I Can't Breathe

M.N.M

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9 minutes. 9 minutes is all it took for George Floyd's heart to stop beating, for his fading voice screaming "I can't breathe" to go silent. His life ended under the knee of Derek Chauvin, a police officer who once swore to protect and to serve (The New York Times, 2022). George Floyd was one of the many unarmed and marginalized individuals killed by police brutality in America, and his death brought a community outcry. Many sought to defund or even abolish the police in order to decrease their power over the lives of innocent individuals, in hopes that this would reduce the amount of unjust killings by police in America (Novacic, 2021). However, will reducing police autonomy also in turn reduce the presence of racist and discriminatory officers? The Defund the Police movement has gone through many changes and interpretations in the time since its formation and has had a large impact, though to move forward into a safer and accepting future we must acknowledge the current state of America's citizens and police, which we should explore through the lens of reformation, not destruction. In order to realistically move into this future, we must aim not only to have safe interactions with the police, but also keep our streets safe, which is why the policeforce is necessary and should not be dufunded, but rather reformed.

There are many definitions to the Defund the Police movement, but the literal concept of removing funding from the police budget or abolishing the police department entirely is what must be tackled due to the popularity of these interpretations (Novacic, 2021). This mainstream idea of Defunding the Police comes from the defined perception that if police are given fewer funds, they will have less power and autonomy and therefore are less likely to impropoerly exercise their power on marginalized communities. While I concede that the police have an

arguably unnecessarily large budget whose funds could be allocated elsewhere, I disagree with the notion that the actual decreasing of this budget or removal of police autonomy will reduce the amount of unjust killings and racism within the ranks of officers. Currently, the police department is simply not equipped to deal with every situation appropriately, and by identifying what changes can be made holistically to solve the issues officers are tasked with handling, we can effectively make positive change. In order to enact this change, we must explore the root of the problem, which is not police access to power, but rather racists' access to power. Reform, not destruction, of the police department must be made in order to bar racist individuals from entering its ranks, and to penalize individuals who have perpetrated them.

Firstly, however, we must identify what impact the Defund the Police movement has had to date, particularly to the police themselves. While many argue that the movement has created a positive impact through unity amongst Black citizens and the demanded justice and accountability from the police department, the sudden explosion of the movement has reaped many negative impacts as well. After the killing of Gearge Floyd by police officers, Minneapolis became the center of the Defund the Police movement through protests and outrage, and has faced the most drastic impacts of it, beginning with the heightened crime rates, many of which were homicides, after the movement's explosion (The-CNN-Wire, 2022). The Minneapolis police department itself also faced drastic changes, primarily of which is the reduction of officers due to low morale and scrutiny by the community. In fact, Sgt. Betsy Brantner Smith of the National Police Association stated "It's no secret that law enforcement ... especially in the last two and a half years, has been badly vilified and wrongly vilified." "You can't call an entire profession racist and expect people to just sit back and say, okay, you know, keep piling on." The

combination of heightened crime and lack of police personnel available to assist citizens has left many individuals feeling unsafe and unheard. These negative impacts of the Defund the Police movement have left many Black Americans with the goal to reform, not defund, the police, and seek out responsible officers rather than a lack of officers at all. In fact, Rae McKay-Anderson, the sister of Telly Blair, a young Black man who was shot and murdered in Minneapolis, states "you can't possibly defund the police in a way that's going to benefit the Black community" (The-CNN-Wire, 2022).

Thus, if defunding the police is not a practical answer to making America safer, what is? The police department itself is the answer to this question. From an internal level, there are few measures to not only ensure officers will be equitable in the field, but also on how to handle the variety of situations presented to them. Many of these situations are high-stress and can be quick to escalate, often inciting the officer to fall into unnecessary aggression (Gutierrez, 2021). This issue is not addressed enough in police training, as much of the focus is directed to the use of lethal weapons rather than preventing the need to use them by teaching officers de-escalation tactics. Not only is there very little time dedicated to conflict mangament in police training, but the training itself lasts only six months, less than even the professions with the lowest levels of stress. Training in this short time span is abnormal around the world, and the United States of America ranks around twelfth globally in terms of police training requirements, which is one of the lowest standards by far (The Institute for Criminal Justice Training Reform, 2014). In a job this critical, it is imperative that officers have time to train before they are pushed out into the streets, and that the training itself is more in-depth with emphasis on de-escalation, not

aggression. This reformed version of training, as well as additional inclusivity and racial bias detection measures would set a higher standard of what it means to protect and serve.

This evidence of the need to reform the police, in addition to pressures of the Black American community to have systemic change and many grassroots movements, have pushed many states to take active steps to reform the police department in order to decreease police brutality and discrimination (Subramanian & Arzy, 2021). For instance, Minneapolis itself and many other cities made efforts to reduce the amount of police in school settings, and many others including San Francisco have inititated the release of crisis response teams as opposed to officers when responding to behavioral or mental health calls. The largest police department in the United States, New York City, was the first to eliminate qualified immunity for its officers, instead holding them accountable for their actions. Many citizen and state-led legal changes have also been pushed to reform the police force, primarily regarding use of force, officer responsibilities in cases of police misconduct and medical emergenicies, and penalization of police misconduct (Subramanian & Arzy, 2021). These reforms, among many, may be key to moving towards a different version of the police force as we see it today.

Not only do these new efforts display a sense of accountability and solidarity among states and citizens, but many such reforms have already been proven effective all over the world (Sherman, 2020). Firstly, however, it is important to acknowledge that while these direct forms of change are necessary, indirect measures reducing crime itself are also critical, such as housing the homeless, decriminalization, and increased social service resources. For instance, the state of Oregon has been making many effective alternatives to health responses by the police, including establishing a team called CAHOOTS, dedicated to be a non-violent mental health and addiction

service. In terms of domestic calls, Massachusetts and Houston have made services geared

towards sheltering and assisting victims of abuse leave dangerous environments wothout

exacerbating the perpetrator. Chicago has even gone to the step of keeping the police in-check,

and decreasing need by providing personal safety services (Sherman, 2020). All of these

measures have made positive impacts in their community's relations with the police department,

and could be implemented on larger scales as a solution.

Overall, the police force's relationship to American citizens, particularly Black and

marginalized communities, is complex, and always has been. In fact, the many movements

stemming from this relationship, including the Defund the Police movement, are complicated as

well. While all these movements acknowledge that discrimination is a prevalent issue in America

and the police department, they argue for varying solutions. Defunding the police is one of those

suggested, but not the correct one if we want to move into a safer and inclusive tomorrow. We

need reform and positive change, and we have to start at the root of the problem. As a woman of

color myself, who has seen many individuals who look like me unjustly killed or imprisoned by

the police, it is important to me that America makes the decision that will make our streets safer,

not just from the police, but from the crime police seek to prevent as well, which is why the

existence of the police force itself is a necessity. By reforming the institution that swears to serve

and protect us, we can move forward into a better tomorrow, where "I can't breathe" stays in

history, not the future.

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