



DISMANTLE THE POLICE

IMAGINING WHAT LAW ENFORCEMENT COULD EVOLVE TOWARDS WORDS
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In the future, there will be no police in Kansas City.

No more armed officers escalating situations with gun violence. No cops to harass people making consensual choices with other adults about drugs and sex. No traffic cops on power trips with racial biases. No sheriffs, either, evicting people from their homes.

In the future, everyone will have access to safe and healthy homes. Everyone will have food to eat. Schools will have all the resources needed to educate children, who will all have the potential for bright futures. Health care will be available for the physical and mental needs of everyone.

If someone hurts you, there will be community mediators trained in transformative justice. You can call on people amongst your friends, your family, your neighbors who will be prepared to step in and hold one another accountable, to address the conflict's roots, to help prevent it from happening again. To facilitate actual justice.

If people have what they need, there won't be burglaries to bust, or trespassers to pursue. If people learn that caring for one another is more important than competing with one another, and have healthy outlets for anger and avenues to heal trauma, there will be dramatically few assaults and interpersonal violence to address.

Maybe that future feels intangible, impossible. But the steps to get there—to get to a future where everyone is free from the terror and harassment of living in a police state, where everyone (and I mean everyone) is entitled to housing, food, health, care, respect—begin now.

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Jenay Manley, a leader with KC Tenants, has tried to play by the rules of our current system. Five years ago, the father of her children abused her, and she called the police. “I thought if I pressed charges,” she says, “he’ll know that you don’t do this to people, and it’ll never happen to anybody else. And then it happened.” He then abused the woman he was next with.

When she and her children recently faced homelessness, she made the choice to return to her ex. “I knew it was domestic violence or homelessness, so I chose to deal with my body and my mental wellness in order to give my kids a house.” He has now hurt her again, and she is once again press-

ing charges, out of a lack of alternatives.

“I’ve done it the way they say you do it! I’ve done it that way, and it did nothing,” says Manley.

“It did nothing to make my kids have a better father. It did nothing to make them feel safe or secure.”

In our future free of police, Manley says, “hopefully we are healing our communities instead of just punishing them for the traumas that have been put upon them and they are now putting upon others because they have never been healed.”

Instead of punishment, we need transformative justice—justice that transforms harm from the root. “It is a long-term healing situation, where he has to own what he’s done, not just to me, but what my kids saw,” says Manley. “Transformative justice is therapy for me, for my children, it is therapy for him, it is holding him accountable.”

At the same time, she continues, “Justice is not all about him. He’s not the one who needs justice. A jail is not justice. It leaves me and my kids behind. All they care about is him being behind bars. And that doesn’t



do anything for my children's self-esteem, that doesn't do anything for my children's relationship with their father later on, if they choose to have it. Transformative justice is parenting classes if they decide that's what he needs. It's giving him the space to really know that he did wrong, and also the space to know it's okay to say that you did wrong."

"For me, transformative justice is every single person who got hurt in this situation gets to voice that and how they can be healed," says Manley. "What are the roots of what he did? What made him violent? What made him okay with hurting me? What made him okay with his kids seeing that? It seems like he needs some healing. Just putting him in jail isn't going to heal anything. It's not going to make me better, it's not going to make him better, it doesn't do anything."

"I've heard people say, oh well if you were assaulted, or if your kid was assaulted, or if someone killed your kid, what would you do?" continues Manley. "The truth is, I don't know what I would do. But I know that the cops don't actually make it so that

those things don't happen. My goal is not to punish someone who hurts me. It is to stop people from hurting me. And the cops, all they do is enforce a punishment."

Defunding the police is an opportunity to fund housing. Envisioning the future, Manley says, "I would like to see land trusts, I'd like to see guaranteed housing for everyone, I'd like to see a safe place for my kids, I would like to know that I don't have to move back into an apartment with someone who abused me five years ago because we have to afford to live."

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This isn't about one broken department—but an entire system of control destroying lives and communities. Police are the enforcers of structural inequality in our society. If you believe that Black lives matter, it is critical to understand that our system of policing and prisons is killing Black people, and upending families and neighborhoods.

"It's a myth that is intentionally perpetuated that the police are here to protect

and serve," says Ray Billis, a co-founder of Black Rainbow, a new local collective working for social justice. "They don't protect and serve—specifically for low-income and Black and brown people. They terrorize people, they criminalize people, they don't do anything to decrease the harm in our community. We specifically use the word 'harm' as opposed to 'crime,' because we see crime as a political category."

Police and prosecutors are selective on what crimes are pursued and punished. Who is made criminal? The War on Drugs has been waged for decades against non-violent, low-level offenders in poor communities of color. While white people and Black people use and sell drugs at the same rates, whites are incarcerated at a rate of 450 per 100,000, and Black folks are incarcerated at the staggering rate of 2,306 per 100,000.

That's a lot of fathers being taken away from their children because they were pulled over with a joint on them. And once branded a criminal, it follows you for the rest of your life. You are relegated to a second-class status, losing access to jobs, housing, educa-

tion, public assistance.

Cops also face very few consequences for their actions. Qualified immunity shields police officers from liability for harm they cause. Their powerful unions, which historically are in opposition to the values and goals of actual labor unions, ensure officers have little accountability and often work to resist reforms. Cops have incentives to harm and harass community members—like making a bad arrest at the end of their shift so they can rake in easy overtime pay doing paperwork. That's really a thing. And there's little recourse in the courts: the Supreme Court has stripped Americans' 4th Amendment protections around unreasonable search and seizure.

Okay, so the police are a problem. So how do we handle the harm happening in our communities right now?

As of this writing, 122 people have been murdered in Kansas City this year. We are on pace for 198 murders in 2020. Our previous record year was 1993, with 153 homicides in KCMO.

This is a genuine crisis. And the police



are incapable of solving it. Under KCPD's watch, we have had 100+ murders year after year. As KCPD's budget has risen, so has gun violence in our city. Police have proven themselves unable to prevent murders or even to find those who commit them—the current clearance rate is only 43 percent.

"We think that interpersonal violence is a very, very serious issue that does need to be solved," says Billis of Black Rainbow. "We think that the way to solve that is not by increasing policing. What are the relationships that people have with systems that create a need to commit violence? What that means is, what can we do to make people not have a need to commit violence?"

"We also think that homelessness is violence," continues Billis. "We think that food insecurity is violence. We think that miseducation and diseducation is violence. The accumulation of systemic violence that is imposed on Black people and brown people and low-income people creates these conditions that force people to have to commit violent acts for survival."

Attempts to curb gun violence in our city without addressing systemic violence, like poverty and racism, will ultimately fail.

"We, as abolitionists," says Billis, "aren't foolish, by any means, to think that we can pull cops off the street and release all the people from jails and that everything will be awesome. As abolitionists, it is our job to think about harm. And we came to this idea and this belief of abolition because we are concerned with the harm that takes place, the interpersonal harm and violence, that takes place in our communities. What that means to be an abolitionist is wanting to actually solve this harm that takes place in our communities."

Abolishing police and prisons is a long-term process of community transformation. The call to abolish police is a call to abolish harm and violence. If you are worried about the murder rate in Kansas City—don't look to the police for answers.

In addition to their failure to prevent homicide, the police also commit it. KCPD's

"A LOT OF PEOPLE, WHEN THEY HEAR 'ABOLITION' OR THEY HEAR 'DEFUNDING,' THEY ASSOCIATE IT WITH AN ABSENCE," SAYS BILLIS. "WHEN REALLY, WHAT WE'RE SAYING IS WE WANT MORE PRESENCE. WE WANT A PRESENCE OF MORE POSITIVE INSTITUTIONS AND SERVICES THAT ACTUALLY PROTECT AND GIVE LIFE AND GIVE OPPORTUNITIES TO PEOPLE. WE'RE NOT ADVOCATING FOR ABSENCE, WE'RE ADVOCATING FOR PRESENCE."

statistics on homicide explicitly exclude "officer-involved shootings." According to data compiled by the *Kansas City Star* and the *Washington Post*, KCMO police officers have killed 73 people since 2005. Seven people have been killed by KCPD so far in 2020 alone.

"The people who are most concerned with gun violence and harm in our communities should be the people most interested in the idea of abolition," says Billis.

In July, Black Rainbow and a broad coalition of other local organizations including KC Tenants, One Struggle, NAACP, and the Urban League, released an open letter to Mayor Lucas with demands that include cutting KCPD's budget by 50 percent and redirecting those funds to housing, healthcare, and education.

"Right now we spend \$273 million dollars on police. We think that that's absurd, irrational, outdated," says Billis of Black Rainbow. That amount represents a whopping 38 percent of the city's budget. Kansas City is required by law to spend 20 percent of its operating budget on police—and this coalition says we need to scale back to the minimum.

Their letter pointed to the statistics.

"From 2012 to 2018, KCPD's budget has grown an absurd 28 percent (an increase of over \$50 million) while the violent crime rate has risen 42 percent. It is clear: Increasing an already bloated police budget does not reduce crime."

Among Black Rainbow's other demands: "We want Chief Smith, who has a history of racism and violence towards the Black community, fired immediately," says Billis. "We want to suspend the use of paid administrative leave for cops under investigation. We want KCPD to withdraw participation in police militarization exercises."

Reforms have not worked. Putting more money into the police department by doing things like funding body cameras or mandatory trainings are wrong-footed. Investing in community safety means divesting from the police.

"What we propose is divesting from the institution of policing that has never been truly proven to decrease harm, to decrease poverty, to decrease violence," says Billis. "Instead, we propose to invest in life-affirming institutions, whether that be mental health, health care, education, housing, any of these types of institutions that have actually been proven to decrease interpersonal

violence in our communities."

Manley is clear: "Every dollar that goes into policing is a dollar taken away from poor people. Every single dollar is a dollar taken away from the solutions that we know would help."

In talking about how defunding the police will work, Manley says, "It's our elected officials job to do the legwork and the research. I've been doing research, I'm not getting paid for it, I'm doing it. So why are they not? And instead you tell me that defunding the police sounds radical and absurd—it sounds radical and absurd for us to continue to have police officers that we know have guns and are going to kill us!"

The threat of violence is never going to be the way to stop violence. Manley says, "Stop the traumas that happen in our education system, stop the traumas that happen in our houses when we're children, stop forcing women to stay in abusive relationships to pay their bills or to watch their children. Our children wouldn't be dealing with these traumas as adults without resources, and maybe—maybe, violence would not be repeating itself, if we invest in our people."

Abolition is making police and prisons obsolete by reimagining how we relate to one another. INCITE, a network of radical women of color organizing against violence, paints a portrait of an abolitionist future: "We seek to build movements that not only end violence, but that create a society based on radical freedom, mutual accountability, and passionate reciprocity. In this society, safety and security will not be premised on violence or the threat of violence; it will be based on a collective commitment to guaranteeing the survival and care of all peoples."

Kansas City, can we commit to caring for one another?

"A lot of people, when they hear 'abolition' or they hear 'defunding,' they associate it with an absence," says Billis. "When really, what we're saying is we want more presence. We want a presence of more positive institutions and services that actually protect and give life and give opportunities to people. We're not advocating for absence, we're advocating for presence."

The abolition of police and prisons is as necessary as the abolition of slavery was. We will look back on this era of violent policing and mass incarceration and wonder how we let such injustice stand for so long. We will look back on this system of racial control, and grieve and honor the millions of people who were harmed by it.

In the future, Kansas City, we won't be beholden to a cadre of people with guns who wield power over the rest of us. KC will be home to well-resourced schools, to equitable health care, to plentiful good food on everyone's tables, to people who collaborate and care for one another. It is time to imagine the possibilities—and bring them into being. **P**