**Headline:** Oh Look, Police Reforms Didn’t Work

**Teaser:** To the surprise of no one but naive liberal backers of the police, expensive reforms to law enforcement have done nothing to curb the killings.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

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**[Article Body:]**

The nation’s [biggest investment](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/obama-proposes-body-worn-cameras-police) in the past decade to fix police abuses has failed. The New York Times, in collaboration with ProPublica conducted an [extensive 6-month-long investigation](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/13/magazine/police-body-cameras-miguel-richards.html) into the use of body cameras on police officers and found that it has done little to stop police killings. Reformists ought to be shocked—however, they may be too busy concocting yet another expensive scheme to pour money *into* policing rather than out—but abolitionists are hoarse from saying, “We told you it wouldn’t work.”

When 18-year-old [Mike Brown](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/25/us/michael-brown-spent-last-weeks-grappling-with-lifes-mysteries.html), newly graduated from high school, was gunned down in 2014 in cold blood by officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, his killing sparked one of the early waves of the Black Lives Matter movement. The New York Times rightly faced [protest](https://archive.nytimes.com/publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/08/25/an-ill-chosen-phrase-no-angel-brings-a-storm-of-protest/) as well for referring to Brown as “[no angel](https://archive.nytimes.com/publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/08/25/an-ill-chosen-phrase-no-angel-brings-a-storm-of-protest/),” a familiar media post-mortem of Black police victims that paints them as deserving of death.

And, as Ferguson burned with rage, [academics](https://scholarship.law.ufl.edu/flr/vol67/iss5/6/) and [politicians](https://www.wired.com/2014/12/obama-body-cameras/) declared the staid solution to such killings: body cameras worn by police officers to capture them in the act of killing.

Well, okay, police reformists hoped that the body cameras would dissuade police officers from killing rather than merely catching them in the act of doing so. Or, if the cameras failed to restrain police, they would capture evidence to hold police accountable. But such faith in the armed enforcers of racial capitalism was naive at best. At worst, it was a measure of the ardent belief that officers are actually trying to keep people safe. Liberals have been as guilty as conservatives in their unquestioning belief in the sanctity of policing. It was a Democrat, President Barack Obama, who in 2014 asked Congress to authorize spending [$263 million of taxpayer funds](https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/first-read/obama-requests-263-million-police-body-cameras-training-n259161) to outfit cops with cameras.

The price of liberal naivete was on full display in 2020 when Minneapolis officer Derek Chauvin slowly and brutally choked George Floyd to death in full view of bystander Darnella Frazier’s phone camera while he knelt on Floyd’s neck. Chauvin had been outfitted with a [body camera](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/derek-chauvin-new-body-camera-video-trial_n_6064e25cc5b6555472ceade2) that fell off him while he killed Floyd. In 2017, Chauvin had been caught at least twice using the same tactic of kneeling on top of [a person's neck](https://www.cbsnews.com/minnesota/news/body-camera-footage-released-showing-derek-chauvins-violent-use-of-force-in-2017-case/) while wearing a body camera. The city paid out more than $1 million to settle with the victims, who were lucky enough to survive. Chauvin then went on to kill Floyd three years later.

When Chauvin was ultimately convicted, it was no thanks to his body camera. Massive public pressure from the [largest protests in the nation’s history](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html), and [Frazier’s testimony and recording](https://www.vogue.com/article/darnella-frazier-gratitude-derek-chauvin-conviction#:~:text=It%20was%20a%20rare%20conviction,in%20the%20case%20against%20Chauvin.), helped to indict him for Floyd’s murder.

The fact that police departments themselves [supported the use of body cameras](https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/michael-brown-shooting-ferguson-police-to-get-body-cameras-1.2752146) when they were initially proposed ought to have warned us that the project was doomed to failure. What the [New York Times/ProPublica investigation](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/13/magazine/police-body-cameras-miguel-richards.html) found is that police have used body camera footage to actually justify their killings. In the 2017 fatal shooting of a man named Miguel Richards, the New York Police Department used selective footage from officers’ cameras to absolve them, not hold them accountable. It is frequently the police themselves, depending on the city, who get to decide whether or not to release body camera footage. Body cameras did not deliver accountability; they were just new weapons to help police in the war they have been waging on the public.

[Decades of police reforms](https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2021/police-reform-failure/) have sucked up hundreds of millions of dollars, and have kicked the can of accountability down the road, maintained [police dominance of city budgets](https://www.vera.org/publications/what-policing-costs-in-americas-biggest-cities), and ultimately [failed to curb](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/) the killings. Even the [Washington Post](https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2021/police-reform-failure/) called it “an ongoing exercise in reform that never ends.”

The police kill at least [1,000 people a year](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/), with 2022 being the deadliest year ever recorded. And it appears as though 2023 may surpass it. In other words, police fatalities rose after body cameras were deployed (it’s true, correlation does not necessarily mean causation). A deeper look at the data shows that Black people are the most likely to die at the hands of police and are twice as likely to be killed than whites, despite being a much smaller racial group. And, younger Black people are the most vulnerable to bloodthirsty cops.

So, what would actually keep police from killing? The [Movement for Black Lives](https://m4bl.org/press/perspectives-on-community-safety-from-black-america/) (M4BL), in conjunction with GenForward at the University of Chicago, asked the group most victimized by violent police—Black Americans—what their opinions were on moving money out of policing and into the things that have been proven to foster safety (housing, health care, education, and other social services). The extensive survey, called [Perspectives on Community Safety from Black America](https://m4bl.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Perspectives-on-Community-Safety-From-Black-America.pdf), found high levels of fear toward police among Black Americans. Younger Black people were the most fearful. This is not surprising given that they are the most targeted by police.

More importantly, the survey found broad support for an “Invest/Divest” approach to public safety. Specifically, this means, “86 [percent] of Black people support creating a new agency of first responders who specialize in de-escalating violence and providing mental-health support and other social services that would take over these responsibilities from police.” The survey also found that “78 [percent] support a process whereby city officials promote public safety by investing in solutions that do not rely on incarceration.”

Dr. Amara Enyia, M4BL’s Policy and Research Director, told me in an [interview](https://risingupwithsonali.com/new-survey-finds-broad-support-among-black-americans-for-defunding-police/) on YES! Presents: Rising Up With Sonali, “When people say reform, so often it’s this tweaking around the edges of police and policing. It’s things that we know don’t really get to the root causes of harm that come from the policing system.”

Enyia questions the reliance on policing altogether, especially in scenarios where the presence of armed officers often makes things worse. “Why should armed police be pulling people over for traffic violations?” she asks. “Or why should police be giving bicyclists tickets for riding their bike on the sidewalk, for example? Why should individuals who are having a mental health crisis, why should armed police be called to the scene?”

There are no good answers to these questions. And body cameras do nothing to discourage police from killing in such scenarios because they merely validate policing as a tool for safety. Police are enforcers of order, not safety.

Safety does not enter the equation except for those members of society who rely on the strict maintenance of the existing order: well-off white Americans for example, who enjoy the greatest economic benefits from generational wealth and, not coincidentally, experience the least harm from police. Rethinking the role of policing in society needs to go hand in hand with rethinking our economy as a whole.

M4BL asks a stark question in the report on its survey results that ought to form the basis of any changes to policing: “Can you imagine a world where policing is obsolete and everyone has what they need to thrive?”