PROBLEMS WITH COMMUNITY CONTROL OF POLICE AND PROPOSALS FOR ALTERNATIVES

Over the past 50 years, radical Black organizations have consistently demanded community control of the police. The idea behind this demand is that those most impacted by oppressive policing should have the power to decide how the system operates in their own communities, and that community control of police would transform the force from an occupier into a partner (or bring truth to idea that the police "protect and serve").

But the demand for community control ignores the real problem with police and policing; policing functions to maintain white supremacy and protect property, and its power and violence contribute to and are part of broader structures of inequality. Instead of promoting the kind of change that would protect oppressed communities from individual and structural harm, Community Review Boards (CRBs) legitimize the role of police in this harm. In the current landscape, "community control" does this by suggesting that under the "right" supervision or control, policing (and police) can be separated from this institutional violence and the historic function of policing.

CRBs cannot confront the logic or overall function of policing, or reduce the violence inherent to policing. Oversight of the system does not CHANGE the system. For these reasons, even in best case scenarios, the institution of policing cannot be reformed because it is tied to the violences of white supremacy and capitalism. Policing must be abolished in order to end police abuse; relying on CRBs masks and distracts from this important reality. Instead, we can build on historic calls for community oversight to create community- and self-determined capacities to prevent and address harm in other ways, forging partnerships together to do this work.

Civilian Review Boards and Police Oversight

Most CRBs and other police oversight bodies are usually proposed to produce police accountability and transparency. CRBs with the weakest control are asked to review complaints and make non-binding recommendations to the police department or city / local government. Stronger boards oversee police budgets, sometimes have subpoena power (can call people to testify), and have authority to hire, fire and discipline police officers.

Proponents suggest that such oversight bodies will increase public trust in policing, because residents will believe that police are overseen by independent bodies with the power to call out "bad" police practices and effect changes to policy or discipline that will hold police accountable. A best case scenario of this kind of CRB might look like this: An independent CRB is elected by residents (not appointed by a mayor, police representative, or city council, as is often the case). The CRB has the power to hire, fire, and discipline police of all ranks without police department interference. Imagine that this board has the power to subpoena people and read classified documents and holds open meetings whose minutes are also available online, or whose meetings are also broadcast on the radio and internet. And, finally, suppose there is a mechanism for people harmed by police actions to present directly to and be represented on the board.

But, even if community oversight really did all this, building trust in the institution of policing tends to legitimize of the role police play in our daily lives. If we invest in an oversight body that is meant to work toward the goal of ending "bad" policing, we simultaneously invest in the resources, rhetoric, and power of policing and the possibility of police reform. This legitimizes the things police departments do as a regular part of the work of policing, including using force to do everything from settle disputes between people to suppress dissent. Increasing the legitimacy of policing entrenches and enhances police power; improving a system aimed at genocide merely speeds that death dealing along. This runs counter to abolitionist goals to make policing obsolete by meeting the needs and desires for community and individual well-being that, in theory, fall to policing, but in fact are mostly left unmet, anyway.

New York City, for example, established an all-civilian Community Complaint Review Board (CCRB) in 1993. Routine police violence continued after the

CCRB began to meet – including the infamous police sexual assault of Abner Louima in 1997, the murder of Amadou Diallo by the NYPD's Street Crimes Unit in 1999, the murder of Eric Garner in 2014 – a pattern of violence that continues still. During this same period, with the CCRB in place, Police Commissioners Ray Kelly, Howard Safir, and William Bratton oversaw the implementation of Stop and Frisk policing and so-called "Quality of Life" policing, giving officers nearly unrestricted capacities to stop, harass, and arrest people of color, immigrants, people without homes, and queers, especially young queer people of color, in the city. Issues that plagued both the NYPD and, more critically, the City of New York, are as present today as they were in the early 1990s when the CCRB was established.

So, the trouble with CRBs includes:

1. **A lack of power to make any fundamental changes to the practice of policing**, because they are most often merely symbolic and function on the same logic of punishment as the rest of the PIC – assuming that by punishing individual police officers, that police violence overall will decrease. When it is the system of policing that produces the harms we see, a CRB's power to respond to police violence as the individual action of one cop undermines any capacity to address the system as a whole.

2. **They are most often constituted of people appointed by mayors, chiefs of police, or other elected officials**, and are as often aligned politically, or in solidarity, with other groups that do not represent the interests of people most severely impacted by the violence of policing.

3. **Even when the members are elected, they are often influenced by the same power-brokering as other elected officials when it comes to the cops** (for example, from police associations).

4. **Simply being local civilians does not ensure that residents will not also be biased in favor of police** (we see this, too, in juries that acquit police and everyday conversations about policing as dangerous work that involves risk that justifies "split second mistakes"). The presumption here is that policing is an exceptional category of employment that, even if it requires special oversight in the form of a CRB, it also merits allowances for "reasonable" or "justifiable" violence and other forms of harm as "part of the job."

5. **Police fraternal orders and similar organizations often have power that overrides any power civilian boards may have** with the complete support of local politicians. Sometimes police officers are even seen as a separate protected, and targeted, class (#BlueLivesMatter bills are an illustration of this).

6. **Even when boards are able to hold individual cops accountable to the policies governing their practices, the policies themselves often support unacceptable levels of force and coercion, especially in cases deemed "security" threats.** This goes hand in hand with the elevation of fear reported by police - which leads them to do even more harm - as being more important and legitimate than the fear people who are most targeted by policing have of police contact.

Here's what we can do instead:

We know that the surest way to reduce the violence of policing is to reduce contact with the police. Effective community control over safety and well-being can focus instead on how to *reduce policing power*, *police presence*, and *police contact* even as we suggest ways we can continue to build community safety without the involvement of law enforcement at all.

Some starting points to prioritize in our organizing

1. **Shift funding priorities from law enforcement to community health and well-being**, including investments in physical and mental health care, youth programming, and community mediation and reconciliation programs (e.g. #FundBlackFutures, Oakland's People's Community Medics)

2. **Erode the power of police fraternal orders**. This would significantly decrease the power of police by limiting their ability to isolate and protect individual police and argue for special treatment / indemnity. While we support the right of workers to unionize, police fraternal orders are not unions so much as social organizations meant to obscure the violence of policing, and coerce and preserve power structures. This includes rethinking connections made between labor unions, especially of other "community" workers, like teachers, and police organizations. **How can teachers, health workers, and others stand apart from police organizations and mobilize their unions to prioritize preventative and community-building projects and work?**

3. **Change police policies to make termination of cops involved in repeated incidents of killing or excessive force automatic, and make them ineligible for rehires or transfers. Withhold pension payments.** Organizers in Minnesota have proposed such a law (prior to the police murder of George Floyd). The focus of these approaches is not to act as a symbolic deterrent, echoing a justification for punishment central to the PIC itself, but reduce and erode the power of policing to proceed as if violence, harm, surveillance, and constant contact are a necessary part of creating "safety."

4. **Instead of CRBs as they are currently formulated, imagine an elected body that would challenge the overall structural power of police and ultimately eliminate policing**. The CRB could be re-imagined to be a conduit for organizing in communities to develop mechanisms to deal with harm in ways that don't promote violence. Steps toward that goal might be:

   - Have the power to re-allocate budget and other resources away from policing and toward other community, neighborhood, and health-building practices, groups, etc.
   - Have a focus on institutional and systemic harms caused and perpetuated by policing when instances of particular violence happen, rather than on individual cases of police violence decontextualized.
   - Develop systems of community accountability that are sustainable and make time, space, and resources available to train people in how to carry them out.
   - Create capacities to share and amplify existing practices, including assistance to groups interested in adapting practices to their own local contexts.

5. **These steps could be part of working toward long term goals, including:**

   - Well-resourced and sustainable access to emergency response and after-care;
   - Longer-term resources for addressing conflict and harm;
   - Accessible health and mental health care options;
   - Shifting resources toward opportunities for meaningful work, housing, education, and other critical needs;
   - The abolition of policing

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