

Policing causes violence, not the other way around

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Police Everywhere Justice Nowhere, rally at the State Capitol in St Paul, Minnesota, after the not guilty verdict in the Yanez trial, 2017. Photo: [Lorie Shaull](#)

The New York City subway shooting in Brooklyn on April 12 miraculously resulted in [no deaths](#), although about 30 people suffered injuries, including 10 from gunshot wounds. Within hours, a massive manhunt for the shooter was underway, but in the end it was the suspect who tipped police off and [turned himself in](#). Still, that has not stopped politicians and corporate media outlets like the [Washington Post](#) and others from using the shooting to shore up police talking points and implicitly make the case for more police funding.

Alex Vitale, a professor of sociology and coordinator of the Policing and Social Justice Project at Brooklyn College, has followed the politics of law enforcement for years. The author of *The End of Policing*—a book that Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) inadvertently [helped turn into a bestseller](#) during the recent Supreme Court confirmation hearings of Ketanji Brown Jackson—explained to me in an [interview](#) that “we’ve seen a big increase in the number of police on the subway with the new mayor, Eric Adams, and that did not play a role in preventing this [shooting] from happening.”

Indeed, New York police, with all the resources of modern technology, surveillance and weaponry at its disposal, had to embarrassingly [turn to the public](#) for help. “We routinely overestimate the effectiveness of policing as a solution to our problems,” said Vitale.

Across the country, Democratic Party leaders like Mayor Adams are taking “tough-on-crime” stances, forgetting the horrors of racist police brutality that had seemed so apparent to the entire nation only two years ago when millions of Americans protested, angered by the videotaped police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

San Francisco Mayor London Breed, who in 2020 [suggested cutting \\$120](#)

million from her city's police budget, ultimately decided to increase police funding. Earlier this year she again requested millions more in supplemental police funding but then quietly withdrew her request after gleeful coverage by right-wing news outlets about her "stunning" reversal on the issue.

In Los Angeles, mayoral hopeful Karen Bass, known as a staunch progressive, has also decided to change her tune on police funding. Bass is running neck and neck with billionaire real estate developer Rick Caruso and may be feeling pressure from Caruso's overt pro-police position.

Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot last fall also proposed increased police funding after having earlier taken a position to cut funds.

And, President Joe Biden, who has stated more vociferously than most of his fellow Democrats that he does not agree with the idea of defunding police departments, has unsurprisingly proposed a massive increase in police funding in his federal budget for the upcoming fiscal year.

Biden, Adams, Breed, Bass, and Lightfoot, all Democrats, are citing rising crime levels as reasons for increasing police funding, perplexing left-leaning voters. The Intercept's Akela Lacy says that this pivot is the result of Democrats' failure to make progress on gun control.

But there is no evidence that increased policing actually reduces violence. Indeed, it is quite the contrary. Most researchers and journalists attempt to correlate increased policing with a reduction in crime. But few ask whether increased policing reduces *violence*. If police are the perpetrators of violence, then increased policing results in increased violence, as a 2021 study  by Community Resource Hub and Interrupting Criminalization found.

Crime is related to many factors, and policing is not one of them. Vitale draws a

connection between wealth disparities and the criminalization of poverty, saying that Democratic mayors “continue to insist that all local government can do is subsidize the already wealthy in hopes that they’ll be competitive on the global stage.” In turn, he says, “this has just produced tremendous inequality and budget cuts for essential social services.” The issues that “have resulted from that have been turned into ‘policeable’ problems, and this has just created a vicious cycle.”

Studies have shown that when there are ample resources for community services such as mental health care, crime goes down. Indeed, in the case of the New York subway shooting, the suspect has a history of mental health struggles. If cities responded to mental health episodes with counselors instead of police, we might well see a reduction in overall violence.

In fact, the city of Denver, Colorado, did just that. Over a period of six months, Denver city authorities dispatched mental health teams instead of police in situations that warranted such intervention. The experiment was judged a success given that 750 such calls resulted in zero arrests. In one incident, a man who was hallucinating had no shoes on in extremely cold weather. The team that was dispatched gave him a pair of shoes as a simple first step toward helping him.

Sadly, the corporate media has relentlessly fed the notion that rising crime is an indication that more police are necessary. The fact that recent robberies of high-end luxury stores have gotten so much publicity—from disproportionate media coverage—has fueled the myth that crime is out of control and that more police are needed, even though overall crime levels are not as high as they are being made out to be. Critics have dubbed this sort of media coverage as “copaganda,” or pro-cop propaganda.

“There are a lot of factors that drive this conflation of policing and public safety” and the idea that “policing is the only tool that’s available to keep us safe,” said Vitale. One factor is that covering crime and policing offers “sensationalism” in headlines

that drives up corporate media ratings. Additionally, according to Vitale, “The news media have always cozied up to police to be a source of information.”

But, the most important driver of copaganda is what Vitale calls “a shared worldview” between corporate media, liberal elites, and police. This view is that “the problems of American society... [are] problems of individual and group moral failure that are best addressed through punitive interventions.”

A stark example of this can be found in Politico, once a digital upstart and pioneer of “new media,” today squarely part of the [corporate media landscape](#). A [story](#) about the Los Angeles mayor’s race, headlined “Crime upstages progressive priorities in Los Angeles mayor’s race,” featured a large photograph of a homeless encampment by the beach. The photo made it clear that unhoused people, in the outlet’s view, are a source of crime.

Instead of seeing the large spike in homelessness as a symptom of an unequal economy, the phenomenon is being used by politicians and the media alike to justify increased policing. In fact, as Politico points out at the very bottom of its story, “crime rates are far below historic lows and actually dipped in 2020 before the current uptick.” Shouldn’t that have been the story’s leading point?

This sort of coverage is a far cry from the nearly unanimous mainstream media support for the Black Lives Matter movement two years ago. That movement called for, and continues to support, a redirection of police funding toward community services for the unhoused, those struggling with mental health, unemployment, hunger and other social problems caused by the current capitalist system.

“The mainstream media, once they had an understanding of what it was we were really talking about in the summer of 2020,” said Vitale, “quickly realized that they were diametrically opposed to it and have sort of systematically excluded these ideas from mainstream media conversations.”

To admit that social problems are caused by the failures of capitalism would undermine the credibility of the very system that political and media elites rely on. A police-centric worldview preserves a system that is designed to produce unequal outcomes.

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