POLICING HAS FAILED BLACK PEOPLE

A Reimagined System of Safety Will Protect Black Lives and Well-Being

Photograph by Michael McCoy/Reuters

George Floyd was murdered by officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota after a dispute over an allegedly counterfeit $20 bill. In an attempt to arrest him, an officer pressed his knee into Floyd's neck for nearly 10 minutes, despite Floyd's cries that he couldn't breathe. This horrifying killing shows the brutal violence that Black people face from police — and the minor nature of the offenses that can lead to fatal encounters. There are many underlying factors that explain how policing harms Black people.

The Purpose of Policing is to Punish.

Officers' primary job is to enforce laws and arrest people who have violated them — even when people have called 911 for help. The tools that officers have rely on their power to use violence, detention, and arrest.

Policing is Rooted In, and Continues to Reflect, Anti-Black Racism.

Policing today reflects its anti-Black roots. Black people continue to be policed more aggressively than others and are more likely to be stopped, searched, or arrested in many cities. Nationwide, Black drivers are stopped more often than white drivers on average, and Black people are killed by law enforcement at more than twice the rate of white people. These harms result from a dangerous and false association between Blackness and criminality.

Law Enforcement Fails to Keep Black Communities Safe.

Black people are 10 times more likely than white people to die from gun homicides, and Black children and teens are more than 18 times more likely to die from gun violence than their white counterparts. Yet the rates of law enforcement completing homicide investigations have decreased over recent decades. Moreover, many common police responses to domestic violence fail to keep Black survivors safe. Black people also face higher traffic fatalities and more police traffic enforcement stops than white people.

Police Practices Cause Harm, Especially to Black People.

Police encounters can harm people's health and well-being — and that of their entire communities.

- Research from LDF's Thurgood Marshall Institute shows police respond more aggressively to racial justice protesters than other types of protest demonstrations.
- Law enforcement's use of advanced surveillance technologies like aerial surveillance, facial recognition, and social media monitoring software has worsened racially-biased police practices.
- Police encounters are far too often fatal, but they can also cause injury, trauma, and mental health issues. They are also linked to worse academic performance for students.
- Police encounters harm the broader communities of directly-impacted people. One study found that during weeks in which two or more incidents of racial police violence occurred, Black people reported poorer mental health.

Black people are killed by law enforcement at more than twice the rate of white people

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LDF's Affirmative Vision: Safety for All, Not for Some

A public safety system that respects the dignity of Black people and keeps Black communities and all communities safe is both necessary and possible. LDF recommends these action steps:

☑ **Repeal Criminal Penalties for Offenses Linked to Poverty.** Police are often called over "quality of life" complaints like panhandling and loitering in low-income communities. However, when local courts don't prosecute these misdemeanor offenses, people are less likely to have future contact with the criminal legal system.

☑ **Use Community Responders to Resolve Issues Underlying 911 Calls.** 911 calls often result from unmet health and social needs. Community responders like social workers, mental health professionals, mediation specialists, and crisis workers can help people meet these needs instead of punishing them for their unfortunate circumstances.

☑ **Invest Resources in Communities and Restorative Practices to Promote Safety.** Communities should invest in programs that address the root causes of violence, conflict, and instability to promote safety. This includes building economic security (e.g. through cash aid), providing safe, affordable, and supportive housing, expanding violence prevention programs that use "credible messengers" from the community, and using restorative practices like victim-offender mediation to repair harm while reducing incarceration.

It's important to consider both the harms of policing and the effectiveness of these alternative strategies in developing public safety systems in which Black people can feel and be protected and respected.