

# Policing: The Change America is Awaiting

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## PANELISTS

JASON WILLIAMS is Assistant Professor of Justice Studies at Montclair State University and author of “Black Males and the Criminal Justice System.”

EVELYN GARCIA is Senior Lecturer in the School of Criminal Justice, Political Science and International Studies at Fairleigh Dickinson University.

ANDREW COHEN is Senior editor at the Marshall Project and Fellow at the Brennan Center for Justice.

## MODERATOR

SARAH RYLEY is a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist.

ABOUT THE EVENT HOST



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## Empower the Community

JASON WILLIAMS

- The United States is truly experiencing an epistemic nightmare in policing. The current level of discontent has caused a historical level of condemnation from all, regardless of age, race, or socioeconomic status. This has caused us to put policing under the spotlight.
- Elijah Anderson's "Iconic Ghetto" concept puts forward that the modern-day color question is now affixed to inscriptions of geography. In this case, the ghetto becomes a proxy for race. Black folks are tied to the ghetto, even if they are not from the ghetto. This includes individuals who have reached a high level of success. Blacks are then susceptible to a higher level of dehumanization.
- Victims of state violence and vigilante justice are murdered for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The violence and policing in these zones have been viewed as okay when the ghetto is perceived as not having anyone or anything worth saving.
- Internal colonialism also speaks to the ghetto as a sustained system of racialized control and domination. This keeps blacks in a caste-like state.
- When policing is considered in this light, police abolition or divestment becomes the only way forward. Community policing or hotspot policing do not do anything to help communities. Helping community members address racism and economic depravity should be at the top of the agenda. Policing cannot undo these injustices.
- Abolition forces us to think about ways we can empower the community. Funds that go to police departments should be redirected toward community programs, which include mental health and social services.
- The black community has not had a say in how they are governed. People should have agency to handle problems in their communities. How does democracy intersect with policing? How can we make democracy more accessible?

## Policing Practices

EVELYN GARCIA

- There are many questions needing answers, including whether policing practices are outdated and in need of reform. In carrying out the duty to protect and serve, police strike a balance between controlling crime and preserving civil liberties.
- Relations between police and the community become uneasy when there is disregard to procedural protections. A lack of mutual respect and trust between involved parties can lead to strained relations and civil unrest.
- In community-police relations, use of force continuums give police guidance in what actions to take when responding to particular situations and how to determine whether the use of force is excessive.
- A relatively small number of people are met with deadly force when they come in contact with police. Taking the use of force continuum into account, police apply the same amount of force commensurate with the amount of force used against them.
- Deadly physical force is used on white males at higher rates than any other race because there are more white males in the population. However, police are more likely to use deadly physical force on unarmed black men compared to white men. The application of different levels of force, given the level of resistance used by African Americans against police, needs to be better documented.
- Police reform can include diversity training and unconscious bias training. However, the underlying problems and social ills of communities need to be examined and addressed. The police are not equipped to address social ills.
- Efforts to build strong communities and carry out police reform should consider the wellbeing and mental health of both community members and the police. A true partnership involves governance and communities having a say in holding police departments accountable.

## Holding Police Accountable

ANDREW COHEN

- There is bipartisan support for meaningful police reform. A big reason for this is technology. In the case of George Floyd, the citizen video spurred all that happened since. Police are being held accountable by civilians and videos that go viral nationally.
- Episodes of police brutality are taking place on live television during the George Floyd protests. Police officers are proving the point that protesters are trying to make. People watching from their homes find it harder to be skeptical about cases of police brutality.
- For decades there was a lack of data tracking the extent to which people are killed by police and where use of force is happening. Though this is starting to change, it has been purposeful on the part of police agencies.
- The internet allows for the dissemination of information, including topics such as qualified immunity. The general public did not know about this doctrine a few years ago. People all over are now talking about the need to change this.
- Significant reforms in criminal justice have happened in Republican leaning states such as Texas and Georgia.
- Police officers recognize the serious problems they have with racist policing. However, some of the outlandish and deplorable things local police unions say in the aftermath of some of these episodes are now widely disseminated. People have begun to question the role of the police unions.
- Despite the support for basic police reforms, police unions are enormously powerful politically. They use the fear card and wield power at legislative levels. Public-supported reforms will not take place until police unions lose some political power.
- The will of the people is now coming to the forefront with the repeal of Section 50-a of the New York State Civil Rights Law. Although unions tried to fight the repeal of Section 50-a in court, police misconduct and disciplinary data will no longer be hidden.

## Question and Answer Takeaways

**What are your opinions on defunding the police? Police forces have increased in diversity, but why do the problems continue despite this? Why is there more support for reform rather than abolition?**

- Williams: Diversity does not work if the culture is still the same. In terms of abolition, communities need to have a voice in how they are governed. Police are supposed to protect and serve. If citizens say they are being mistreated, their voices need to be heard. Restorative justice programs work, but they do not get the necessary funding.

**What are your opinions on how Camden, NJ reimaged public safety?**

- Cohen: The Marshall Project has done some work on Camden. In some outlets, it is praised for building up a new system from scratch. Lots of data show that some of it has worked, but not all of it has. Some feel Camden is now overpoliced. It is not entirely the success story people hoped it would be.
- Williams: There was a county takeover of policing. It was a “get tough” approach. Local control was taken from the people. It resulted in hyper surveillance. The strategy resulted in more cops on the ground.

**Is there a good model out there?**

- Williams: Models continue to focus on “better policing”. We are not looking at root causes. None of the models focus on bettering the communities, which is the best model. We need to create better communities through upward economic mobility.
- Cohen: Eugene, Oregon has a creative program called CAHOOTS—Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets. Local officials in Olympia, Washington have figured out how to sort 911 calls to send the right resources other than cops to deescalate and re-route. That is what will happen in the short term in many jurisdictions. Change will be implemented in smaller increments.

## Question and Answer Takeaways (continued)

**Do you have any explanation as to why the George Floyd video disturbed so many Americans when there have been plenty of videos of racism against black people?**

- Williams: Compounded by COVID-19, everyone sat and bore witness to it. Seeing a grown man calling out for his deceased mother hit everyone. We watched this man die on film. This incident hits your soul differently.
- Cohen: There is a lack of ambiguity surrounding it. It is clear. It is excruciating to watch when you can see he poses no threat on the ground. Plus, Minneapolis has had a bad history of racist policing. The local uproar fueled the national interest.

**In recent protests, violence against white people seemed equal to that against black protestors. Did this make people see that this is real?**

- Cohen: Demographics have played a role. So many of these protests have taken place in small towns and in red states. That must be fueling the public support for reforms.
- Williams: The response of the police—such as the police shoving an elderly man in Buffalo—has humanized the issue for many white people watching at home.

**Are there constructive or tangible solutions people can get behind?**

- Cohen: All of this has come about because of reporting and advocacy groups. Folks of different stripes are fighting for transparency and accountability. It is coming at a time when local news is being destroyed by economics and a pandemic. Support local news, advocacy groups, and nonprofits. Information, facts, and evidence need to come out to continue to change public opinion and effect real change.
- Garcia: You have to get involved and educate people. Look at your own local community. You can have a direct impact. Many nonprofits are taking on new initiatives regarding issues of justice.
- Williams: The New Jersey Institute for Social Justice is a great nonprofit in the region that is doing work on all these issues. We need to interrogate the data and broaden how we think about evidence. Life stories and community experiences must become part of the conversation. Besides protesting, write letters and use social media as well.