

Considering Social Work Roles in Policing

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The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement continues to bring attention and direct action to incidents of racially motivated aggression and police violence. Although BLM is a not a formal centralized organization, numerous branded bodies, such as the international BLM Global Network (BLM Global Network, n.d.), use the term “Black Lives Matter” to represent the mandate of their group. Regardless, BLM operates as a collection of individuals and organizations that commonly promote change aimed at combatting police brutality while supporting an overall agenda of Black liberation. The movement began in 2013 in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the murder of Trayvon Martin, an African American teenager. Over the past eight years, BLM has taken action following law enforcement–related deaths of other African Americans across the United States (Day, 2015). In 2020, the movement gained national attention during protests that resulted from the killing of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis. BLM has emerged as one of the largest social movements the country has seen to date (Buchanan, Bui, & Patel, 2020).

As an outcome of recent, well documented, and widely viewed acts of police brutality, a renewed appeal to “defund the police” has sparked a great deal of interest, debate, and confusion over what that entreaty denotes. This issue is further complicated as various individuals and groups who have led the charge to defund the police differ to some degree in how they envision the specifics of this aim. A common understanding of this statement is elucidated by the BLM Global Network who explains that defunding the police involves divesting resources in traditional law enforcement roles and investing funding in other public health and safety services. In turn, this method of structural change seeks to reduce police duties by reallocating responsibilities to others who are better suited to

address them. Therefore, this definition of defunding the police suggests no change to present levels of resources commensurate with a decreased array of restructured law enforcement tasks (Fernandez, 2020; Levin, 2020; Lopez, 2020). This conceptualization of defunding the police is based on cognizance that social problems are often the root cause of public safety concerns. Although the pervasive influence of social problems is well acknowledged among social workers, the phrase “defund the police” can be misleading and easily interpreted as advocating for a lawless state of anarchy devoid of police. Understanding that defunding does not mean cutting all subsidies for law enforcement, but rather reallocating resources to support more appropriate means to address problems that underlie public safety concerns, can be difficult to comprehend. Moreover, defund the police suffers from poor word choices that are not comfortably accepted by the citizenry at large. Increasing public understanding and appreciation for the potential benefits of defunding the police may arise from support for the recommended areas of resource investment such as health care, education, substance use treatment, mental health care, housing, employment, restorative programs, community harm reduction, and various public services (BLM Global Network, 2020; Fernandez, 2020; Levin, 2020; Lopez, 2020). Not only would enhancing such resources more fittingly address social problems, but it would also serve to decriminalize those that would no longer be under the purview of law enforcement. For example, many localities have laws that govern the public activities of unsheltered people, thus criminalizing poverty. When police are held responsible to uphold restrictive homeless ordinances, often by removal from areas where they are attempting to carry out activities of daily living such as sleeping, the act of being poor and without shelter is needlessly raised to being a criminal activity. This manner of law enforcement

response does not help the social problem of homelessness. On the contrary, it has been found to worsen the health, behavior, and length of time that individuals experience homelessness episodes while also increasing opportunities for police violence to occur ([National Association of Social Workers \[NASW\], 2020](#); [Robinson, 2019](#)).

A commonly suggested alternative to defunding and reallocating duties to other professionals is to increase training or retraining of law enforcement personnel to improve their ability to respond non-violently in a more diverse array of situations. Although this approach attempts to address concerns of police brutality, many contend that it has been long tested and found unsuccessful. Kailee Scales, the managing director of BLM Global Network, purports that previous reform and retraining efforts have failed to lessen police violence and has concluded that such an approach may not be possible in a law enforcement system built on disproportionately harming Black people. Rather, Scales suggests that divesting resources from a broken system and investing in social programming is a clear path forward. Scales suggested specific means of reallocation by investing 5 percent of the \$100 billion spent on policing in the United States that would effectively double the budget for public health alone ([BLM Global Network, 2020](#)). The repeated failure of training, reform, and other more conservative efforts is supported by research as well as the origins of policing itself ([Kaste, 2020](#); [McDowell & Fernandez, 2018](#)). Historical connections between early policing and race received mainstream attention in a July 2016 episode of the “Kelly File” on Fox News, where Megyn Kelly hosted a panel discussion on the topic of race and law enforcement. When BLM received harsh criticism, community organizer panelist Jessica Disu stated, “Here’s a solution, we need to abolish the police,” and further stated that “The police in this country began as a slave patrol” ([McDowell & Fernandez, 2018](#), p. 374). Disu then provided a brief yet cogent analysis that challenged hegemonic assumptions about policing. She argued against the assumption that policing is an inexorable societal structure that equates to public safety. Although the initial reactions to Disu’s statements were disbelief and outrage, this did not come as a surprise to everyone. For many in the field, Disu’s retort is widely recognized and accurate. In 2020, NASW published a Social Justice Brief titled “Reimagining

Policing: Strategies for Community Reinvestment,” noting that “Policing in America has a long history of preserving the violent legacy of slavery and upholding white supremacy” ([NASW, 2020](#), p. 17).

Discourse of this nature is inextricably linked to the larger criminal justice system, abolition movements of the past, and theories that validate progressing beyond moderate slow-moving reforms. For example, W. E. B. Du Bois coined the term “abolition-democracy” to assert that policy reform is inadequate to eradicate the oppressive social conditions that created and sustained slavery ([Du Bois, 1935/1992](#); [McDowell & Fernandez, 2018](#)). Likewise, current defund-the-police supporters contend that “the law enforcement system is so broken that the notion of police reform and reimagining policing is an exercise in futility” ([NASW, 2020](#), p. 2). Relatedly, the concept of a “carceral state,” first coined and explored by Foucault, described the formal and informal means, tools, perceptions, and interrelated structures that work in tandem to maintain and grow a punitive crime control industry ([Foucault, 1975](#); [Garland, 2001](#)). Similarly, current defund-the-police sentiments assert that policy reform is inadequate and unable to redress systemic structures, dogma, and long-held beliefs that continue to drive police violence and criminalization, particularly in racially and economically vulnerable communities. Abolition seeks to delegitimize police, erect a new system of ensuring public safety based on equity, and maximize the expertise of diverse emergency responders with the intent of eliminating the need for policing, as we know it. Others seek to reform and restore the current system of policing by increasing accountability and better preparing law enforcement to respond to varied situations in a nonviolent manner.

Clearly, there are valid arguments for altering policing that range from temperate reform to more extreme abolition. Others suggest parallel pathways that incorporate tenets of both ideologies. As part of this conversation, controversy regarding roles of the profession in policing have surfaced. Essentially, some social workers feel that formal employment within police departments supports an unjust system that goes against professional values and ethics. Others feel that becoming involved in policing, particularly in roles that can serve to de-escalate situations that could easily lead to vio-

lence, is well matched to social work skill sets. For example, an NASW Social Justice Brief noted that

Police are not social workers. Yet they continue to be the de facto response to situations that call for social work intervention. Issues of drug use, homelessness, mental illness, and domestic violence disputes all too frequently lead to police responses. Tragically, we have seen over and over how these calls lead to harmful escalation instead of peaceful resolution, particularly when people of color are involved.” (NASW, 2020, p. 2)

Regardless of one’s professional perspective, there is a role for all social workers in making a positive impact in policing. **HSW**

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