

POLICY *focus*

RECIPES FOR RATIONAL GOVERNMENT

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Policing Reform

By Patrice Onwuka, Senior Policy Analyst

What You Should Know

Most Americans, regardless of color, believe that police are a critical part of creating safe communities, especially minority communities. As a society, we recognize that police put their lives on the line in service of duty, and we provide them with the resources and support they need to do their jobs effectively. But we also expect that they will not abuse their power or operate in a way that brings greater harm to communities.

Recent civil unrest sweeping many cities has prompted discussions about aggressive policing tactics and the use of force. Under the banner of Black Lives Matter, citizens, activists, and agitators are calling to defund the police and demanding reforms that they believe will prevent deadly interactions. On its face, this movement aims to draw attention to racial disparities in policing and the criminal justice system. However, the organization behind it promotes a radical leftist agenda that seeks to undermine law enforcement under the false assumption that fewer police officers on the streets will lead to better outcomes for people of color.

Reducing the number of cops on the street and slashing police budgets will leave minorities, who are disproportionately victimized by violent crime, in an even more vulnerable position. There are, however, some reforms, including increased accountability for officer misconduct, that can address concerns about excessive force and restore the lost trust between police and the people they serve.

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Why It Matters

When police lose the public's trust, they lose an important ally in preventing and solving crime. Bringing together police and communities to identify the most pressing issues and craft solutions can deliver transformational change:

1. **Increase the number of beat cops**—Americans, including people of color, want to see more police patrolling the streets, not fewer.
2. **Increase accountability and transparency**—Reforming collective bargaining can ensure that police unions do not shield bad officers from discipline or removal. The federal government may also incentivize greater transparency about police misconduct.
3. **Consider the effect of overcriminalization and seek alternatives to jail.** We can offer more effective punishments for low-level offenses.

Policing in America

Police maintain public order and safety, enforce laws, and prevent and investigate crime. About 18,000 federal, state, county, and local agencies in the United States employ over 745,000 sworn officers.

Gender and racial diversity of police officers has been on the rise, with the percentage of police who are racial minorities doubling since the late 1980s. Currently, about **13 percent** of police officers are women, **65 percent** are white, 13 percent are black, 11 percent are Hispanic, and 3 percent are Asian. Many police departments have intentionally recruited minorities and women to better reflect the communities they serve.

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Public Perceptions

Police work is difficult and dangerous but rewarding. Most officers feel respected by their communities, and **seven-in-ten** say most of the residents in the areas they patrol share their values. Nearly all officers believe that knowing the people and understanding the culture in which they work are essential elements of their jobs.

However, high-profile violent incidents involving black citizens and the police have triggered long-standing tensions between police and some communities. While a large majority of police (67 percent) say these deadly encounters are isolated incidents rather than signs of a broader problem, only 39 percent of the public expresses that view. Overall, **majorities** of Americans, both black and white, say that police treat black people less fairly than whites.

Critics of law enforcement blame these deadly encounters on the criminal justice system being inherently racist. Some of the more extreme critics believe today's police departments are filled with yesterday's klansmen. This is an overly simplistic, emotion-driven view that ignores basic facts about crime and the risk calculation that officers must employ.

There is also a disconnect between the views that police and the public hold about the primary role of law enforcement. **Three times** as many people than police officers view the police's primary role as enforcers. Just 16 percent of the public views the police's primary role as being guardians of the peace compared to 31 percent of officers. Blacks are significantly more likely to see police as enforcers.

It may be the growing criminalization of everyday activities and commerce that is pushing more Americans onto the wrong side of the law, where they clash with police. Of the **10.5 million arrests**, the bulk are for crimes the FBI classifies as less serious including, but not limited to, drug-abuse offenses, disorderly conduct, loitering, fraud, violations of local ordinances, and civil violations. Arresting a **teen** for selling water bottles outside of a zoo without a permit or a **90-year-old man** for giving the homeless free food make officers seem callous, while the lawmakers responsible for these overzealous ordinances escape unscathed.

The pandemic has brought overcriminalization into sharper focus as otherwise law-abiding citizens have been **dragged off** buses by police officers for not wearing a face mask and business owners have been **arrested** simply for trying to keep their business afloat.

Antipathy toward police makes the job of law enforcement more difficult. Nearly all officers (**93 percent**) surveyed say they have become more concerned for their safety. Three out of four say officers have been reluctant to use force even when appropriate.

Police Interactions with Citizens

Civilians have 375 million annual contacts with police officers, and they are largely uneventful.

Lethal police shootings of minorities are amplified by the media. In reality, fatal police shootings are rare occurrences—about **1,000** annually. Almost half of the victims are white; a quarter are black. **Harvard economist Roland Fryer, Jr.** examined police data and found no racial differences in officer-involved fatal shootings. In fact, when controlling for factors including the suspect demographics, officer demographics, and whether the suspect had a weapon, he found that blacks were 27 percent *less* likely to be shot at by police compared to whites.

Incidents ending in the non-lethal use of force (such as handcuffing a citizen without arresting him, drawing a weapon, and pepper spraying or using a baton) are rare as well, however, they often involve significant racial disparities. According to Fryer, blacks and Hispanics were more than **50 percent** more likely than whites to have an interaction with police which involved any use of force, and 21 percent more likely to be involved in an interaction with a police officer who at least draws a weapon.

The lived experience of many negative interactions with police may be a powerful force in forming how blacks view race in America and police, even if it does not always match up with the data. According to Pew Research, black adults are nearly **five times** as likely as white adults to say they have been unfairly stopped by police because of their race.

According to the **Justice Department** in 2015, of racial all demographics blacks were the most likely to have a police-initiated contact (which includes street stops, traffic stops, being

arrested, or being approached for some other reason) and the least likely to have a resident-initiated contact with police. During traffic stops, Blacks were more likely than whites and Hispanics to be the driver, and a higher percentage of blacks experienced street stops than whites and Hispanics. And when police initiated the contact, police were more likely to threaten or use physical force against blacks and Hispanics than whites.

Are disparities due to racism? In the 1970s, pioneer in the sociology of policing Egon Bittner **found** that racial minorities, the poor living in blighted areas, young people, and men in general contribute disproportionately to the sum total of crime, and, as a result they attract a higher degree of surveillance and interventions by police.

Today, crime patterns still hold. In 2018, blacks made up **over half** of known murders and robberies in the U.S. despite comprising just 13 percent of the population.

Selectively surveilling some demographics though—which often becomes an entry point into the criminal justice system—causes some in the public to view police as divisive and prejudiced.

Solutions to Policing

Policing is a local issue. Any effective solutions should begin with communities working collaboratively with the police. Police departments may also find it effective to partner with civil institutions such as schools, churches and nonprofits on programs that build relationships with citizens.

Increase Police Headcount

Studies show that the mere presence of additional officers in a neighborhood can reduce crime. Americans of all colors understand this and want more police officers, not fewer, in their neighborhoods. Indeed, some **60 percent of blacks and 64 percent of Hispanics** support increasing their local budget for the police force and hiring more officers. Minorities are disproportionately the victims of violent crime and, like everyone else, they want safe homes and communities. Police budgets should fund positive police-community programs such as targeted recruitment programs to attract minorities and women, cadet and explorers programs to introduce young people to police for community service and personal development, and athletic programs to engage young people. These offerings build trust with communities and police forces that reflect the communities they serve, but often are the first to go when budgets get cut.

Change Tactics and Training

The law gives officers great discretion in how they can interact with citizens. From courteous to aggressive, police can decide whether a verbal warning or physical action is needed to bring an individual under control. Cities and states have proposed or passed various reforms that ban aggressive tactics such as the use of chokeholds and tear gas. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, but lawmakers and police departments should study the effects of these restrictions on crime and public safety.

Better **training** for police officers as well as reforms that **reduce officer fatigue**, should also be considered.

The mentally-ill present a unique set of challenges for law enforcement. There are growing calls for social workers and mental health professionals to be more involved with police, even replacing them. That path should be taken very cautiously. Social workers may be well equipped to handle calls for people in mental health crises, but it is not always immediately obvious when someone is experiencing such a crisis. These workers can only provide limited on-going help and may not be able to handle a situation that spirals out of their control quickly.

Alternatives to arrests can be effective policing tools that don't sacrifice public safety. Citations for misdemeanors for those who are not a public safety or flight risk allow officers to dole out a punishment while allowing the violator to remain in the community, work or attend school, and take care of his family.

Increase Transparency and Accountability

When a police officer abuses his power, engages in corruption, or mistreats a citizen, Americans expect that he will face discipline and justice. Too often, this does not happen. And, too often, this is the result of police unions that make accountability difficult or impossible.

Collective bargaining agreements **shield police officers** from discipline and oversight, allow those with histories of complaints to move from force to force, and even permit the expungement of police disciplinary records after a certain period of time. Some agreements place the ultimate decision in a termination appeals process in the hands of arbiters who routinely overturn the terminations of officers by police chiefs.

All of this harms public safety. One study of data from 100 of our largest cities found a **positive correlation** between police unions and police abuse. A **Chicago University study** found a substantial increase in complaints of violent misconduct by Florida sheriffs when they won collective bargaining rights.

While police unions should have the right to collectively bargain for compensation, benefits, and good working conditions, we must eliminate the involvement of police unions in disciplinary matters.

Unions are not the only actors in the justice system that hinder police accountability. When prosecutors and the judiciary fail to execute criminal cases against officers, they undermine the belief that no one is above the law, including those who enforce it.

Transparency about police misconduct is important for accountability. Data collection and transparency could be incentivized at the federal level. This is the approach South Carolina Senator Tim Scott sought with his **police reform bill** that leverages federal funding to encourage tactical reforms (such as banning certain types of deadly force) and increased reporting by police departments on their use of force.

Protecting American citizens is a core function of government that we entrust to police. It begins with a stronger police presence and police forces that are accountable to the people they serve.

What You Can Do

Get Informed

Learn more about the United State's leadership on carbon reduction. Visit:

- [Pew Research](#)
- [The Manhattan Institute](#)
- [American Enterprise Institute](#)

Talk to Your Friends

Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Tell them about what's going on and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

Become a Leader in the Community

Get a group together each month to talk about a political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few motivated people can change the world.

Remain Engaged Politically

Too many good citizens see election time as the only time they need to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your Representatives know your opinions. After all, they are supposed to work for you!

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Independent Women's Forum (IWF) is dedicated to building support for free markets, limited government, and individual responsibility.

IWF, a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution, seeks to combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.

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