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The Police Can't Solve the Problem. They Are the Problem

By Derecka Purnell and Marbre Stahly-Butts

Twenty-five years after the infamous 1994 crime bill, too many criminal justice groups are simply reimagining mass incarceration.

A quarter-century on, criminal justice advocates agree that the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, signed by Bill Clinton in September 1994, was a disaster for poor people and people of color, and a driver of mass incarceration. Elected officials, policy experts and academics have recently sought to undo this damage by reimagining public safety. But too many of them are keeping law enforcement central to their vision for reform. This is a fundamental mistake. They are not reimagining public safety. They are reimagining mass incarceration.

The reality is this: The police fill prisons. We can't repair the harm that the 1994 crime bill has done by promoting mass incarceration without reducing the size and scope of the police.

The crime bill articulated an obsession with punishment and prescribed policing as the cure to a host of social ills. It provided funding for 100,000 new police officers, \$14 billion in grants for community-oriented policing, \$9.7 billion for prisons and \$6.1 billion crime prevention programs. The legislation was partly responsible for a 30 percent increase in police officers from 699,000 in 1990 to 899,000 in 1999, and funded over 7,000 school officers. Today, there are over one million law enforcement officers in the United States

But did the plan work? The Government Accountability Office concluded that while there was a 26 percent decline in overall crime from 1993 to 2000, only 1.3 percent of the decline could be attributed to additional police officers. The majority of that decrease, the office said, came from other, unspecified factors; smaller studies have found that everything from preschool to job programs for young people decreases crime rates.

Approximately 10.5 million people are arrested each year in this country. While a majority of these arrests ultimately result in dismissed charges, their impact is devastating. Being arrested, whatever the outcome, can jeopardize a person's employment, housing, physical and mental health and parental rights.

Politicians promise jail closings even as they increase police budgets — and, as a result, arrests. Mayor Bill de Blasio of New York has acknowledged that the 1994 crime bill was a mistake and wants the city's Rikers Island jail to close by 2026. Yet New York's transportation agency just announced a plan to hire 500 police officers to combat fare evasion and manage homeless people in the subway.

Free public transportation, living wages and quality housing would be better responses to these issues than increased policing. Nationwide, nearly half of the people whom the police arrest multiple times have incomes below \$10,000 a year. It's important to put this in historical perspective: Since it originated with efforts to prevent labor organizing and to patrol slaves, modern policing has punished the poor. No number of diversity workshops, body cameras and community policing initiatives will change that.

Reformers on both sides of the aisle praised President Trump for signing the First Step Act last year as a measure toward ending mass incarceration. The act is a modest, underfunded criminal justice reform package that a coalition of over 150 black led organizations opposed. Last week, White House economists announced a plan to use the police to get homeless people "off the street." This direction is misguided. Police officers cannot solve underlying causes of homelessness or other social problems. They can only temporarily manage these issues with punishment and more violence.

And even more misguided ideas are being proposed. After a movement against police violence erupted in 2014, scholars, nonprofit groups and politicians reimagined police officers as youth mentors, mental health professionals, and social workers — against the wishes of many police officers. But the police do not help vulnerable populations — they make populations vulnerable. Excessive force is the No. 1 investigated complaint against police officers, and sexual violence is the second. People with mental illness are 16 times

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more likely to be killed by the police. People of color, people with disabilities, immigrants, queer and trans people, those with mental illness and the homeless disproportionately experience violence from officers, who kill an average of nearly 1,000 people annually, and sexually assault, physically assault, harass, and surveil hundreds of thousands more

Philanthropists and politicians have called for more “community policing,” the idea of having police departments develop partnerships with community groups to ease tensions between law enforcement and residents. In the last 10 years, the Department of Justice included “community policing” in its consent decrees with police departments accused of misconduct in Baltimore, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Chicago, New Orleans, Newark, Puerto Rico and Ferguson, Mo., and Oakland, Calif.

But community policing is an empty phrase. A Washington Post report showed that law enforcement use of force increased in half of police departments with consent decrees. Asking police officers to strengthen community relationships — including by doing things like playing football with children or handing out ice cream — does not reduce their power to harm anyone.

There's hope. Community organizations are working to solve the problems our communities face without putting them in more danger. The San Francisco school board recently passed a resolution limiting the role of the police on school campuses, acknowledging that law enforcement's presence criminalizes students under the guise of protection. The Oakland Power Projects trains community members in health skills and emergency response practices to reduce reliance on the police and to create the support networks needed to address the issues that cause problems in the first place.

In New York, the Audre Lorde Project's Safe Outside the System produces resources for L.B.G.T.Q. communities to build safe spaces without police involvement. Nationally, the People's Coalition for Safety and Freedom is organizing for the repeal of the 1994 crime bill and for a community-driven process to decide how to respond to community-based violence and corporate harm.

Systems of oppression, like slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration, must be reduced and abolished — not reimaged. Police officers, who primarily put people in cages, are the enforcers of mass incarceration. We must reckon with the reality that the police are part of the problem and stop investing money, power and legitimacy in them.

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