Ideas
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We called 911 for almost everything except snitching.

Nosebleeds, gunshot wounds, asthma attacks, allergic reactions. Police accompanied the paramedics.
Our neighborhood made us sick. A Praxair industrial gas-storage facility was at one end of my block. A junkyard with exposed military airplane and helicopter parts was at the other. The fish-seasoning plant in our backyard did not smell as bad as the yeast from the Budweiser factory nearby. Car honks and fumes from Interstate 64 crept through my childhood bedroom window, where, if I stood on my toes, I could see the St. Louis arch.*

Environmental toxins degraded our health, and often conspired with other violence that pervaded our neighborhood. Employment opportunities were rare, and my friends and I turned to making money under the table. I was scared of selling drugs, so I gambled. Brown-skinned boys I liked aged out of recreational activities, and, without alternatives, into blue bandanas. Their territorial disputes led to violence and 911 calls. Grown-ups fought too, stressed from working hard yet never having enough bill money or gas money or food money or day-care money. Call 911.

When people dismiss abolitionists for not caring about victims or safety, they tend to forget that we are those victims, those survivors of violence.

The first shooting I witnessed was by a uniformed security guard. I was 13. I remember that the guard was angry that his cousin skipped a sign-in sheet at my neighborhood recreation center; the victim told police it had started as an argument over “something stupid.” I was teaching my sister how to shoot free throws when the guard stormed in alongside the court, drew his weapon, and shot the boy in the arm. My sister and I hid in the locker room for hours afterward. The guard was back at work the following week.**

Like the boy at the rec center who was shot by the guard, most victims of police violence survive. No hashtags or protests or fires for the wounded, assaulted, and intimidated. I often wonder, **What if Derek Chauvin had kneeled on George Floyd’s neck for seven minutes and 46 seconds instead of eight?** Maybe Floyd would have lived to be arrested, prosecuted, and imprisoned for allegedly attempting to use a counterfeit $20 bill. Is that justice? This, for me, is why we need police abolition. Police manage inequality by keeping the dispossessed from the owners, the Black from the white, the homeless from the housed, the beggars from the employed. Reforms make police polite managers of inequality. Abolition makes police and inequality obsolete.

Annie Lowrey: Defund the police

“Police abolition” initially repulsed me. The idea seemed white and utopic. I’d seen too much sexual violence and buried too many friends to consider getting rid of police in St. Louis, let alone the nation. But in reality, the police were a placebo. Calling them felt like something, as the legal scholar Michelle Alexander explains, and something feels like everything when your other option is nothing.
Police couldn’t do what we really needed. They could not heal relationships or provide jobs. We were afraid every time we called. When the cops arrived, I was silenced, threatened with detention, or removed from my home. Fifteen years later, my old neighborhood still lacks quality food, employment, schools, health care, and air—all of which increases the risk of violence and the reliance on police. Yet I feared letting go; I thought we needed them.

Until the Ferguson, Missouri, cop Darren Wilson killed Michael Brown. Brown had a funeral. Wilson had a wedding. Most police officers just continue to live their lives after filling the streets with blood and bone.

I drove from Ferguson to law-school orientation two weeks after Brown’s death. I met, studied, and struggled alongside students and movement lawyers who explained the power and the purpose of the prison-industrial complex through an abolitionist framework. Black abolitionists have condemned the role of prisons and police for centuries, even before W. E. B. Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction*. They imagined and built responses to harm rooted in community and accountability. In recent decades, abolitionists have developed alternatives to 911, created support systems for victims of domestic violence, prevented new jail construction, reduced police budgets, and shielded undocumented immigrants from deportation. Abolition, I learned, was a bigger idea than firing cops and closing prisons; it included eliminating the reasons people think they need cops and prisons in the first place.

We never should have had police. Policing is among the vestiges of slavery, tailored in America to suppress slave revolts, catch runaways, and repress labor organizing. After slavery, police imprisoned Black people and immigrants under a convict-leasing system for plantation and business owners. During the Jim Crow era, cops enforced segregation and joined lynch mobs that grew strange fruit from southern trees. During the civil-rights movement, police beat the hell out of Black preachers, activists, and students who marched for equality wearing their Sunday best. Cops were the foot soldiers for Richard Nixon’s War on Drugs and Joe Biden’s 1994 crime bill. Police departments pepper-sprayed Occupy Wall Street protesters without provocation and indiscriminately teargassed Black Lives Matter activists for years—including me, twice. Black people I know trust police; they trust them to be exactly what they always have been.

After each video of a police killing goes viral, popular reforms go on tour: banning choke holds, investing in community policing, diversifying departments—none of which would have saved Floyd or most other police victims. The Princeton professor Naomi Murakawa wrote to me in an email:
At best, these reforms discourage certain techniques of killing, but they don’t condemn the fact of police killing. “Ban the chokehold!” But allow murder with guns and tasers and police vans? The analogy here is to death-penalty reformers who improved the noose with the electric chair, and then improved the electric chair with chemical cocktails.

But the technique of murder doesn’t comfort the dead. It comforts the executioners—and all their supportive onlookers. Like so much reform to address racism, all this legal fine print is meant to salve the conscience of moderates who want salvation on the cheap, without any real change to the material life-and-death realities for Black people.

When Donald Trump was elected president, many liberals feared the end of consent decrees, legal agreements between the Department of Justice and police departments, intended to spur real change. After law school, I worked for the Advancement Project, which supported community organizers in Ferguson on the decree that was negotiated in the aftermath of Brown’s death. Millions of dollars went toward an investigation, publicity, and a lawsuit to rid the Ferguson Police Department of “bad apples” and transform its culture. After a year of militaristic ambush on the community, the consent decree provided members of the police department with mental-health services to cope with the unrest, but no treatment or restitution for the residents who were teargassed, shot with rubber bullets, and traumatized by the tanks at the edge of their driveways. The Obama administration’s DOJ objected to dismissing thousands of old cases that were the result of unconstitutional policing, and protected the police department from criticisms that community organizers shared with the judge in court.

Tracey L. Meares and Tom R. Tyler: The first step is figuring out what police are for

Constitutional policing is a problem too. As the legal scholar Paul Butler explains, the overwhelming majority of police violence is constitutional. Reforms cannot fix a policing system that is not broken.

Still, many Americans believe that most police officers do the right thing. Perhaps there are bad apples. But even the best apples surveil, arrest, and detain millions of people every year whose primary “crime” is that they are poor or homeless, or have a disability. Cops escalate violence disproportionately against people with disabilities and in mental-health crises, even the ones who call 911 for help. The police officers who are doing the “right thing” maintain the systems of inequality and ableism in black communities. The right thing is wrong.

Policing cannot even fix the harms of our nightmares. People often ask me, “What will we do with murderers and rapists?” Which ones? The police kill more than a thousand people every year, and assault hundreds of thousands more. After excessive force, sexual misconduct is the second-most-common complaint against cops. Many people are afraid to call the police when they suffer these harms, because they fear that the police will hurt them. Thousands of rape survivors refuse to call the police, worried about not being believed or about being re-assaulted, or concerned that their rape kit would sit unexamined for years. In three major
cities, less than 4 percent of calls to the police are for “violent crimes.” Currently, police departments are getting worse at solving murders and frequently arrest and force confessions out of the wrong people.

So if we abolish the police, what’s the alternative? Who do we call? As someone who grew up calling 911, I also shared this concern. I learned this: Just because I did not know an answer didn’t mean that one did not exist. I had to study and join an organization, not just ask questions on social media. I read Rachel Herzing, a co-director of the Center for Political Education, who explains that creating small networks of support for different types of emergencies can make us safer than we are now, and reduce our reliance on police. The Oakland Power Projects trains residents to build alternatives to police by helping residents prevent and respond to harm. San Francisco Mayor London Breed just announced that trained, unarmed professionals will respond to many emergency calls, and Los Angeles city-council members are demanding a similar model. This is the right idea. Rather than thinking of abolition as just getting rid of police, I think about it as an invitation to create and support lots of different answers to the problem of harm in society, and, most exciting, as an opportunity to reduce and eliminate harm in the first place.

Derek Thompson: Unbundle the police

Defunding the police is one step on a broad stairway toward abolition. Cities can reduce the size and scope of police and thus limit their opportunities to come into contact with civilians. There should be as much support for the anti-criminalization organizer Mariame Kaba’s call to cut law enforcement by half as there has been to cut the prison population by half. Communities can demand hiring and budget freezes, budget cuts, and participatory budgeting opportunities to ensure that police will not be refunded in the future. States should stop the construction of new prisons and begin closing remaining ones by freeing the people inside. No new police academies should be established. These are only a few suggestions from a broader set of abolitionist demands.

More important, society must spend money and time reducing the root causes of violence. If we want to reduce sexual violence immediately, we should expand restorative and transformative processes for accountability. If we are committed to eliminating this harm long-term, then society must offer quality housing, food, day care, transit, employment, debt cancellation, and free college so that people will not be stuck in unhealthy relationships because they need food, money, health insurance, or a place to live.

If we care about reducing neighborhood killings, we must invest in street-violence interruption models such as the one that the feminist organization Taller Salud uses, which minimizes violence through community development and peace programs. These likely would have reduced killings and retaliation in my neighborhood without police. I wouldn’t have hid in the locker room for hours because of a shooting, and maybe my sister would have
a better jump shot. We can reduce and eliminate shootings long-term if we provide the most dispossessed communities with opportunities to thrive, and choose comprehensive gun reform over police occupation of our schools, places of worship, and neighborhoods.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: The Black family in the age of mass incarceration

Slavery abolition required resistance, risk, and experimentation. Black people rebelled, ran away, and built an underground railroad. Abolitionists wrote and orated against the “peculiar institution.” Allies funded campaigns, passed legislation, and changed the Constitution. Of course, people then felt a range of anxieties about abolition. Slave owners worried about their plantations and the profits that the labor camps wrought. White overseers feared joblessness. Both feared the loss of superiority. Some Black people had reservations about how they’d sustain themselves without the steady, yet violent, protection of their owners. Police abolition triggers similar anxieties today—moral, economic, and otherwise.

But if abolitionists waited to convince every single person that liberation was worth the pursuit, Black people might still be on plantations. Slavery’s violence and repression was riskier than Black people’s plans, imagination, and will to be free. So they held the uncertainty in their bellies and started running.

Rather than waiting for comforting answers to every potential harm ahead of us, let’s run. And continue to organize, imagine, and transform this country toward freedom and justice without police and violence. Let’s run.

And never look back.

* An earlier version of this article misidentified the interstate as I-70.

** An earlier version of this article described the shooter as “a cop.” In fact, he was an armed, uniformed security guard working at the municipal recreation center, employed by a security company under contract with the city of St. Louis. In addition, the author was 13, not 12, at the time of the incident.