangerous associations: Joint enterprise, gangs and racism*. London: Centre for Crime and Justice Studies.

---