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Reform the police: How Oakland could change policing for the better

By David Muhammad | June 11, 2020



A graduating class of new Oakland Police Department cadets in 2014. Following days of protests against police brutality, an expert argues that reforming policing is still possible, especially with changes to new officer training.
Photo: Sarah Rice / Special to The Chronicle

The killing of George Floyd by four Minneapolis police officers, at least one of whom had several previous complaints against him, in a department that has been considered a model of reform, raises serious doubt about the prospect of successful police transformation.

Like so many others, I feel rage, frustration, pain and fatigue at seeing the death of yet another unarmed black man at the hands of peace officers. Yet, I remain committed to the idea that we can transform the policing profession.

My perspective comes from many complicated and conflicting experiences. I grew up in Oakland and had a number of run-ins with the police during my own bouts of delinquency. Two such incidents resulted in my being beaten and bloodied by Oakland's finest. Years later, I would run a nonprofit in Oakland that advocated for reform of the juvenile justice system.

Then to the surprise of many, including myself, I decided to accept a position in the belly of the beast as a deputy director of the youth justice system in Washington, D.C. Eventually I landed back home, in Oakland, as the head of the probation department that had once supervised me.

The decade I spent working in the system was solely for the purpose of transforming it from the inside. I now facilitate reform in numerous criminal justice agencies across the country, including several police departments.

After many years of working to improve police and probation departments, I now count several police leaders as my friends. They are good people who acknowledge they work in a broken system.

The primary challenge in police agencies is the culture. Adrenaline-fueled young officers want to "knock heads" during their shifts. Many departments have the "us vs. them" outlook of an occupying army.

We must confront and transform this destructive culture, because policing should be about protection and service to the community. This will take effective communication, new recruiting and hiring strategies, transformative leadership, and an overhaul of the police academies.

It is slow and often unfulfilling work. But it can work.



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Another significant structural reform we must advance in policing is shrinking its scope.

Officers are asked to do too much with too few resources. It is time for an alternative response network for all non-violent calls for service.

Similar to the community-based organizations that provide diversion programs for youth and adults who would otherwise be in the justice system, we need a new infrastructure of community safety and crisis response. Such a network must be vast and well-equipped, including 24-hour on-call social workers and community-based outreach workers.



This way, armed police officers can focus primarily on reducing serious violence.

Implement new policies, like limited use of force. There should be mandated verbal de-escalation strategies, community policing, and the elimination of stop-and-frisk techniques. Police should be provided with frequent, high-quality training on these policies.

Finally, hold all personnel accountable to demonstrating these policies in action.

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Accountability is where many departments fall short. Rogue officers are rarely routed out of the department, thanks to police unions. Advocates, activists and policymakers must reduce these unions' undue power. They are why so many states have laws that make it nearly impossible to convict murderous cops.

The city of Oakland is in a unique position to quickly implement reforms that could reduce the footprint of the police department.

Measure Z, a voter-approved ballot initiative, provides \$9 million in annual funding for community-based violence prevention programs. Nonprofit organizations already conduct crisis response and provide case management to justice-involved youth and adults.

This network, along with an expanded partnership between the police department and the Alameda County Behavioral Health Department, should be used to significantly reduce the police response to non-violent service calls. The vast majority of police officer time is spent responding to these calls. With an alternative response network, Oakland can have a smaller police department focused on serious violence.

Reform has been so hard to come by that there have been calls for the abolishment of police.

This is a proposal that would take decades to achieve responsibly. But transforming policing, reducing its footprint, and reining in abuse and corruption is difficult, though doable. We can start now.

David Muhammad is executive director of the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform, based in Oakland. He is a former Alameda County chief probation officer and the former deputy commissioner of probation in New York City.

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