

“We’re on the Freedom Side”: the Movement to Abolish the Chicago Police Department

by SAM MAUCERI

Police reform has been an issue in the American public consciousness for quite some time, and has only intensified after decades of [police brutality caught on camera](#). Today, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd by police officers in Minneapolis in May 2020, [which was videotaped by several bystanders](#), the national conversation around policing in America has shifted from one [primarily focused on reform](#) to a deeper conversation on [defunding the police and abolishing police altogether](#).

What is police abolition?

You may have heard the

word abolitionist used to refer to people who fought to [abolish slavery in the United States](#) during the 19th century. Although slavery in Confederate states was formally ended by the [Emancipation Proclamation](#) in 1863, [today many activists use the word abolition](#) to refer to the movement and political philosophy to end the system of policing and incarceration, known as the prison-industrial complex (PIC).

[Chicago-based playwright and organizer Tanuja Jagernauth](#) says, “Abolition is emptying cages and shutting down prisons, dismantling the systems that created them,

and creating community-based processes for preventing, intervening in, transforming, and repairing after harm.”

Abolition as we know it today [emerged from the Black feminist tradition](#), and is centered on imagining possibilities for a future which eliminates racist systems [that harm Black and brown people at disproportionate rates](#), and restores resources and power to marginalized communities. Abolitionist and author Angela Davis further illuminates the growing calls for police abolition in the interview below with Democracy Now:



As Davis explains, abolition focuses on addressing the root causes of crime, namely by shifting the massive amounts of city budgets away from policing and towards resources that directly support communities. By shifting our priorities, abolitionists believe that we can create a radically different world focused on community well-being and mutual care.

It can be difficult to imagine a world that looks so dramatically different from the one we live in right now. [In a 2020 NPR interview](#), abolitionist and organizer Mariame Kaba remembers a friend asking her, “Why do you assume that prisons are a natural thing?” And I really didn’t understand it. And they’re like, “Prisons are unnatural – somebody made them, and everything that’s made can be unmade.” ...And then a couple of years later, I was in a restorative justice training and somebody said, “There are a million ways to handle harm. Why did we choose this one?” I was like, “Oh my God.”

In 2020, [40% of Chicago’s entire budget](#) was allotted to the Chicago Police Department. That’s \$1.6 billion. If we didn’t spend that money on policing, where would you like to see those resources go instead? What would you spend that money on to better support the lives of the people in your community?

What is police **reform**?

Abolitionists’ emphasis on



Nikki Haley, the former Republican Governor of South Carolina, signs a law encouraging the use of police body cameras. “Governor Haley signs body camera legislation” by North Charleston is licensed under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#).

dismantling policing and imprisonment systems stands in contrast with the more familiar strategy of police and prison reform. [Reformist policies](#) maintain the existing structure of policing and incarceration while aiming to make interactions with police less violent and harmful to civilians. Common police reforms in the U.S. include measures like [requiring officers to wear body cameras](#), [implicit bias training](#) for officers, and [banning brutal practices like chokeholds](#). In June 2020, the [#8CantWait campaign](#), led by police reform project [Campaign Zero](#), called for these and other reformist

policies, an initiative that was [supported by numerous high-profile celebrities](#).

While these sound like positive changes, reforms have been shown to be [ineffective](#) at reducing police brutality and [expensive](#) to implement. In fact, many of the eight policies proposed by [#8CantWait](#) [have already been implemented](#) in the police departments of major American cities. [Chokeholds were already illegal in New York](#) when NYPD Officer Daniel Pantaleo used one on unarmed Black man Eric Garner in 2014. This reform did not prevent [Eric Garner from dying at the hands of](#)

[police](#), just months after the murder of Michael Brown, nor did it result in timely accountability for Officer Pantaleo, who was finally fired in 2019.

Furthermore, reformist strategies cost a lot of money. It cost [\\$8 million](#) to equip every Chicago patrol officer with a body camera in 2017, but [officers do not reliably wear or activate their cameras](#). This use of funds runs counter to the abolitionist aim of shifting resources away from police forces and into community-centered areas that provide security and prosperity for communities, like education, housing, and mental healthcare. Abolitionists argue that police reforms do not address the root causes of crime and community distress. If police reform is a band-aid, the aim of police abolition is to prevent the injury in the first place.

Who is fighting for abolition in Chicago?

Black Lives Matter Chicago

BLM Chicago is “an intersectional vehicle that values Black people and our right to self-determination. We fight for justice with families most impacted, while working to create just and equitable systems.” Among [BLM Chicago’s 10 Demands](#) released in 2020 are “No Cops in School”, “Accountability for Police Murder and Torture”, and “Defund the Police”.

Chicago Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression

Formed in 1973 as part of the movement to free Angela Davis and other political prisoners, CAARPR “struggle[s] against white supremacy, the prison-industrial complex, and state violence. We demand community control of the police and full representation for Black people and other poor and oppressed people at all levels of government.”

Chicago Torture Justice Center

“The Chicago Torture Justice Center was born out of reparations for survivors of police torture... Today, with hundreds of survivors still incarcerated and the persistence of racialized police violence, that fight continues.” For more information on the organization’s formation through the 2015 Reparations Ordinance, check out the study guide article [“Jon Burge and the Chicago Reparations Ordinance”](#).

Assata’s Daughters

Named for radical civil rights activist Assata Shakur, Assata’s Daughters is “an abolitionist organization led by Black women using a Black queer feminist lens and relationship-based tactics to organize bases of young Black people in divested-from areas of Chicago.”



[Black Youth Project 100 Chicago](#)

"Founded in 2013, BYP100 (Black Youth Project 100) is a member-based organization of Black youth activists creating justice and freedom for all Black people." The Chicago chapter participated in protests around the [#NoCopAcademy movement](#) and "engaged in multiple actions and demonstrations for Laquan McDonald who was murdered by CPD's Jason Van Dyke".

[Let Us Breathe Collective](#)

"The #LetUsBreathe Collective is an alliance of artists and activists organizing through a creative lens to imagine a world without prisons and police... The Collective produces cultural events and direct actions that disrupt oppressive systems, amplify marginalized voices, and serve people and communities most directly harmed by mass incarceration, police violence, and systemic injustice."

[Students Strike Back](#)

This "group of students who attend neighborhood high schools on the southwest side of Chicago" mobilizes around issues affecting CPS students, including [demanding the removal of police officers](#) from their schools. During summer 2020, they held multiple #CopsOutCPS virtual workshops to educate the public on the negative effects of having School Resource Officers (SROs) in their learning environment.

[Black Abolitionist Network](#)

BAN is "a constellation of people & organizations collaborating to dismantle anti-Black and carceral systems and build systems that affirm and nurture Black lives." Formed in 2020, they launched the [#DefundCPD](#) campaign, which aims to defund the Chicago Police Department and provides regular trainings for Chicagoans to learn more about police abolition.

[How can I learn more?](#)

Do you have more questions about police abolition? The #DefundCPD Campaign has created "Yes, We Mean Abolish the Police!: Defund CPD Community Conversation Toolkit" to help answer your burning questions about a police-free future.

Click the image below to access the Toolkit!

