Policing does not keep us safe. Calls to #DefundThePolice have caught fire across the country in the past month following the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Erik Salgado, and more at the hands of the police. These uprisings come on the heels of the deplorable and wholly inadequate response by government entities to provide support and healing to our communities throughout the crisis of COVID19. Stark images and stories from healthcare professionals have circulated our communities depicting hospitals overloaded with patients without enough medical resources to treat our people, and in some cases, medical staff resorting to wearing plastic bags as protective gear due to lack of funding. Meanwhile, we’re seeing familiar images, stories and lived experiences of the people’s uprisings against the police being met with swift and well-funded repression by militarized police forces across the nation.

Here in Oakland, a coalition of movement partners, building off of Anti-Police Terror Project’s (APTP) years-long demand to Defund OPD, has mobilized this year to put forth a demand to cut 50% from the policing budget. Critical Resistance Oakland (CR) stands in full support of these efforts to slash the Oakland Police Department (OPD) budget and reallocate funds to resources that we know we need. In this Policing in Oakland: Mid-Year in Review, we look into policing in Oakland, its budget, its impact on communities, and how people are fighting back.

FUNDING AND RESOURCES FOR POLICING IN OAKLAND

We know that policing, imprisonment, and surveillance do not keep us safe, and yet these forces hold the majority of our 2019 - 2021 General Fund budget in Oakland. All the while our healthcare system, public schools and youth programs, affordable housing, and public transportation suffer. Here is the distribution of the current Oakland City General Fund adopted expenditures.

In this breakdown we can see what’s spent on policing vs what’s spent on services that bolster our community and promote safety and self-determination:

In addition to this General Fund allocation that clearly represents the city governments prioritization of repression, property protection, and police terror over our people’s safety and livelihood, we also can see that housing and community development received only 0.0% funding. This is compared to a whopping 44% spent on the policing of our communities. We’ve seen the consequences of these targeted distributions
in our communities. They lead to a military unit being unleashed on Black momma’s and babies like we saw in the recent Moms 4 Housing actions in West Oakland where houseless mothers and allies took over an empty home owned by a billion-dollar property corporation only to be violently removed and arrested in the middle of the night. We’ve seen how these skewed priorities contribute to the 14% unemployment rate of our folks in the Oakland-Fremont-Hayward region of the Bay. This loss of work during the pandemic is worsened by the meager resources being allocated to workforce development programs from our city budget. And we’ve seen how the continued prioritization of policing over funding for public health plays into the continued rise in confirmed cases of COVID-19 over the past 4 months—recently up to 5,000 new cases in one day alone.

Police don’t keep us safe. We keep us safe. And we demand a budget that invests in our health and the prosperity of our communities, not the continued expansion and prioritization of the prison industrial complex.

OAKLAND POLICING SCHEMES

Policing programs in Oakland represent a continuation and deepening of militarization, racist policing, surveillance and abuse. The consequences of policing programs in Oakland plague our communities and make us more and more susceptible to violence and harm. Here are a few ways these programs have played out this year and how we’ve suffered as a result.

Militarized Policing: Through programs like Ceasefire and the militarization of policing in Oakland, OPD has deployed the heavily armed Bearcat tank almost twice a week (four times more than in San Francisco), mostly in East Oakland neighborhoods.[1] In 2020, broader attention and awareness of militarized police tactics came to light with the Alameda County Sheriff’s Office’s violent raid and arrest of Moms4Housing activists and OPD’s violent repression of protests in the wake of George Floyd’s death at the hands of police.

Profiling: The Department of Violence Prevention alongside Operation Ceasefire uses a predictive policing model that surveils individuals considered potential victims or perpetrators. These initiatives particularly target Black and Brown youth in East Oakland through a mix of close surveillance, aggressive raids and arrests, alongside offers to targeted individuals for cooperation in exchange for job support and cover – with non-cooperation resulting in heightened policing and abuse.[2]

Protecting Property: This year, property crime has been a major focus for Oakland police, with city council members calling for more community policing.[3] Collaborations across police departments in the Bay Area meet cross-departmentally to mobilize around property crime. Connected to this, Oakland Police Department has been in conversation with the private surveillance company, Ring, which may expand surveillance in Oakland through access of home security footage. Ring already has contracts with police departments in San Jose, South San Francisco, Milpitas, Union City, Walnut Creek, Novato, Foster City and Hercules, as well as the Marin County Sheriff’s Office.[4]

In November 2019, a group of houseless and marginally housed mothers and their children, known as Moms 4 Housing, took over a vacant home in West Oakland. The action garnered the support of community members all over the Bay Area and across the country, with thousands mobilizing to support the mothers. Their goal was to reclaim housing from the big banks and real estate speculators, who have played a primary role in evicting, driving out, gentrifying, and denying housing to longtime Oakland residents.
Maneuvers to Access Even More Funds: While OPD already receives 44% of Oakland’s General Fund budget, the Mayor has suggested moving funds from Measure Q, which was designated to support houseless communities and parks, to fund police officers to accompany clean-up crews. This move has been denounced by groups supporting curbside communities as police are the primary source of violence, arrest, displacement and harassment of homeless people.\(^5\)

Limited Effectiveness of Reforms: While this year the Police Commission made headlines for their role in the city’s firing of former OPD Chief Kirkpatrick (though the decision is ultimately taken by the mayor), the power and effectiveness of police reforms like the police commission and other efforts remain dubious. An assessment of OPD reforms found that officers did not turn on body cameras 20% of the time, and escalated (rather than de-escalated) situations toward physical force. While OPD initiated an effort to integrate more reporting on use of force, this initiative was reversed after two weeks because of the level of paperwork required.\(^6\) Members of the police commission and the federal police monitor that oversees the Oakland Police Department have themselves been accused of misuse of power.\(^7\)(8)

TARGETING HOUSELESS PEOPLE

In 2020, police violence targeting houseless people in Oakland ramped up with the new year. Throughout the beginning of the year, in addition to the raid and arrests of Mom 4 Housing activists, the city has made moves to sweep houseless encampments into nonprofit-managed camps. While this may work for some, the strict rules and limitations of these camps will not work for others, according to East Oakland Collective organizer, Candice Elder.\(^9\) Since the COVID-19 outbreak in Oakland, sweeps and threats against houseless encampments have escalated. In West Oakland, the Wood Street encampment has reported increased police presence since shelter-in-place began, alongside threats of displacement.\(^10\)

In April, two houseless outreach workers were followed, assaulted, and one arrested by police at the East Oakland Collective when returning from distributing resources to houseless encampments. OPD Officers – who were not wearing any PPE despite public health recommendations – pointed a gun at outreach volunteer Leon Young for “matching a description,” who was then taken to Santa Rita jail overnight before being released the following morning.\(^11\) In the same month, OPD also agreed to pay a settlement to the mother of a homeless man killed by Oakland police in 2018 while unconscious; the $1.4 million settlement will come out of the City of Oakland’s general fund. That same month the five officers involved in the shooting were reinstated to the force.\(^12\)(13)

REPRESSION BREEDS RESISTANCE: OAKLAND’S CULTURE OF ANTI-POLICING

From being the birthplace of the Black Panther Party to becoming the first city in the country to wage a successful fight against gang injunctions, legacies of resistance to policing in Oakland run deep, and continue on more strongly than ever today.

On May 25, 2020 an officer from the Minneapolis Police Department killed George Floyd, a 46 year old Black man. The officer knelt on his neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, while three others officers watched complacently. The killing was filmed on camera, and instantly went viral, sparking the largest nationwide protest in the last decade. Everywhere, communities took on the call to “Defund the Police.” This demand points to the years-long work of abolitionist organizations fighting against the system of policing itself, rather than its improvement. Thousands of Oakland communities took to the streets in outrage, amplifying the calls for justice.

As expected, the Oakland Police Department responded to the protest with force, firing tear gas and rubber bullets, and making arrests. Subsequently, attorneys with the National Lawyers Guild representing the Anti Police-Terror Project filed a lawsuit against
the City of Oakland for the police’s use of force. As a result, a federal judge on June 18, 2020 filed a temporary restraining order that restricts OPD’s use of tear gas, rubber bullets, and flash-bang grenades unless it is “necessary” to prevent the loss of life or imminent destruction of City Hall and OPD headquarters.

Amidst this initial spark, CR Oakland hosted a Juneteenth event celebrating Black liberation movements of the past and present with Charlene Carruthers and Marc Lamont Hill where our speakers helped to ground us in the current moment of the movement for Black lives saying, “the question of abolition has often been met by so-called pragmatists. But what we saw in COVID-19 was the perfect backdrop to this season of rebellion: the government showed it’s hand.” With the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and Tony McDade as a direct result of policing in America, movements erupted across Oakland and the world to demand abolition. The lack of meaningful response to COVID-19 followed by the continued killing of Black people in the US was fuel to the flame of an uprising that has been felt around the world.

Here in Oakland, our people have taken the streets demanding true justice for lives lost, and for freedom from policing through abolition. Our youth from Oakland Tech and San Francisco’s Mission High have led mass mobilizations in defense of Black lives. We witnessed an historic Juneteenth shut down of our ports from San Diego to Oakland with accompanying mass mobilizations here led by the port workers of ILWU Local 10, a labor union with a long history of resistance and international solidarity, featuring Angela Davis in the name of Black liberation.

**DEFUND OPD**

We saw APTP move the city to revoke their racist curfew following a successful “Fuck Your Curfew” action and mobilize our community towards an organized collective demand to defund OPD by 50%, roughly $150 million, and to instead invest in our communities. This effort is ongoing and has been met with push back by city government officials and the newly formed so-called “Equity Caucus,” composed of pro-police Oakland city council members Noel Gallo, Larry Reid, Loren Taylor, Lynette Gibson McElhaney. Despite thousands of Oakland residents backing the call to Defund OPD by 50%, these council members steamrolled ahead with a feeble $2.5 million reduction in OPD’s enormous and dangerous budget in a way that did not follow process or democratic norms. As a result of swift, widespread outcry, the Oakland City Council decided on June 30th to not move the budget forward, and will be hearing it again on July 21st. This is an opportunity for communities to mobilize and ensure that budget amendments that redirect substantially more funding away from OPD, put forward by council members Nikki Fortunato Bas and Rebecca Kaplan, are adopted.

Piecemeal reforms and taking crumbs out of the policing budget will do nothing to address the violence of policing, and will not bring us the bold visions for Oakland we need. We need a firm abolitionist demand that centers the needs of our people. We stand with APTP in their efforts and will be regrouping to support them in fighting back against this unacceptable cut and continuing to demand a substantial defunding of policing in Oakland.
Alongside the ongoing fight to slash the funds that fuel violent police presence in our communities, the Black Organizing Project (BOP) has won a massive victory against the policing of our youth by successfully ending police presence in schools and dismantling the Oakland Unified School District Police Department. Through the George Floyd Resolution, which was passed unanimously by Oakland’s Board of Education, school police in Oakland will end. BOP’s steadfast abolitionist praxis and over 10 years of organizing reminds us that abolition is a winning strategy, and that we can imagine a world without police and build that world piece by piece.

We’re living in a moment where we must continue to imagine and create true safety for our communities, achieve self-determination and collective liberation, and abolish the prison industrial complex entirely. CR uplifted this conversation around how our political landscape has brought us to a place where our communities are poised to win significant victories against the violence of policing on a large scale in a recent webinar with Survived & Punished, Project Nia, and others. The discussion offered abolition as a guide for our movements and reminded us that we need to hold central that abolition is both a beautiful long-term vision and an immediate political strategy. In the webinar, CR member Kamau Walton explained that “it’s important to ground ourselves not just in what’s being called for in the moment but in the long term: how are we making room for more & more concrete, abolitionist wins that chip away at policing, imprisonment, state-sanctioned surveillance, and at the courts that criminalize and cage our people?”

CONCLUSION

This season of rebellion in Oakland and across the country and world has shown decision-makers and those in power that we have had enough. Reforms have failed in addressing the death-making capacity of this system of policing; we want and need abolition, and we are ignited and unified in our work to abolish the prison industrial complex by chipping away at these systems that harm, cage, and kill us until we are free of them entirely. Beyond bold visions and demands, the struggles in Oakland and across the country have shown us that we need rigorous and long term strategies to win.

ENDNOTES


Photo Credits: Oakland Budget: City of Oakland; Moms 4 Housing: Moms 4 Housing; Critical Resistance-Oakland; Oakland George Floyd Protest: ABC 7 News; Marc Lamont Hill Quote: Critical Resistance; Angela Davis Port of Oakland: Brooke Anderson; Defund OPD Tile: Anti-Police Terror Project; Kamau Walton Quote: Critical Resistance.

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