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How (Not) to Abolish The Police

A Guide from the City of Minneapolis

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Contents

Abolition from Above?	3
How (Not) To Abolish The Police	4
A Little Background	5
A Helping Hand	7
A Glimpse of the Future	8
A Way Out	10

George Floyd rebellion was not represented by citizen patrols—rather, we glimpsed it in the crews of rioters and revelers who transformed the city over the course of a few days. Acting in defiance of the law, they collectively expressed that the power to shape our lives should be in our hands, not monopolized by the city government, or developers, or banks, or anyone else. Everything we’re usually forced to pay for—necessities, luxuries, spaces, and togetherness itself—was liberated and shared with all.

Likewise, true police abolition demands a deep engagement with the ideas of accountability and transformative justice. Horizontal violence will not automatically disappear if we defund and disband the police. If we want to diminish the amount of violence and suffering in our society, we have to abolish all the other systems that create and enforce inequality, as well.

Ultimately, we aspire to cultivate new ways of living together that allow us to address harm without reinventing laws and police under new names. This must occur in our daily lives, not just in exceptional moments of rupture like the George Floyd rebellion. If we succeed in developing new ways of addressing harm, we will become more capable of defending ourselves and each other against the police, and we will be able to offer more concrete alternatives to those who still cling to the only order they know. Only by building communities worthy of the name can we abolish the police once and for all.

If we recognize this now, we can begin to prepare for this potential future. We need to be able to identify policing, whatever form it assumes, however it is disguised. We need an analysis and a language with which we can point out new forms of policing as they are introduced. We need to popularize visions of what our lives could look like without policing and open up spaces in which to experiment with making that a reality.

It is not the uniforms and badges that make police so destructive to our communities and our aspirations. It is the role that police play in maintaining structural white supremacy and other forms of oppression. It is the way that they concentrate power and legitimacy, monopolizing force and using it to enforce the agenda of the ruling class, focusing violence on targeted communities and those who practice self-determination rather than permitting the ruling class to dictate all that they can do and be. All of the roles that police currently play can be passed on to badgeless, uniformless “community groups” without the results being any less pernicious. We don’t want a society in which the police have been formally abolished but everything else continues as it did before. We want to abolish the disparities and alienation that the police exist to enforce.

A Way Out

Movements for police abolition will remain trapped in this nexus as long as we imagine abolition as a policy proposal to be implemented by a government—as long as we conceive of the police as something distinct from the laws they enforce. The effective police abolition that we saw prefigured during the

There has been a lot of talk about police abolition over the past year and a half. But very different proposals coincide under this language. The coming years could see the phasing out of police departments—and in their place, an array of other agencies, activists, psychiatrists, and neighborhood watch organizations enforcing the same social order under a different name.

Abolition from Above?

In March 1856, in response to unrest throughout the Russian empire, Tsar Alexander addressed his fellow nobles, proclaiming “It is better to abolish serfdom from above than to wait until it is abolished from below.” At the time, few Russians could imagine the abolition of serfdom; many believed that it would lead to crime and chaos. Yet by taking the initiative to introduce reforms himself, Alexander was able to do away with serfdom without abolishing the gulf between the poor and the ruling class. This staved off real social change in Russia for half a century.

In Minneapolis, in response to the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, people rose up and abolished the Third Precinct of the police outright, chasing the officers out of the building and setting it on fire. That was abolition from below. Politicians always run along behind social movements, promising to grant them whatever they demonstrate themselves to be capable of achieving through direct action; consequently, some Minneapolis politicians suddenly proclaimed themselves to be ad-

vocates of police abolition, and many critics of the police once more vested their hopes in state reform.

After a year and a half of obstacles, media fear-mongering, and vigorous PR campaigns from police departments around the country, a proposal to replace the Minneapolis Police Department with other agencies was put before the public in a referendum on November 2, 2021. At any time before May 26, 2020, if almost 44% percent of the voting population of any metropolitan area in the United States had voted to abolish the police, this would have been reported as a significant blow to the legitimacy of the institution of policing; Abraham Lincoln won the presidential election of 1860 with a mere 39% of the vote, and he was not even running on an abolitionist platform. This past week, however, centrists and conservatives claimed the defeat of the proposal in Minneapolis as a victory.

But would the reform that we saw on the ballot really bring about the results that advocates of police abolition seek? In the following analysis, an author from Minneapolis reflects on the implications of this attempt to abolish the police from above.

How (Not) To Abolish The Police

“I’m not against police brutality, I’m against the police.”

—Frank B. Wilderson III

The Minneapolis Police Department has not been abolished.

those who resist the police or engage in other confrontational actions.

The most insidious aspect of this approach is that the groundwork for it was laid in the very discourse of abolition that arose in the uprising. During the rebellion, when countless people ceased to accept the legitimacy of the police, many people and organizations arose to fill their place, using the language of abolition to justify their role as “the community policing itself.” Notably, the Minnesota Freedom Fighters were one of the most prominent groups doing this at the time. This same tendency towards self-policing emerged in George Floyd Square with the Agape Movement; up until the removal of the barricades in June—and even since—the Agape Movement was a clear part of the Square’s composition. In the “Justice Resolution” published in August 2020 by activists seeking to represent the Square and the movement that arose from it, Agape is mentioned by name twice, once acknowledging their role in “providing safety” in MPD’s absence, and again in demand number 18 (of 24), which calls for them to receive a permanent space within the Square to continue to operate.

This idea of self-policing, of the community policing itself, forms the nexus in which police abolition and police enforcement fuse and become one. Unfortunately for earnest abolitionists, the city is well ahead of us in developing this model. The coming years could plausibly see the phasing out of anything called the Minneapolis Police Department—and in its place, an array of officers from other agencies, activists, psychiatrists, neighborhood watch organizations, and others enforcing the very same violent law and order that MPD did.

Patrol and National Guard, not the MPD, that headed up the response to that unrest.

In June, a task force comprised of sheriffs and federal marshals murdered Winston Smith in Minneapolis, illustrating the extent to which policing in the Twin Cities is already distributed across a wide range of institutions. This has been especially necessary since hundreds of MPD officers have left the department since the uprising of 2020.

A Glimpse of the Future

The second strategy is more insidious. A number of preexisting community groups have been tapped to assist the police or even take over their roles entirely in situations that might be sensitive for uniformed officers. We saw the most brazen example of this when the Agape Movement assisted city employees in dismantling the barricades around George Floyd Square—the site of his death, which mourners had barricaded and transformed into a memorial. The police did not even have to be on site for this, though they were seen in nearby areas in case their intervention was necessary. As it turned out, they were not needed—all it took to desecrate the memorial to George Floyd was for a “community group” to take over the role of the police.

Incidents like this have become more and more frequent. In response to police killings in April and June of this year, state-funded community groups like the Minnesota Freedom Fighters violently adopted the role of “peace-police,” a term used to describe people who interfere with and sometimes assault

Despite the pledge of “a veto-proof majority” of city council members in the aftermath of the George Floyd rebellion of 2020, the MPD has not been abolished. Despite the subsequent onslaught of pearl-clutching media coverage about how the city government was going to abolish the police in the middle of a crime wave, the MPD has not been abolished. Finally, despite the massive campaign for Ballot Question #2, the referendum regarding whether to rename and reorganize the department, the MPD has not been abolished.

Yet it was entirely possible that the campaign for the referendum could have succeeded and the city council members could have made good on their original promise to dismantle the department. We may well see this campaign emerge again during the next election cycle, in Minneapolis or elsewhere around the United States. This is why it is important to examine the underlying premise of these attempts at “police abolition”—and how they could contribute to the further entrenchment of police power and control, right under our noses.

A Little Background

Even residents could be forgiven for not following the last year and a half of discourse and policy around abolition in Minneapolis. In June 2020, nine of twelve city council members announced their intention to abolish the MPD. This was to take the form of an amendment to the city charter, which currently requires the city to fund a police department with at least a certain number of officers. Shortly thereafter, the city’s Charter

Commission intervened to strike down the amendment, letting the politicians themselves off the hook.

In late 2020, a petition began circulating to seek to enact the proposed amendment via a question on the 2021 ballot. Despite many obstacles, this vote took place last week on Election Day. The amendment would not itself have abolished the police. Rather, it would have replaced the MPD with a “Department of Public Safety” and removed the minimum requirement for the number of police officers.

The ballot question did not succeed, but it did do relatively well for such a controversial proposition—well enough that we will likely see it again. But we’ve already started to see what kind of “police abolition” it would allow for, and it is not the abolition that so many of us risked our freedom to propose in 2020.

While these debates raged on—with tremendous quantities of ink spilled writing these policies, suing to stop them, and distorting their meaning in the media—the government of Minneapolis got started shaping what abolition from above will look like from this point forward, whether or not we ever see it officially introduced. We can identify two hallmarks of their approach, both of which are already being implemented today.

First, they are introducing closer collaboration with other police departments to supplement an MPD that is already logistically and emotionally weakened from the George Floyd rebellion—not because of any supposed “defunding,” but as a practical consequence of the grassroots resistance that their murders have provoked. Second, they are arranging for funded non-state groups to do the jobs of the police for them through the Office of Violence Prevention.

A Helping Hand

This first strategy should be familiar to anyone living in a large metropolitan area in the United States. There are numerous departments with widely overlapping jurisdictions that can shoulder the tasks of police repression, even if one department were to disappear. Minneapolis Parks police, Metro Transit police, University of Minnesota police, Hennepin County Sheriffs, Minnesota State Patrol, the police departments of every surrounding city and suburb—these are some of the many departments that can take on the job of the MPD, that have been doing the same job all this time. Ironically, in many parts of the United States, the frameworks through which different police departments collaborate are called “mutual aid agreements.”

Last fall’s repression of illegal car meets—called “sideshows”—was an example of one such multi-agency collaboration. When MPD attempted to shut down these meets by themselves when people began to hold them again in spring 2021, the officers were quickly forced to retreat.

Regardless of whether MPD is ever abolished, it is already taking a back seat in much policing. This past winter saw a large police operation against a spate of carjackings, assisted by the County Sheriffs and State Patrol. Then, during the lead-up to the trial of Derek Chauvin, Minneapolis mobilized countless agencies plus the National Guard to assist them in locking down the city—and that still wasn’t enough when a Brooklyn Center (not Minneapolis) police officer murdered Daunte Wright in April, leading to a week of unrest. It was the State