
Why Isn't Police Reform Working?

In 2020, the world has watched as police harassment and violence targeted Black and Latinx communities during COVID-19 and peaceful protesters demanding accountability for police brutality – often in locations where the police had undergone years of supervised reform efforts for the very excessive force, racial profiling, and systematic misconduct we saw on tv and in the streets. Despite decades of effort, police routinely fail at reform mandates of community-based activism, judicial oversight, investigative commissions, and revised legislation and policy. Popular narratives of “baby steps” or incremental reform ignore ongoing police impunity in leadership and in the community. Defensiveness, rather than insight, is a standard reaction to calls for accountability. And, as police double down on misconduct, after decades of attention and billions of taxpayer dollars devoted to reform, the clearest outcome of judicial oversight and legislative reform may be its use as a tool, by the very offending police departments reform is supposed to fix, to attempt to rebut claims of systemic misconduct and impunity.

The urgency of this moment includes recognizing how reform is used to avoid accountability, rather than embrace it. The ‘performance of reform’ includes renaming rogue units without disciplining misconduct, implementing training without strong pedagogical strategy, reworking the language of police policies, defending indefensible misconduct, including the use of chokeholds, punching, and body-slammings of community bystanders, and more. Such theater is not public service and may be maladaptive – *de facto* insulating police from liability, accountability, or culture change.

What Are Best Practices?

- ◆ **#defund** | the police are not problem-solvers. They are empowered to investigate and arrest, yet carceral solutions are proven ineffective (or detrimental) for a vast amount of what we ask police to regulate (mental health, ‘quality of life,’ small crimes, etc.). Police budgets should reflect our investments in our communities, not a reductionist approach to complex social issues.
- ◆ **community experience is the only measure of reform** | a checklist of improved processes cannot reform policing. Policing involves discretion, which is consistently misinterpreted as a license to racially profile. Outcome, not process, indicators define the adequacy of reform and the authenticity of effort. Community experience is the only legitimate measure of police reform.
- ◆ **organizational culture** | the maxim that culture eats strategy for breakfast is as true in police reform as anywhere else; the strong organizational culture of policing routinely defeats or coopts reform. Refocusing police culture is a game changer.
- ◆ **embrace existing best practices** | so many of the solutions are already tried and tested in disciplines and fields outside of policing. We know how to change culture, improve retention of training + education, build leadership, and disincentivize misconduct. Research in many fields offers significant evidence of what works... and what doesn't. Yet policing and policing reform often operates in a silo.
- ◆ **external advice on approach, analysis, and interpretation** | a major driver of inadequate reform is failure to understand how the relations of power feed impunity in policing. Yet, improving policing processes has not dismantled entrenched systemic racism. Even with good intentions, systemic racism requires a critical approach to ensure the reform process will achieve its goals.