

Our Ever-Deadlier Police State

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None of the reforms, increased training, diversity programs, community outreach and gimmicks such as body cameras have blunted America's deadly police assault, especially against poor people of color. Police forces in the United States—which, according to The Washington Post, have [fatally shot 782 people](#) this year—are unaccountable, militarized monstrosities that spread fear and terror in poor communities. By comparison, police in England and Wales [killed 62 people](#) in the 27 years between the start of 1990 and the end of 2016.

Police officers have become rogue predators in impoverished communities. Under U.S. [forfeiture laws](#), police indiscriminately seize money, real estate, automobiles and other assets. In many cities, traffic, parking and other fines are little more than legalized extortion that funds local government and turns jails into debtor prisons.

Because of a failed court system, millions of young men and women are railroaded into prison, many for nonviolent offenses. SWAT teams with military weapons burst into homes often under warrants for nonviolent offenses, sometimes shooting those inside. Trigger-happy cops pump multiple rounds into the backs of unarmed men and women and are rarely charged with murder. And for poor Americans, basic constitutional rights, including due process, were effectively abolished decades ago.

Jonathan Simon's "[Governing Through Crime](#)" and Michelle Alexander's "[The New Jim Crow](#)" point out that what is defined and targeted as criminal activity by the police and the courts is largely determined by racial inequality and class, and most importantly by the potential of targeted groups to cause social and political unrest. Criminal policy, as sociologist Alex S. Vitale writes in his new book, "[The End of Policing](#)," "is structured around the use of punishment to manage the 'dangerous classes,' masquerading as a system of justice."

The criminal justice system, at the same time, refuses to hold Wall Street banks, corporations and oligarchs accountable for crimes that have caused incalculable damage to the global economy and the ecosystem. None of the bankers who committed massive acts of fraud and were responsible for the financial collapse in 2008 have gone to prison even though their crimes resulted in widespread unemployment, millions of evictions and foreclosures, homelessness, bankruptcies and the looting of the U.S. Treasury to bail out financial speculators at taxpayer expense. We live in a two-tiered legal system, one in which poor people are harassed, arrested and jailed for absurd infractions, such as selling loose cigarettes—which led to [Eric Garner](#) being choked to death by a New York City policeman in 2014—while crimes of appalling magnitude that wiped out 40 percent of the world's wealth are dealt with through tepid administrative controls, symbolic fines and civil enforcement.

The grotesque distortions of the judicial system and the aggressive war on the poor by the

police will get worse under President Trump and Attorney General Jeff Sessions. There has been a rollback of President Barack Obama's 2015 restrictions on [the 1033 Program](#), a 1989 congressional action that allows the transfer of military weaponry, including grenade launchers, armored personnel carriers and .50-caliber machine guns, from the federal government to local police forces. Since 1997, the Department of Defense has turned over a staggering \$5.1 billion in military hardware to police departments.

The Trump administration also is resurrecting private prisons in the federal prison system, accelerating the so-called war on drugs, stacking the courts with right-wing "law and order" judges and preaching the divisive politics of punishment and retribution. Police unions enthusiastically embrace these actions, seeing in them a return to the Wild West mentality that characterized the brutality of police departments in the 1960s and 1970s, when radicals, especially black radicals, were murdered with impunity at the hands of law enforcement. The [Praetorian Guard](#) of the elites, as in all totalitarian systems, will soon be beyond the reach of the law. As Vitale writes in his book, "Our entire criminal justice system has become a gigantic revenge factory."

The arguments—including the racist one about "[superpredators](#)"—used to justify the expansion of police power have no credibility, as the gun violence in south Chicago, abject failure of the war on drugs and vast expansion of the prison system over the last 40 years illustrate. The problem is not ultimately in policing techniques and procedures; it is in the increasing reliance on the police as a form of social control to buttress a system of corporate capitalism that has turned the working poor into modern-day serfs and abandoned whole segments of the society. Government no longer makes any attempt to ameliorate racial and economic inequality. Instead, it criminalizes poverty. It has turned the poor into one more cash crop for the rich.

"By conceptualizing the problem of policing as one of inadequate training and professionalization, reformers fail to directly address how the very nature of policing and the legal system served to maintain and exacerbate racial inequality," Vitale writes. "By calling for colorblind 'law and order' they strengthen a system that puts people of color at a structural disadvantage. At the root, they fail to appreciate that the basic nature of the police, since its earliest origins, is to be a tool for managing inequality and maintaining the status quo. Police reforms that fail to directly address this reality are doomed to reproduce it. ...Well-trained police following proper procedures are still going to be arresting people for mostly low-level offenses, and the burden of that will continue to fall primarily on communities of color because that is how the system is designed to operate—not because of the biases or misunderstandings of officers."

In a recent interview, Vitale told me,

"We've been waging a war on drugs for 40 years by putting people in prison for ever longer sentences. Yet drugs are cheaper, easier to get, and at a higher quality than they've ever been. Any high school student in America can get any kind of drugs they want. Yet we persist in this idea that the way to respond to the problem of drugs, and many other social problems, is through arrest, courts, punishments, prisons. This is what Trump is playing to. This idea that the only appropriate role for the state is one of coercion and threats—whether it's in the foreign policy sphere or in the domestic sphere."

Police forces, as Vitale writes in his book, were not formed to ensure public safety or prevent crime. They were created by the property classes to maintain economic and political dominance and exert control over slaves, the poor, dissidents and labor unions that challenged the wealthy's hold on power and ability to amass personal fortunes. Many of America's policing techniques, including widespread surveillance, were pioneered and perfected in colonies of the U.S. and then brought back to police departments in the homeland. Blacks in the South had to be controlled, and labor unions and radical socialists in the industrial Northeast and Midwest had to be broken.

The fundamental role of the police has never changed. Paul Butler in his book "[Chokehold: Policing Black Men](#)" and James Forman Jr. in his book "[Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America](#)" echo Vitale's point that the war on drugs "has never been about public health or public safety. It's been about providing a cover for aggressive and invasive policing that targets almost exclusively people of color."

"People often point to the London Metropolitan Police, who were formed in the 1820s by [Sir Robert Peel](#)," Vitale said. "They are held up as this liberal ideal of a dispassionate, politically neutral police with the support of the citizenry. But this really misreads the history. Peel is sent to manage the British occupation of Ireland. He's confronted with a dilemma. Historically, peasant uprisings, rural outrages were dealt with by either the local militia or the British military. In the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, in the need for soldiers in other parts of the British Empire, he is having more and more difficulty managing these disorders. In addition, when he does call out the militia, they often open fire on the crowd and kill lots of people, creating martyrs and inflaming further unrest. He said, 'I need a force that can manage these outrages without inflaming passions further.' He developed the Peace Preservation Force, which was the first attempt to create a hybrid military-civilian force that can try to win over the population by embedding itself in the local communities, taking on some crime control functions, but its primary purpose was always to manage the occupation. He then exports that model to London as the industrial working classes are flooding the city, dealing with poverty, cycles of boom and bust in the economy, and that becomes their primary mission."

"The creation of the very first state police force in the United States was the Pennsylvania State Police in 1905," Vitale said. "For the same reasons. It was modeled similarly on U.S. occupation forces in the Philippines. There was a back and forth with personnel and ideas. What happened was local police were unable to manage the coal strikes and iron strikes. ... They needed a force that was more adherent to the interest of capital. ... Interestingly, for these small-town police forces in a coal mining town there was sometimes sympathy. They wouldn't open fire on the strikers. So, the state police force was created to be that strong arm for the law. Again, the direct connection between colonialism and the domestic management of workers. ... It's a two-way exchange. As we're developing ideas throughout our own colonial undertakings, bringing those ideas home, and then refining them and shipping them back to our partners around the world who are often despotic regimes with close economic relationships to the United States. There's a very sad history here of the U.S. exporting basically models of policing that morphs into death squads and horrible human rights abuses."

The almost exclusive alliance on militarized police to deal with profound inequality and social problems is turning poor neighborhoods in cities such as Chicago into miniature failed states, ones where destitute young men and women join a gang for security and income and engage in battles with other gangs and the police. The "[broken windows](#)" policy shifts the

burden for poverty onto the poor. It criminalizes minor infractions, arguing that disorder produces crime and upending decades of research about the causes of crime.

“As poverty deepens and housing prices rise, government support for affordable housing has evaporated, leaving in its wake a combination of homeless shelters and aggressive broken-windows-oriented policing,” Vitale writes. “As mental health facilities close, police become the first responders to calls for assistance with mental health crises. As youth are left without adequate schools, jobs, or recreational facilities, they form gangs for mutual protection or participate in the black markets of stolen goods, drugs, and sex to survive and are ruthlessly criminalized. Modern policing is largely a war on the poor that does little to make people safer or communities stronger, and even when it does, this is accomplished through the most coercive forms of state power that destroy the lives of millions.”

The accelerated assault on the poor and the growing omnipotence of the police signal our transformation into an authoritarian state in which the rich and the powerful are not subject to the rule of law. The Trump administration will promote none of the conditions that could ameliorate this crisis—affordable housing; well-paying jobs; safe and nurturing schools that do not charge tuition; better mental health facilities; efficient public transportation; the rebuilding of the nation’s infrastructure; demilitarized police forces in which most officers do not carry weapons; universal, government-funded health care; an end to the predatory loans and unethical practices of big banks; and reparations to African-Americans and an end to racial segregation. Trump and most of those he has appointed to positions of power disdain the poor as a dead weight on society. They blame stricken populations for their own misery. They seek to subjugate the poor, especially those of color, through police violence, ever harsher forms of punishment and an expansion of the prison system.

“We need an effective system of crime prevention and control in our communities, but that is not what the current system is,” Alexander writes in “The New Jim Crow.” “The system is better designed to create crime, and a perpetual class of people labeled criminal. ... Saying mass incarceration is an abysmal failure makes sense, though only if one assumes that the criminal justice system is designed to prevent and control crime. But if mass incarceration is understood as a system of social control—specifically, racial control—then the system is a fantastic success.”

[Click here](#) to see Chris Hedges interview writer Alex Vitale.

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