



Social Work and the Future of Policing: Key Points for Changes in Policy and Practice

By *Michael Sherraden*

Introduction

Following the death of George Floyd under the knee of a Minneapolis policeman—along with many other, similar deaths—Americans have realized that long-standing racism in the nation's policing is not just morally wrong—it is deadly. At this writing, people from all racial backgrounds are in the streets, in numbers not seen since the 1960s. The term “structural racism” has migrated from social textbooks to mainstream journalism and public discussion.

We hear nationwide calls to train police, control police, defund police, and even abolish police. In response, we also hear calls to defend the police and even strengthen the police.

As a nation, we are struggling to redefine how we organize public order, safety, and justice. This will not be easy, but in this struggle to redefine social order, there is opportunity for positive change. This policy brief on social work and the future of policing is one summary of the challenge, offering a viewpoint from social work.

Policing, Race, and Violence

Police are necessary and highly valued. This brief is not antipolice. We very much need police when major crimes and violence occur. Police are trained to respond to these situations. It would be fanciful and misguided to call for the abolition of police.

Policing in the United States is racially violent. Too much policing in the United States, and too much of the criminal justice system, reflects a racist history in

slavery and slave patrols. Evidence of this is all around us, from small acts of oppression to mass incarceration. During the Jim Crow era, police actively supported “Black Code” laws and lynchings (Alexander, 2020; Gates, 2019). Prior to the police shooting of unarmed Michael Brown in 2014, the citizens of Ferguson, Missouri, were repeatedly fined for trumped-up traffic violations then charged court costs and additional penalties—all to finance the city government. In this and many other ways, police actively generate “crime.” It is not a coincidence that America's prisons are packed disproportionately with people of color. Policing is a core institution of White supremacy, which, for the first time, is being talked about on a national level. After 400 years of racial violence, this is a remarkable recognition.

Reducing police violence. With growing public awareness of police violence, many national leaders in both political parties are proposing reforms. Although reforms are very much needed, proposing a reduction in violence is insufficient. History and experience show that such proposals, by themselves, may not be very effective.

Police are resistant to reform. Every society requires a certain amount of regulation and protection, but the continuing, systemic racism in police departments reflects a persistent practical failure. The institution of policing has deep historical roots, large economic resources, considerable power, and enough racist support from the general population to protect itself. Police unions are strong and influential, and police reform has seldom been effective.



There is a role for control, but not everything is about control. Policing should retain its focus on interventions when a violent crime has occurred or is strongly threatened. There is certainly a time for control, even forceful control. But managing violence is a small part of the long menu of police duties.

Police should not be asked to do everything.

Police are assigned to intervene in a wide range of situations—mental health and drug problems, homelessness, disruptive but nonviolent behaviors, minor thefts, and other nonviolent crimes—that are not a good fit with police training. For nonviolent situations, America would be better served by prioritizing relationship building and community problem-solving ahead of confrontation and force.

The cost of over-policing is very high. Over-policing generates physical harms and deaths, and it fills jails and prisons, turning social problems into criminal problems, which have a much higher cost in money and lost potential. In this, opportunities to solve a community problem and repair social bonds are lost. *In effect, over-policing denies the possibility of striving for a stronger community and stronger nation.*

Police training is primarily about physical control and use of force, and social work training is primarily about relationship building and solving problems. To be sure, many police departments have implemented “community policing” programs that have improved relationships with communities. Nevertheless, these basic statements about police training and social work training remain true and make clear the importance of a *thoughtful division of labor in establishing community stability*. Sometimes control and force are absolutely necessary, but people with warrior training should not be sent to address nonviolent incidents. For nonviolent issues, people with skills in calming emotions, building trust, and solving social problems can be more effective.

Social Work and the Future of Policing

Humans are far from perfect, and problem-solving is an important challenge. Humans can be selfish, uninformed, and careless. We make honest and dishonest mistakes; we become afraid; we lose our tempers. Some people are greedy and manipulative; some are mean. The resulting social tensions

and problems must be addressed, and most of these challenges can be met by reducing tensions, building trust, repairing relationships, and working through problems. Most circumstances require de-escalation, relationship building, and problem-solving, not control and force. The required set of professional skills is found in social work. Indeed, several enlightened police chiefs have said that “most police work is social work.” Most of this work does not belong in the police department.

Social workers are “among the people,” with values that emphasize full inclusion and social justice.

Social workers, like police, are primarily in the community. No other professions can say this. Jane Addams (2012) proudly pointed out that social workers are “among the people.” Other service professions, though well intentioned and constructive, operate mostly from office buildings. In addition, the values of social work emphasize full inclusion, self-determination, development of all people, the importance of human relationships, antiracism, and social justice—more so than any other profession (National Association of Social Workers, 2017).

Social work has been a leader in U.S. social policy. *Social policy innovation and serving the country are in the DNA of social work.* The profession has a long and accomplished history in leading major policy changes. These include campaigns for children’s rights and protections, women’s suffrage, labor rights and protections, the “safety net” of the Social Security Act, and civil rights and voting rights for people of color (Pople, 2018; Sherraden et al., 2014). In the 21st century, social work continues to advance social policies that can build a more inclusive and secure nation. These are described in publications of the Grand Challenges for Social Work (see, e.g., Coalition for the Promotion of Behavioral Health, 2020; Grand Challenges for Social Work, 2019).

Insights and New Directions for Policing and Social Work

I offer three simultaneous directions regarding social work and the future of policing in America:

1. All nonviolent community issues should be shifted out of the authority of the police department and into a department for solving community social problems.

2. Social workers should continue to partner with police in responding to calls in which social issues and violence intersect—for example, domestic violence, drug users with weapons, suicide threats.
3. Social workers can also help to reduce unnecessary police violence through training and changes in the culture of policing.

Social workers should be first responders in nonviolent situations. A focus on social problem-solving is not the primary focus of police training, but it is the primary focus in social work training. Social problems are often complex. They require advanced skills in de-escalating tensions, listening, building trust, building relationships, organizing community responses, and creating positive pathways forward. These social skills should be lifted up and appreciated in community functioning and also in public policy.

Changing policing is a challenge, but it is within reach. Until a new policy is created and implemented, it will be difficult for people to “see” that it is even possible. Universal public education and universal Social Security retirement payments were considered very radical before they were enacted. Yet in looking back, we often wonder why these social policies were controversial. *Freeing police departments from managing nonviolent social problems would be much the same. We may look back and wonder why we had not done this sooner.*

This is not about “defunding the police.” The mayor of New York, the Minneapolis City Council, and other officials have called for reducing police funding (or “defunding the police”). Most of these calls provide little description of what would be done with the money, offering only vague proposals to invest in housing, social services, and youth programs. This thinking, while well-intentioned, seems undeveloped. The unspecified nature of the proposals also signals the likelihood of their success. A much better idea, summarized below, is to *redefine and reshape community responsibilities, with appropriate funding.*

This will require purposeful social innovation. The primary implication is that a large portion of the responsibilities of police (all the nonviolence responsibilities) should be shifted back to the people through community institutions. Absent violent

crime, social problem-solving should be led by people in the community through their organizations.

This would require a new public-service institution—the *We the People Department* for the sake of this discussion. It would partner with nonprofit organizations (civic groups, churches, social agencies) to establish community goals, engage more purposefully in problem-solving, and encourage citizen engagement. To ensure effective staffing, schools of social work would expand training in community-based problem-solving without violence. The schools also would train for administrative leadership. The *We the People Department* would not compete with community policing, but would remove primary responsibility for nonviolent issues from police oversight to social work oversight.

This organizational and professional effort would leverage community resources and encourage broad engagement (beginning with early engagement in schools). This new social organization would empower community residents with skills and opportunities to work together to solve problems.

Innovations require design and testing. The local department would oversee many of the tasks that now fall to the police department—sometimes with joint responsibilities—and budgets would be adjusted accordingly. The design, staffing, and operation would require working out many practical considerations and testing different models. Planned legislation by Sen. Chris Van Hollen would spark a community-engaged process of design and testing of different community problem-solving models.

Social work partnerships with police should continue. Social workers and police have worked together for a long time. These partnerships are not at all new, and they provide real value in communities. Social workers in these relationships are valued for their skills. *They are working in professional partnership with police, not carrying out police orders.* While some social workers may think that any partnership with police should be avoided, this is not my position. I know that social workers can add positive value to policing. Yet, I stand strongly against any possibility that social workers would support, or provide cover for, or become co-opted by police who practice racism or unwarranted violence—these are abhorrent to social workers.

Social workers should work with police to reduce racism and violence. Police training should confront historical racism and improve the “culture” of policing. Social workers can do this work. In this sense, police would work with social workers, learning skills in treating all people fairly, reducing tensions, and avoiding violence whenever possible. The George Floyd Justice in Policing Act (2020) sponsored by Rep. Karen Bass, chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, addresses these important practices for social work. As noted above, however, training alone is unlikely to be sufficient.

Conclusions

We the People: Humans are highly social. If we are wise, our national efforts to craft a new model for public safety will work with “the social” in humans. Most people have capacities to connect with others and solve problems, or at least to dial down intensity and reduce the threat of violence. This outlook empowers community members to be responsible, to participate in addressing interpersonal issues, and to build effective community institutions. This is a new social citizenship grounded in responsibility, full participation, respect for others, inclusion, fairness, human and civil rights, and aspirations to live together—not in storybook harmony, but also not in damaging conflict. This outlook calls on the best in people in how we regard ourselves and others.

An ongoing project of renewal. Like all effective social organization, the proposed We the People departments would be works in progress, adjusted as practice experience and evidence warrant. But it would be a far more constructive strategy for solving problems. In effect, over-policing denies the possibility of striving for a better world. It is time to put racist over-policing behind us. We can gather ourselves to do better.

The overall goal is to build strong communities. In the 21st century, we should look for the best ways to address community problems and work toward organizational structures that are most effective, so that communities are stable and sustaining, and people of every ethnicity, color, and religion can reach their potential.

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