

# Police Violence and Racism Have Always Been Tools of Capitalism

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*The system-wide challenges the United States faces with policing are entrenched and deeply rooted. When the historical and current practices of police are examined, it is evident police have been designed to uphold the status quo including racial injustice and class inequality. Whenever political movements develop to respond to racial and class unfairness, the police have undermined their politically-protected constitutional rights.*

Police have used infiltration, surveillance, and violence against political movements seeking to end injustices throughout the history of the nation. It is the deeply embedded nature of these injustices and the structural problems in policing that are leading more people to conclude police must be completely transformed, if not abolished.

We advocate for [democratic community control of the police](#) as a starting point in addition to defunding the police and funding alternatives such as programs that provide mental health, public health, social work and conflict resolution services, and other nonviolent interventions. Funding is needed for the basic human needs of housing, education, employment, healthcare, and food especially in communities that have been neglected for years and whose low-wage labor has enriched the wealthy in this unequal society.

## The Roots Of Policing Are Rotten

The needs of the wealthy have been the driving force for the creation of police. Policing developed to control workers, many who were Irish, Italian and other immigrants seeking fair wages in the North and African people who were enslaved in the South. Victor E. Kappeler, Ph.D writes in "[A Brief History of Slavery and the Origins of American Policing](#)" that "Slave patrols and Night Watches, which later became modern police departments, were both designed to control the behaviors of minorities."

### A. Southern Police Created to Protect Slavery

In the south, the driving force of the economy was slavery where people kidnapped in Africa were brought to the Americas as chattel slaves, workers who created wealth for their owners. The [Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database](#) lists 12.5 million Africans who were shipped to the Americas, 10.7 million of which survived the dreaded Middle Passage. Of that, 388,000 were brought to North America. African slaves were forced to reproduce for their owners and to sell.

From the start, African people revolted against slavery and fought to escape it. This 400 years legacy of racist injustice that helped form the United States is the history we must confront. The roots of policing in what became the Confederacy and later the sheriffs

who enforced Jim Crow grew out of the containment of slaves, the most valuable 'property' in the nation.

[Olivia Waxman describes this history](#) writing that in the South, "the economics that drove the creation of police forces were centered . . . on the preservation of the slavery system." She describes "slave patrols tasked with chasing down runaways and preventing slave revolts" as one of the primary police institutions.

Gary Potter writes in "[The History of Policing in the United States](#)," that "Slave patrols had three primary functions: (1) to chase down, apprehend, and return to their owners, runaway slaves; (2) to provide a form of organized terror to deter slave revolts; and, (3) to maintain a form of discipline for slave-workers who were subject to summary justice, outside of the law, if they violated any plantation rules." The purpose of slave patrols was to protect the wealth of the white people who owned slaves.

Potter writes, "the first formal slave patrol had been created in the Carolina colonies in 1704. During the Civil War, the military became the primary form of law enforcement in the South, but during Reconstruction, many local sheriffs functioned in a way analogous to the earlier slave patrols, enforcing segregation and the disenfranchisement of freed slaves."

Hundreds of laws were passed in the South around slavery and its enforcement but laws were also passed in northern colonies including Connecticut, New York, and others to control slaves. The US Congress passed fugitive Slave Laws allowing the detention and return of escaped slaves, in 1793 and 1850. Racist police made up the "kidnap gang" in New York City in 1830 who would capture Africans and bring them to a rubber stamp court that would send them to the South as captured slaves - often before their families knew they were arrested. Throughout this history, there were people who fought police violence and abuse as is discussed in [The Black New Yorker Who Led The Charge Against Police Violence In The 1830s](#).

The history of racist policing did not end with the abolition of slavery. Police forces were involved in enforcing the racist Black Code, the Convict-Lease System, and Jim Crow segregation. The terrorism of white supremacist groups like the KKK, the burning of black schools and churches and [lynching](#) became the common realities of the south. White police often did not stop, or seriously investigate these crimes; some even participated. In the era of Civil Rights, southern police used violence against nonviolent protesters - beatings, fire hoses and dogs.

This also occurred in the north. For example, Minnesota was infamous for arresting indigenous people on charges like vagrancy and forcing them to work for no pay. This spurred the formation of the American Indian Movement. [Dennis Banks describes](#), "The cops concentrated on the Indian bars. They would bring their paddy wagons around behind a bar and open the back doors. Then they would go around to the front and chase everybody toward the rear. " They would be taken to stadiums and convention centers and forced to work for no pay. The police did not do this at white bars, only bars where Native Americans gathered.

The War on Drugs became the new disguise for police violence against black people. "We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news," said President Nixon's domestic policy chief [John Ehrlichman to Harper's Magazine](#). Mass incarceration of the 1980s, begun under President

Reagan and continued under President Clinton with Joe Biden leading efforts in the Senate, disproportionately impacted black and brown people. Now slavery legally continues as prison labor.



AT&T workers on strike. From Socialist Worker.

## B. Northern Police Protect Commercial Interests, Hold Down Wages

The [history of policing in the northern colonies](#) was also driven by economics. Commercial interests protected their property through an informal, private for-profit form of hiring people part-time. Towns relied on a “night-watch” to enforce laws. Boston started a night-watch in 1636, New York followed in 1658 and Philadelphia created one in 1700.

As cities become more populated, the night-watch system was ineffective. Commercial interests needed more regular policing and so they hired people to protect their property and goods as they were transported from ports to other areas. Boston, a large shipping commercial center, became the first city to form a police force when merchants convinced the government that police were needed for the “collective good” thereby transferring the cost of maintaining a police force to the citizens.

A driving force for police expansion was workers, who were often immigrants, seeking better pay and working conditions. [Abolishing The Police: A Radical Idea That’s Been Around For Over A Century](#), describes how the first state police force was formed in 1905 in Pennsylvania to combat workers forming unions. According to a study in 1969 by the [National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence](#), the United States has the bloodiest and most violent labor history of any industrial nation in the world.

Sam Mitrani, author of [The Rise of the Chicago Police Department: Class and Conflict, 1850-1894](#), writes in [In These Times](#) that “as Northern cities grew and filled with mostly immigrant wage workers who were physically and socially separated from the ruling class, the wealthy elite who ran the various municipal governments hired hundreds and then thousands of armed men to impose order on the new working-class neighborhoods. Class conflict roiled late-19th century American cities like Chicago, which experienced major strikes and riots in 1867, 1877, 1886, and 1894. In each of these upheavals, the police attacked strikers with extreme violence, even if in 1877 and 1894 the U.S. Army played a bigger role in ultimately repressing the working class.”

Martha Grevatt [points out](#) that “Throughout labor history, one finds innumerable accounts of cops engaging in anti-union violence. Police viciously attacked unarmed pickets during the 1994 Staley strike in Decatur, Ill., as well as the 1995 Detroit newspaper strike, to name a few examples. They arrested and harassed UAW members during last year’s strike against GM.”

This is not only a time of growing protest against police violence but also against the mistreatment of workers. Over the last two years, there has been a record number of strikers not seen in 35 years. [PayDay Report counts](#) more than 500 strikes in the last three weeks with a peak number on Juneteenth at “[29 ports across the West Coast](#)” and the [UAW stopping production on all assembly lines](#) “for 8 minutes and 46 seconds to honor George Floyd.” They have tracked [more than 800 strikes since March](#).

#### Historic Time Of Uprising And Unrest Rattles The Police And Power Structure

The rebellion by workers and anti-racism activists is unprecedented in the lives of most people alive today. There is a [nationwide uprising](#) in every state and in thousands of cities and towns. Repression by the power structure with militarized police and the National Guard has failed to stop the protests. Democrats have failed to divert the movement of the energy into the elections, as Joe Biden and Nancy Pelosi have offered inadequate reforms such as more police training. Fundamental changes are needed.

Police will continue to make efforts to shut down the unrest. The FBI and local police have a long history of combatting movements. In addition to the violent response that has been well documented against the current rebellion, we should expect [infiltration](#), surveillance, creation of internal divisions, and other tactics, even [murder](#).

All of these acts against labor, civil rights, peace, environmental, and other movements have happened before and we should expect them again. Documents show a [nationwide effort](#) of police and the [FBI to defeat the Occupy Movement](#) that included [entrapment of activists](#) in crimes. There has also been aggressive police violence against people protesting pipelines and seeking climate justice.

Black activists continue to be a major focus of the FBI and law enforcement. Media Justice and the ACLU reported last week that [one million pages of materials on FBI surveillance](#) were discovered in a FOIA request showing widespread surveillance of black activists.

The small victories that have been won by the movement are already causing repercussions. Police are threatening to quit because they are being held accountable for violence, even though they [remain protected by immunity from prosecution](#). A survey last week found [3 out of 4 Washington, DC police were ready to leave the force](#). [CNN](#)



[reported](#) police in Minneapolis, Atlanta, South Florida, and Buffalo quitting. In Atlanta, [police got the “flu”](#) after [felony murder charges](#) were brought against the officer who killed Rayshard Brooks.

[New York City police are planning a strike](#) on the Fourth of July to show people what life would be like without police. However, this may backfire as during [a 1997 slowdown](#) and also during [a 2014-2015 slowdown](#), crime did not spike, and may even have declined a bit. The nation’s top law enforcement official, Attorney General [Bob Barr threatened](#) in December 2019 that if some communities don’t begin showing more respect to law enforcement, then they could potentially not be protected by police officers.

### To Transform The Police, The Economy Must Be Transformed

The US Constitution, written by slaveholders and businessmen who profited from slave products, puts property rights ahead of individual rights. The Bill of Rights was an afterthought. The result of treating people as property, Jim Crow laws, redlining, and other racially unfair economic practices has [left Black Americans with a \\$13 trillion dollar](#) wealth gap.

Max Rameau told us in a recent podcast, [To Deal With Police, We Must Understand Why They Even Exist](#), that when we understand the purpose of police is to protect property, it becomes more evident why they cannot be reformed. Unless we confront neoliberal capitalism that creates inequality and a hyper-class-based society, the wealthy will always find someone to pay to protect them.

In fact, the call to [defund the police](#) can be easily thrown off course by getting activists fighting for small gains of cuts to police budgets, while the police are increasing their funding from private corporations. Already, as reported by [Eyes on the Ties](#), “Police foundations across the country are partnering with corporations to raise money to supplement police budgets by funding programs and purchasing tech and weaponry for law enforcement with little public oversight.” Their report documents support to police from Wall Street and finance, retail and food industries, Big Tech, fossil fuel corporations, sports, and universities.

It is fantasy to believe police exist for public safety. As Justin Podur [writes](#), “Society doesn’t need a large group with a license to kill.” Glen Ford of Black Agenda Report advocates for community control over police but he doesn’t stop there, [writing](#) “communities should control, not just the police, but much of the rest of their neighborhoods’ vital services and resources.”

As Richard Rubinstein writes in [ThePolice May Pull the Trigger but it is the System That Kills](#), “Racism, police brutality, and economic injustice can be thought of as separate boxes, but they are part of one self-reinforcing system. And that system’s defining characteristic – the feature most resistant to change – is that it is based on the production of goods and services for profit, not to satisfy basic human needs.”

Like many conflicts in the United States, the problems of police violence comes down to corporate-capitalists vs. the people. Racial separation and inequality are ways the ownership class keeps people divided so the people can be controlled. This is the reality of the US political system and the reality of policing in the United States, but we can change that reality by continuing to organize, staying in the streets and [building our power](#).

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*Kevin Zeese and Margaret Flowers co-direct Popular Resistance where [this article](#) was originally published.*

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