

# What Communities of Color Want from Police Reform



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The past few years have brought intense scrutiny of America’s law enforcement agencies by political leaders and concerned citizens alike. Crime has gone up across America, and even though the murder rate in Trump-voting states far exceeds Biden-voting states, a convenient narrative has flourished which blames higher crime on Democratic policies that also seek to shine a light on racial injustices in policing. Gun ownership has also exploded with Americans purchasing 160 million firearms over the past 5 years, or roughly the amount they purchased between 1999 and 2013. The rise in gun ownership has also coincided with a steady erosion of gun safety laws, particularly those that have redefined self-defense through stand your ground laws.

This incendiary mix of crime, homicide, race, policing, and guns has created a caustic environment for discussions of police reform in which the loudest voices prevail.

So, what do communities of color actually want to see in police reform?

Well, when it comes to public safety, Black, Latino, and Asian communities want what every community wants: a safe and secure environment where their families can live and thrive, free from the fear of violence and crime. This symmetry is eloquently summarized by the Reverend Al Sharpton. “We are the disproportionate victims of police misconduct and gun violence. So, we need to have a balance of fighting crime and fighting for police reform at the same time.”<sup>1</sup> In order to serve communities of color better, policymakers and police departments must understand their true concerns and listen to their perspectives on what public safety should look like in their neighborhoods.

## **Communities of color want substance, not slogans.**

Americans, regardless of race, largely oppose the “Defund the Police” movement. Polling shows opposition to defunding the police averaging around 70% overall. White respondents had the highest disapproval rating at 78%. But a strong majority of Black (52%), Latino (66%), and Asian (61%) respondents also oppose defund efforts (and only 18%, 11%, and 10%, respectively, strongly support them).<sup>2</sup> The lack of support from the Black community may come as a surprise, since the defund movement was largely a byproduct of widespread demands for social equity and racial justice in the wake of George Floyd’s murder. However, many Black Americans are not convinced that the policy proposals associated with defund efforts would make communities of color safer and less vulnerable to crime and violence, whether at the hands of police or civilians.<sup>3</sup>

These sentiments were affirmed in the 2021 local election cycle, when a handful of major U.S. cities introduced ballot measures that would weaken traditional police department operations in favor of more community-centric approaches. These efforts in Minneapolis, MN, and San Antonio, TX, were rejected by the Black and Latino neighborhoods of those cities at an even higher rate than among the whiter areas. Yet still, the majority of Americans believe widespread changes are needed in policing. Opposition to defund does not mean opposition to bold reforms. In fact, 88% of Black, 63% of Latino, and 82% of Asian Americans agree police reform is necessary, compared with 51% of white Americans. Communities of color want tangible and systematic solutions, not social media slogans.

## **While voters of color do not back defund efforts, they do want police to reduce their use of force.**

Americans of all races agree that bold actions must be taken for police to reduce the use of excessive and deadly force exerted against citizens. Despite an enhanced spotlight being placed on law enforcement operations since mid-2020, police shot and killed at least 1,055 people in 2021, the highest number of lethal police shootings since *The Washington Post* began tracking them in 2015.<sup>4</sup> Experts conclude that this number is unlikely to significantly decrease absent comprehensive reforms to the way law enforcement perform their duties. This statistic remains profoundly disheartening for communities of color, as Black and Latino Americans are significantly more likely to be killed by police than their white peers.<sup>5</sup> It is even further distressing that the use

of these tactics does not equate to a sharper reduction in crime, putting communities of color in situations where they are more at risk of harm rather than being protected from violence.

The use of excessive force is one of the biggest areas uniting all communities over policing reforms. A strong majority of Americans support banning chokeholds, curtailing no-knock warrants, expanding the use of body cameras, conducting independent investigations of officer-involved shootings, and launching a national database for police misconduct.<sup>6</sup> White voters and voters of color alike overwhelmingly support mandating police-involved shootings to be investigated by a separate and independent authority.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, 79% of Black, 71% of Latino, and 76% of Asian Americans support appointing civilian oversight boards as watchdogs over police departments.<sup>8</sup> A 2020 Gallup poll also showed that a whopping 98% of Americans support changing management practices so that officers with multiple incidents of abuse of power are removed, and 96% support punishment for officer abuses.<sup>9</sup> Targeting these policies is the most direct way to reduce the opportunities for police to cause harm.

For communities of color, eliminating police misconduct is a key component in improving the fragile relationship between citizens and law enforcement. In a survey of over 30,000 Black Americans, 73% agreed that holding police officers responsible for misconduct would improve police-community relations.<sup>10</sup> In a separate survey, Latino voters identified police brutality as one of their top issues in the 2020 election cycle, and 63% supported eliminating laws that make it harder to prosecute officers when they kill or abuse citizens of color.<sup>11</sup> Taking bold steps aimed at reducing the number of individuals who are mentally and physically harmed by police is an essential element to any measures of reform for communities of color.

## **People of color see anti-bias training as a crucial component in reducing excessive force.**

Addressing racial biases within law enforcement is of great concern for communities of color. Black men specifically are at the highest risk of being the victims of police brutality. In 2020, police officers were responsible for the deaths of 249 Black individuals.<sup>12</sup> While Black Americans have been disproportionately killed by police, Asian Americans are among those least likely, even less so than white Americans, to be harmed in police encounters.<sup>13</sup> The biases displayed by police officers is widely recognized by most Americans. Only 22% of Americans believe that officers treat everyone fairly, including just 5% of Black voters, 17% of Latino voters, and 10% of Asian voters.<sup>14</sup>

The effects of racial bias are often experienced in routine interactions with police. Black Americans are five times more likely than their White peers to say they've been unfairly stopped by police because of their race.<sup>15</sup> In a survey of Latino Americans, 37% reported someone in their family had been unfairly stopped or harassed by police, and 36% of Latino families reported having experienced excessive force by police.<sup>16</sup> Making implicit bias and anti-bias training courses mandatory for officers is one of the most direct ways departments can address these injustices. This

is most necessary in those jurisdictions where the police force is not representative of the citizens they are supposed to protect.

## **Communities of color have confidence in community policing.**

To address the concerns of voters of color, the issues surrounding police funding should not solely be focused on dollar amounts. Determining how money is spent can make just as much of an impact as deciding how much is spent. Although the majority of Black Americans do not support defunding the police, they don't necessarily think that funding should be increased. In fact, 57% of Black voters oppose increased funding to police forces, compared with 33% of white voters, 37% of Latino voters, and 45% of Asian voters.<sup>17</sup> Communities of color want police departments to use their existing resources on responsible policing focused on effective, non-biased tactics that actually reduce violence.

The best way to ensure police can concentrate their resources on keeping the public safe is to alleviate the responsibility of having to take on additional tasks they are not specifically trained to handle. Community policing programs work in conjunction with law enforcement to relieve officers of duties that can be effectively addressed by other professionals.

A strong majority of Americans across the board support community policing initiatives that focus on mental health services, drug abuse rehabilitation, and education. However, support is stronger in minority communities, as 58% of Black Americans say investing in education and job training is the best way to reduce crime, compared to 35% of their white peers. Communities of color view these alternatives to policing as not only an effective tool to make streets safer, but also a means to uplift and support those most vulnerable citizens, thereby improving the quality of life for all. One of the major criticisms of the ballot initiative to reform the police department in Minneapolis was the lack of communication with the Black community in the decision-making process that formulated the measure. Communities of color want to be involved in the creation of policies that affect their lives.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, Black and Latino communities agree that police funding should be redirected from enforcing low level crimes, like traffic stops and marijuana possession, and moved toward targeting violent and gun crimes more specifically. These low-level offenses are viewed in many minority communities as a tool of discrimination used by officers against Black and Latino Americans that do not improve public safety and only increase distrust of police, impeding them from preventing and solving more serious crimes.<sup>19</sup> A refocusing of efforts into the bigger public safety threats would reassure residents that their tax dollars are being used to actually make their streets safer, not just as a means for meeting quotas and making revenue.

## **People of color want to see more officers on the streets who represent their community.**

There are some rifts between police and community that cannot be remedied simply with training. Many American communities are distrustful of police because they feel a consistent disconnect between the needs of citizens and the manner in which officers patrol the area. Additionally, studies have shown that white police officers are more likely than Black officers to use guns or excessive force when patrolling majority-minority areas.<sup>20</sup> And still too often, police forces in communities of color are staffed with a majority of white officers who live outside their service area.<sup>21</sup> Even when the force is racially diverse, Black and Latino officers are less likely to be promoted to higher ranks than their white peers.<sup>22</sup>

Recruiting more officers who are residents of the area they will be serving can decrease this discrepancy and help create a foundation of trust with citizens of the community. Fifty-one percent of Black Americans believe that having police officers live in the community where they work would improve relations.<sup>23</sup> The mayors of several major cities, including Atlanta and New York City, have moved toward requiring officers serving in their cities to actually live in the city as opposed to neighboring suburban areas.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, research supports that having greater diversity within a police department improves trust between citizens and officers in minority communities.<sup>25</sup> There is no lack of talent or eminent qualifications amongst communities of color, and if given the opportunity, many would rise to the prospect of delivering safer streets in their own neighborhoods.

## **Communities of color want police to do their jobs effectively.**

The role of law enforcement officers is among the bedrocks of civil society. These vital public servants are tasked with protecting citizens and their property, deterring and investigating crime, enforcing laws, and maintaining public order and safety for all. Police officers encounter dangerous situations on a daily basis, risking their lives to protect their communities. It can be a thankless job with long hours, low pay, and difficult work-life balance. Despite these disadvantages, our nation's dedicated officers put on their uniforms every day to make their city, state, and country a safer place.

Despite the heroic nature of police work, their efforts are far too often overshadowed by the corruption, brutality, and prejudice of a few wrongdoers within their profession. This has consistently led to public distrust and soured relationships between citizens and law enforcement, especially in communities of color. These circumstances give way to a loss of morale and dedication from officers, and the feeling of uncertainty and fear that their communities are unsafe by citizens. When asked what the sight of a police vehicle with sirens and lights off in your neighborhood makes you feel, 44% of Black Americans responded they feel fear, concerns, or mostly anxiety.<sup>26</sup> In comparison, 33% of Latino, 38% of Asian, and 23% of white Americans had the same response. A significant part of a police officer's job is ensuring citizens feel safe in their homes and on their

streets. But it is very difficult for anyone to feel safe when violent crime, gun trafficking, and hate crimes are rampant throughout our neighborhoods.

## **People of color want law enforcement to do a better job of solving crimes and getting violent criminals off the street.**

In the past two years, murders across the U.S. have rose 30%.<sup>27</sup> Experts have attributed this spike to a number of factors, including the economic and mental stress caused by the pandemic, which has taken a toll on both officers and citizens alike. While violent crime was on the rise, the amount of these crimes that were solved by police declined. In 2020, FBI data reports that law enforcement solved a little less than half of all homicide cases.<sup>28</sup> This represents a steady decline from the 1980s, where homicides were cleared at a rate around 70%. While clearance is calculated by varying methods in different departments, it generally indicates that at least one suspect has been arrested and charged with the killing.<sup>29</sup>

In cities where citizens of color make up the majority of the population, clearance rates have fallen below the national average. In Washington D.C., 2021 was one of the deadliest years in decades, with the nation's capital reporting 226 murders, a 14% increase from 2020.<sup>30</sup> Of those crimes, only 42% cleared.<sup>31</sup> Most cities including Philadelphia, Miami, New Orleans, and Detroit also experienced significant drops in their clearance rates, putting them well below 50%.<sup>32</sup>

Crimes that remain unsolved equates to criminals that remain on the street and families that remain without closure. In communities of color, where confidence in police has already deteriorated, a decrease in the number of crimes solved just exacerbates the discontent felt by citizens. Improving clearance rates, especially for homicides and other violent offenses, would not only improve the perception of law enforcement by their community, but would also greatly boost the morale of the officers that make sacrifices to do their jobs effectively.

## **Communities of color want to keep guns out of the wrong hands.**

While gun violence poses a serious threat in every community across the country, communities of color historically suffer the most from gun homicides. Black Americans are ten times more likely, and Black youths 14 times more likely, to be killed by a gun than their white counterparts.<sup>33</sup> Shockingly, Black men are the victims of 52% of gun homicides, despite being only 6% of the U.S. population.<sup>34</sup> This phenomenon can be attributed to a number of factors, but it all stems from the reality that communities with larger minority populations often suffer from disenfranchisement and economic inequality in comparison to other areas of the city. These circumstances make vulnerable communities even more susceptible to violent crime. And while law enforcement can exert all their resources to deter and solve crime, those efforts are often unmatched against the prevalence of firearms on America's streets.

Police officers alone cannot rid our nation of the tragically devastating and consistent gun violence we face daily. Federal and state legislation is imperative to ensuring that firearms don't fall into the wrong hands, and that the Second Amendment right to bear arms is not being exploited by those who only seek to do harm. Communities of color overwhelmingly agree, as 75% of Black, 65% of Latino, and 72% of Asian Americans support stricter gun laws, compared to just 45% of white Americans.<sup>35</sup> At the federal level, stronger laws are necessary to close the loopholes that give way to illegal guns sales and trafficking of stolen firearms. At the state level, a growing number of state legislatures have enacted "permitless carry" laws that essentially remove all or most of the requirements one must fulfill to lawfully carry a concealed firearm. These laws, strongly opposed by law enforcement agencies, increase the threat of gun violence for both citizens and police officers.<sup>36</sup>

Police officers and city officials at the local level can only play the hand dealt to them by the state. If state law makes it easier for criminals to possess and use firearms, then violent crimes and murders will be more difficult to control, with communities of color suffering the most. The necessary approach to public safety requires all levels of government to work in conjunction with law enforcement to develop systems and standards that keep Americans safe, no matter what side of town they live on.

## **People of color want hate crimes to be taken seriously.**

Hate crimes against all racial minorities have increased over the past few years, with the largest increase felt within Asian communities. According to the FBI, hate crimes against Asian Americans rose 73% in 2020, with women and the elderly overwhelmingly targeted.<sup>37</sup> While this influx is largely attributed to misinformation and political rhetoric fabricated by far-right discontent around the coronavirus pandemic, America's grappling with violence fueled by racial animus is far from a new problem.

Although modern day hate crimes appear to be reported and punished at a higher rate than in decades past, the threat of these violent attacks is no less prevalent. In fact, even prior to the pandemic, physical attacks driven by hate were on the rise. While Asian and Latino Americans are also targeted, attacks against Black Americans consistently account for the largest percentage of racially motivated offenses, making up 47% of all ethnicity-based hate crimes.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, the expansion of stand your ground laws, which dispel the traditional self-defense requirement to retreat instead of exerting deadly force, have led to a rise in legally justifiable homicides where a Black person was killed by a white person.<sup>39</sup>

The recent influx in hate crimes has only intensified support for police reform that recognizes and prioritizes the needs of communities of color. Black, Latino, and Asian Americans deserve to feel just as safe in their neighborhoods as white Americans do, and they believe the best way to achieve that is through better policing, not less policing.

In properly addressing hate crimes in America, communities of color want law enforcement to accept the reality that the majority of these atrocities are committed by white assailants. Over 55% of hate crime offenders in 2020 were white, and nearly 62% of all hate crimes committed were motivated by racial bias. <sup>40</sup> American police officers have a reputation, as evidenced by history, of favoring white citizens over racial minorities. And 86% of Black, 85% of Latino, and 90% of Asian Americans believe police look out for white people. <sup>41</sup>

Utilizing training to overcome their own racial bias is the first step in ensuring officers can effectively and appropriately address hate crimes. Additionally, police departments can most directly respond to racially-biased attacks by employing dedicated hate crime units to deal with all stages of the crisis, from investigation to prosecution, and even prevention.

## **Conclusion**

Communities of color are often the first places to suffer when issues arise with law enforcement, but they are also the last to be consulted when discussing solutions for change. In order for comprehensive police reform to succeed, the concerns and needs of these communities must be heard, taken seriously, and acted upon. True reform cannot be achieved without incorporating the input of communities of color, and they know exactly what is necessary to keep their streets safe.

### TOPICS

**JUSTICE** 36



## ENDNOTES

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