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McElhone, Megan and Kemp, T. and Lamble, Sarah and Moore, J.M. (2023) Defund – not defend – the police: a response to Fleetwood and Lea. *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice* , ISSN 2059-1101.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Defund – not defend – the police: A response to Fleetwood and Lea

Megan McElhone¹ | Tom Kemp² | Sarah Lamble³ | J.M. Moore⁴

¹Megan McElhone is Lecturer in Criminology, Birkbeck, University of London

²Tom Kemp is Research Fellow, University of Nottingham

³Sarah Lamble is Reader in Criminology and Queer Theory, Birkbeck, University of London

⁴J.M. Moore is an Independent Scholar

Correspondence

Megan McElhone, School of Law, Birkbeck, University of London.
Email: m.mcelhone@bbk.ac.uk

Abstract

We argue that defunding the police is necessary to address fundamental and systemic problems plaguing British policing. We do so in response to an article written by Fleetwood & Lea (2022), published in this journal, claiming that ‘defunding the police does not translate well to the UK’ (p.172).

KEYWORDS

defund the police, police abolition, policing, racism

1 | INTRODUCTION

In 2020, following the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis USA, calls to ‘Defund the police’ gained prominence through a wave of Black Lives Matter protests. As demonstrations spread globally, people on the streets of Britain and Northern Ireland echoed demands to redirect funding away from police and towards affordable housing, community care and economic security. But in a predictable backlash, British media largely dismissed these demands, some portraying such calls as ‘nonsense’, as Labour Leader Keir Starmer did, while others questioned whether ‘Defund the police’ was relevant to the UK.

Jennifer Fleetwood & John Lea (2022) have taken up this latter question, arguing that ‘[d]efunding the police does not translate well to the UK’ (p.172). They argue that activists in the UK are replicating US demands while ignoring the distinctive political and institutional context of British policing. In their view, activists misread the fundamental problem of policing as one about funding rather than power, fail to see that austerity politics have already defunded the police, and neglect reforms which would more effectively reduce the institutional autonomy of police.

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We disagree and assert that ‘Defund the police’ is a necessary response to the problems of British policing. We suggest that Fleetwood & Lea have undertaken a reductive analysis of the slogan ‘Defund the police’ and misunderstand the broader politics that are associated with this demand. In turn, Fleetwood & Lea suggest well-intentioned but flawed solutions that will replicate the same pattern of failed reforms that Black Lives Matter protests have sought to challenge.

At stake here is far more than a mere political disagreement between abolitionist and ‘left realist’ academics. For decades, we have witnessed the classed, racial and gendered harms of policing, and seen how reforms posed as solutions repeatedly fail to constrain police power and often reinforce it. As seen in the recent public outcry over the racist strip search of Child Q, the violent policing of protests like the vigil for Sarah Everard, the ongoing brutality of immigration raids, and the daily harassment of Black youth through stop and search practices, far more needs to be done than tinkering with police bureaucracy and accountability processes. A fair and accurate account of abolitionist work in the UK offers a way through this impasse.

2 | DEFUND THE POLICE IS MORE THAN A SLOGAN

Although rarely acknowledged in mainstream media, abolitionist work in the UK has a long history (Abolitionist Futures, 2019; Radical Alternatives to Prison, 1972, 1979). So, when UK activists took up the demand to ‘Defund the police’, this was not a sudden ‘import’ of US ‘policy vocabularies’ to the UK. Activists in Britain and Northern Ireland, like their counterparts in the US, were building on decades of campaigning work to scale back prisons and police powers, which had laid the groundwork for abolitionist ideas to enter into mainstream discussions (Community Action on Prison Expansion, 2020; Reclaim Justice Network, 2017; Ryan & Sim, 2007). UK organisers also took up the demand as an expression of international solidarity and to draw attention to Britain’s role in the global dimensions of racist police violence (Duff & Kemp, 2020).

Defund the police is not a stand-alone policy demand (Black Lives Matter UK, 2021). It is misleading to evaluate it on that basis, as Fleetwood & Lea (2022) do by explicitly ‘setting aside longer-term questions of abolitionism’ (p.168). Rather, defunding police is part of a wider abolitionist vision for social change that involves building alternative systems of care, support and reparation that eliminate the need for prisons, police and punishment (Lamble, 2021a). Abolitionists do not, as Fleetwood & Lea (2022) claim, believe that the mere ‘transfer of police funding to social welfare [is] an effective means of preventing crime’ (p.168), particularly as many existing social welfare policies are entangled with punitive practices of policing and control. Calls to reallocate resources are embedded within a wider ethos of dismantling carceral norms and cultures across society, while simultaneously building viable strategies to prevent violence, address inequality, repair harm and meet people’s basic needs (Begum, 2021; No More Exclusions, 2022).

As a rallying cry on the streets, ‘Defund the police’ offers an entry point into wider public discussions about why police are not an effective means for addressing social problems and what is needed in their place. It is a strategy for contesting the mythology that the primary function of police is to fight crime or protect the public. It asserts that the main role of police is to maintain and uphold the existing class, racial and social order. Like the rest of the criminal justice system, police are designed for the repression and disciplining of the powerless and have repeatedly demonstrated their ineffectiveness in stopping the deviance and harms of the powerful. Abolitionists do not ignore sexual violence, terrorism, state harms, or corporate violence; rather, we recognise that the criminal justice system is, by design, ineffective in responding to these harms (Blakeley et al., 2019; CAGE, 2020; Caradonna, 2020; Davis et al., 2022; Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020; Lamble, 2021b; Tombs & Whyte, 2015). Instead, abolitionists

advocate the development of practices and institutions that foster support and accountability to prevent and respond to harm and help to construct a more equal social order.

3 | DEFUND THE POLICE RESPONDS TO BRITISH POLICING'S ONGOING HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

Fleetwood & Lea (2022) are keen to distinguish between US and British policing, both historically and in their contemporary forms. While there are differences there are also considerable similarities. They concede that police in the US are a legitimate target for defunding through being 'historically tainted by slavery and labour repression' (p.168). However, this is not unique to the US; indeed, Fleetwood & Lea themselves point out that the British police were introduced in the metropole for the 'disciplining of the poorest sections of the working class' and in a colonial context for 'pacification' (p.173). Their argument for difference ultimately depends on colonial amnesia. Just as policing in the US developed simultaneously in the east coast cities and the slave economies of the south, British policing developed in its colonies at the same times as its metropole. Personnel, ideas and strategies moved between settler colonies, slave colonies, extractive colonies and the metropole (Moore, 2014).

To seek to liberate the British police from this tainted history, Fleetwood & Lea (2022) claim that in the middle of the 20th century: 'the police gained legitimacy as efficient crime fighters and relatively impartial guardians of multi-class access to public space' (p.173). Space limits a detailed response to this claim, but to anyone familiar with the everyday experiences of non-white communities, the police's role in industrial disputes, or the widespread police corruption, it is clearly problematic. Indeed, the benign picture painted by Fleetwood & Lea dismisses the fact that racism and classism have remained integral to British policing, and diminishes the attempts of racialised and working-class communities to resist police violence throughout the 20th and 21st centuries (see, e.g., Elliott-Cooper, 2021; Howe, 2020). This allows them to reframe the contemporary crisis of policing as restricted to the excessive use of police stop and search powers, which they claim is no more than 'an archaic hangover from colonial policing and the general control of the working class' (Fleetwood & Lea, 2022, p.179).

4 | DEFUNDING POLICE IS NOT THE SAME AS AUSTERITY

Proceeding from their Dixon of Dock Green view of 20th-century British policing, Fleetwood & Lea (2022) assert that a decade's worth of austerity-driven 'funding cuts' have compromised the police's ability to 'engage with' or 'adequately respond to victims of crime', and especially those from racialised or working-class communities (p.171). While racialised and working-class communities have long lamented that they are underprotected by the police, there is little evidence to suggest that police responses to their victimisation were 'adequate' prior to austerity. Rather, the deeply-ingrained ambivalence towards the police documented in these communities arises from the fact that they have always been simultaneously underprotected from victimisation *and* 'over-policed', in that they bear the brunt of suspicion, intervention and violence (Howe, 2020).

We also object to Fleetwood & Lea's (2022) persistent conflation of austerity-driven funding cuts and defunding the police, for example in their claim that 'since the economic crisis of 2009... both social services and police have been defunded' (p.171). Not only are they not the same things but they are, in practice, opposites. Austerity was a deliberate attack on socialised welfare services and a transfer of resources to the wealthy. Defunding the police, on the other hand, is part of a wider

vision of a more just society. While austerity did see reductions in police funding and head counts from New Labour's historic highs, it was accompanied by an intensification of policing through the expansion of both private security and other government police agencies (e.g., Border Force, MI5, GCHQ, SFO, UKNCA, MI6, etc.). To call for the defunding of the police is not to call for its replacement with other forms of policing; it is to reject the presumption that policing is a 'good' and instead work towards a society with considerable less need of being policed – whether by the police or other repressive agencies.

Nevertheless, that the police funding landscape has changed in recent years only serves to demonstrate that UK funding arrangements are not eternally fixed. As such, while we agree with Fleetwood & Lea (2022) that there are differences between police funding structures in the UK and the US, it does not follow that the UK 'arrangements rule out an easy reassignment of funds from police to alternatives' (p.172).

5 | DEFUNDING IS A STRATEGY TO REDUCE POLICE POWER

Fleetwood & Lea (2022) further claim that efforts to defund the police should be superseded by a concern with constraining police powers and organisational autonomy (p.168). However, such an insistence belies the fact that police funding, powers and organisational autonomy are often deeply entangled. As Fleetwood & Lea (2022, p.174) themselves observe, funding cuts to social services, education and welfare provision have increased many agencies' reliance on the police, cast 'harm problems' as 'crime problems' and enabled the police's interventionist and co-opting compulsions.

Separating abolitionists' attempts to defund the police from their broader strategies for reducing police power creates artificial distinctions. Defund the police is an example of what abolitionists refer to as a 'non-reformist reform': a strategy which 'seeks to reduce the power of an oppressive system while illuminating the system's inability to solve the crisis it creates' (Berger, Kaba & Stein, 2017). As highlighted in the work of groups like Critical Resistance, 8-to-Abolition and Abolitionist Futures – including UK resources cited in Fleetwood & Lea's article – the criteria for an effective abolitionist strategy are not merely whether it reduces funding, but whether it reduces the scope of police power, scales back on police tactics and tools and challenges the ideology of policing (8-to-Abolition, 2020; Abolitionist Futures, 2020). In other words, when abolitionists call for the police to be defunded, it is with a view to reducing the size, scope and power of police, while at the same time drawing attention to the fact that police rarely keep communities safe from violence, and often cause more violence.

6 | ABOLITIONIST PRINCIPLES ARE NEEDED TO BREAK OUT OF THE REFORM MERRY-GO-ROUND

Although abolitionists and left realists both argue for the need to minimise policing, we find Fleetwood & Lea's proposal for 'minimal policing' unconvincing. It is contradictory and unrealistic, and does not address the fundamental problem of policing. It treats inequality and discrimination as unfortunate side effects of policing, rather than core to police function. By not fully grappling with the role of police in protecting wealth and reinforcing class order, and in failing to critique the concepts of crime and public order, their proposals shore up the ideological function of police, while masquerading under the guise of novel, 'practical' solutions.

Fleetwood & Lea (2022) propose a system where recourse to police 'non-negotiable force' occurs 'hopefully on a very much reduced scale', and yet they continue to envision a role for police in responding both to emergencies and 'public order' matters such as monitoring traffic and the 'guaranteeing of peaceful and non-discriminatory access to public spaces and events' (p.177). These non-emergency situations are known locations of racist police outcomes (Howe, 2020, pp.102–105; Liberty & StopWatch, 2017). Fleetwood & Lea further propose that the police will take on subordinate roles in responding to social problems in relation to other public services. This is ensured primarily by the introduction of an Orwellian named official – 'The Controller' – who would determine how and when the police are deployed.

Yet, expanding state-police bureaucracy to hold police abuses in check has been a tried and failed strategy since the police were established (Ascoli, 1979). Likewise, many of the agencies to which Fleetwood & Lea would subordinate the police themselves engage in policing, even if they are not 'the police'. Consequently, Fleetwood & Lea's proposals for police reform are unlikely to reduce police power overall. Their naive, even romanticised view of the state and state institutions will mean that criticism of the police will (again) be funnelled into dead-end reform campaigns, and shore up the institutional power of police and other state agencies. In contrast, we would argue that it is only by building political power in social movements, capable of overcoming the resistance of the political and police establishment, that meaningful change can be made.

Such change not only requires the scaling back and eventual dismantling of police, but the simultaneous building of community-based alternatives that eliminate the very need to call the police. Despite the authors' claims, abolitionists do not have a romanticised view of 'community' (Lamble, 2016; Mingus, 2020). It is precisely a recognition that inequality and violence are embedded in communities, as a direct result of the exploitation and injustice inherent in wider social structures, that motivates abolitionists to place great importance in building up community capacity to transform those structures. The police, whose function is to maintain the existing social order, have unsurprisingly not been effective in addressing most forms of violence. Community solutions offer more promise. Some such alternatives are already in existence, and we hope to see more.

We want institutions and social practices that work better than the police in responding to violence – and have at their core prevention and transformation of the injustices and inequalities that lead to violence. In this way, abolition directs us away from one size fits all 'solutions' towards a plethora of environmental, structural, institutional and interpersonal changes which need to happen for their own sake, but also as steps on the road towards abolition. Defunding the police is an important stepping stone on this road.

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How to cite this article: McElhone, M., Kemp, T., Lamble, S. & Moore, J.M. (2023) Defund – not defend – the police: A response to Fleetwood and Lea. *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hojo.12508>