

CRITICAL RESISTANCE: ON POLICING

Published January 2009

Policing is the practice, empowered by the state, of enforcing law and social control through the use of force. The roots of policing in the United States are closely linked to slavery, the capture of escaped slaves, and the enforcement of Black Codes and Jim Crow. Police forces were also routinely used to keep new immigrants to the US “in line” and to prevent the working classes from making demands. Clearly, not much has changed. Policing is still set up to target poor people, people of color, immigrants, and people who do not conform to socially acceptable behavior on the street or in their homes. For example, police frequently target women, queer and gender non-conforming people, people of color, and young people just based on their appearance or behavior. The choices police make about which people to target, what to target them for, and when to arrest and book them play a major role in who ultimately gets locked up.

Some of us are comforted by the option of being able to call someone when we need help. Some of us are told from a very early age that the police are our friends who will help us when we’re in “trouble.” But the impact of policing on many of our communities—more people beaten and killed by cops and the growing number of our friends, family members and loved ones being locked away behind bars—shows us that the police hurt rather than help us.

Policing is, in its very nature, in opposition to self-determination. The practices of watching, questioning, intimidating and arresting people—through the use of force are violent practices. Not only do cops use threats of violence—the guns on their hips, the clubs on their belts—to control people, they often use force in making stops, inquiries, and arrests. Harassment of people on the street or “stop and frisk” practices—stopping people to frisk them for drugs or weapons—are tools often used to intimidate, monitor, and control poor people and people of color. While we’re told the police are on the street to stop or solve “crime”, their very presence is a way of enforcing social control, and actually creates more violence.

When people die at the hands of police, more often than not, the state concludes that the use of force was reasonable... Police review boards are completely useless. And even though some people argue that police abuse is an isolated problem that can be blamed on the actions of rogue officers, it is really a systemic problem that is fundamental to the way the policing system in the US is built and maintained.

In recent years, the militarization of the police has increased dramatically. Not only has US law enforcement come to resemble the US military more closely, but it has also begun to be equipped with the same technologies. From providing training in tactics and instruction in using certain types of equipment to the cooperation between the military and domestic law enforcement at the US/Mexico border, militarization of law enforcement has meant that the US has become another space within which the military can operate and has meant that residents of the US are potential military targets to be eliminated.

The same way that locking people in cages does not help us build the healthy, stable communities we want, relying on the state to force people into acting in ways that serve the state doesn’t encourage the kinds of cooperation, trust, and accountability we know are at the heart of building what we truly want.

Instead of relying on the violent establishments of police and prisons, what if we got together with members of our communities and created systems of support for each other? We are capable of looking after and caring for one another, providing each other with our basic human needs, creating community self-determination. Relying on and deploying policing denies our ability to do this, to create real safety in our communities.