

Policing Isn't About Crime Control



Source: Associated Press

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June, 02, 2020

In recent days, some protesters and commentators have [argued](#) that policing in the US is not about enforcing the law, but about enforcing white supremacy. Most Americans would probably view such statements as well-meaning exaggerations: yes, the police force engages in systematic racism, they might say, but surely its main function is to control crime?

In fact, social scientists largely agree (and they rarely agree on anything) that policing is about *social* control, not crime control. The evidence is clear: societies invest in policing primarily in order to enforce racial and economic inequalities. As a result, policing has little impact on crime levels.

The Purpose of Policing

Why do we have police departments? The conventional wisdom is that policing is a response to the problem of crime. When crime is high — the logic goes — people demand more policing, and politicians respond by increasing resources to police departments. If this view is correct, then high crime rates should lead to more policing expenditure and police strength.

But there's not much evidence to support this theory. In fact, most studies find that there is *no* systematic relationship between a city's crime rate and its decision to invest in policing ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), and [5](#)).

So why do people demand policing if not to control crime? An alternative theory is that, because economic and political power is held unequally in the United States, dominant groups demand policing in order to regulate threats from less powerful groups. The biggest divisions in the United States are racial and economic. Thus, policing expenditure should be highest in cities where the Black population is relatively large, inducing feelings of insecurity among Whites. It should also be high wherever there is a large population of poor people that "threatens" nearby rich people.

Unlike the crime control theory, there is overwhelming support for the social control theory ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#), [6](#), and [7](#)). For example, a [study](#) of large cities between 1980 and 2000 found that the higher a city's percentage of Black residents, the greater the size of its police force. It also found that this trend was getting worse, not better. Another [study](#) looked at Milwaukee over a 50-year period, finding that increases in the Black population led to increases in the number of patrol officers.

Dominant groups are especially likely to demand policing when the rival racial group in question is also an economically disadvantaged group. For example, [one study](#) of cities in the American Southwest finds that the greater a city's inequality gap between Whites and Hispanic, the higher its police expenditure.

Remember: all of these studies control for crime levels. This means that White residents demand more policing not because the crime rate is *actually* high, but because they incorrectly *perceive* communities of color to represent a criminal threat. Such perceptions stem from, at best, sticky racial stereotypes, and at worst, white supremacist beliefs. Thus, one could argue that racism is not a bug but a feature of many municipal police departments.

The Effect of Policing

A significant body of research indicates that policing is designed as a tool of social control, not crime control. But could policing at least inadvertently cause a reduction in crime?

The evidence here is mixed to negative. Some police tactics seem to work. For example, [one study](#) finds that neighborhood foot patrols reduce crime, in part because they foster familiarity and trust between citizens and police officers. However, the authors of this study acknowledge that foot patrols are "mythical" — widely venerated, yet rarely used in practice. More common are aggressive tactics like broken-windows and zero tolerance policing. A review of the literature

finds that such tactics simply [do not reduce crime](#) and often increase it. Moreover, there's essentially [no relationship](#) between the number of police officers in a municipality and crime levels.

The fact is, crime rises and falls for reasons that have very little to do with policing. For example, the Brennan Center [finds](#) that the great "crime drop" of the 1990s and 2000s arose from a multitude of factors, including a decrease in unemployment, an increase (yes, an increase) in immigration, better security technologies, and even the legalization of abortion. Policing [accounted](#) for at most five or six percent of the overall crime drop, though some argue it had [no effect at all](#). There's even been [work](#) suggesting that vibrant, non-corporatized urban spaces do more to reduce crime than does formal policing.

In light of this evidence, recent calls to [defund](#) or even [abolish](#) the police are less radical than they might appear (though more research is needed about these specific policies). If policing isn't designed to control crime, then there's simply no reason to expect that significantly reducing police expenditure would lead to a crime surge. The only thing we *should* expect is a decline in state-sanctioned violence against people of color.

Indeed, when NYPD coordinated a "slow-down" in policing in 2014–15 to protest against perceived anti-police comments by Mayor Bill de Blasio, the expected explosion in crime [never materialized](#). On the contrary, civilian complaints of major crimes like murder, rape, and burglary actually *declined* for both White communities and communities of color, while quality of life improved for Black residents.

Of course, many readers may be unable to shake the gut feeling that policing keeps them safe. Though they might acknowledge the evidence against the efficacy of policing, they may simply *feel* more comfortable with a police force than without one. If these thoughts reflect your own, I would ask that you consider whether you are a member of a dominant group or a less powerful community of color. If the former, then it's perhaps no surprise that you feel that police serve your interests. They probably do.

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