

“Abolish the Police? An Exploration”
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First Parish Church of Stow and Acton
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I want to begin by saying something which is always true, but which is worth remembering when I’m speaking on something on which we do not all agree that one of the important beliefs in this faith is the belief in the freedom of the pulpit – that you’ve called me, as your minister, to a free and untrammelled pulpit, where I am asked to speak my conscience without fear of censorship. And, at the same time, we need not agree. While you’ve called me to lead a way, this is a free faith, and we are here by voluntary agreement in participation. What I speak is not a creedal test that you must adhere to. But you are called by our values in the free and responsible search for truth and meaning to listen as you are able with open ears and open hearts, and to make your own judgement from there.

So I’ve been asked to speak on the subject of abolishing the police today. And in truth, I was glad to be asked this, because I think this is an issue we need to be examining here at FPC. In 2020, the UUA General Assembly voted to pass a statement titled “Amen to Uprising: A Commitment and Call to Action.” That resolution stated the following:

THEREFORE, we will create systemic change within our congregations by:

- Revising agreements, and policies to create alternatives to policing (including developing plans for safety and accountability);
- Choosing not to involve police departments, and deactivating security systems that mobilize police response when triggered;
- Engaging in creative transformative justice processes;
- Pursuing abolition of policing systems within the congregations and institutions in which we have power;
- Moving congregational and institutional resources and endowments towards Black liberation organizing and long-term redistribution; and
- Rooting ourselves in theologies of liberation and abolition.¹

Now, at the time, some of our delegates chose to vote against this resolution, because we were not sure that FPC would be in agreement with those goals. For one thing, we’ve had a really friendly relationship with our local Stow Police department. Friendly enough that I was able to call Chief Sallese up this week and talk to him about this sermon. But in 2020, I voted for this resolution, seeing it as aspirational, and leading us forward, even though I had my own questions. And in the end, it passed, overwhelmingly, and is a statement of our denomination, of our faith. And once it passed, I said, well, it’s calling us to take action, and the first step in that action is informing ourselves on this issue, educating ourselves about why people are calling for police abolition.

And I'm definitely glad to study this, because this is a place where I didn't know if I agreed with where our faith is leading. And it's been my experience that this has happened a few times before. There are times when I lag behind in information, in experience, in comfort, or in commitment, to where our faith is leading. This is one of those times. And what I've found is that when I examine those issues, educate myself, and really dive into what it is about, that I find that Unitarian Universalism is right where I was wrong, and it leads me forward into a greater call for justice. This was the case when our faith, for example, got involved in immigration justice. I lagged behind not in agreement, but in commitment. At that time, I was like, "Yeah, that's an issue, but is it really where we should be putting our energy?" (Answer:) Um, yeah, it is, and I needed to get behind that (and FPC has a great task force doing good work on the subject).

So here I am with police abolition, and what I personally think is I'm not ready to say yes to police abolition. Not until I know firmly what would replace it. I've had the unfortunate experience of knowing people who were cruelly murdered, and countless people who were raped, some by serial rapists and stranger rape. I know enough people who were victims of violent crimes, and have met some of the offenders, and I don't really see how we abolish policing and still deal with the most violent offenders without replacing policing with something that looks an awful lot like policing for at least that portion of police work. I don't have the vision of how else it can work, despite reading numerous articles and books and listening to podcasts, etc., on police abolition. I just don't get it.ⁱⁱ

For example, an article titled "Alternatives to Police Services: Let's Re-Imagine a New System" (author not cited) at <https://defundthepolice.org/alternatives-to-police-services/> says, in regards to violent crime, "Instead of relying on police, we could rely on investigators from other sectors to carry out investigations. Social workers, sociologists, forensic scientists, doctors, researchers, and other well-trained individuals to fulfill our needs when violent crimes take place." This doesn't, in my opinion, clearly cover the issue of apprehending the violent criminal.

When I talked with law enforcement, two things were pointed out (in favor of policing) that really felt true to me and resonated with me. The first is back to that issue of violent crime, and looking specifically at domestic violence. A U.S. Department of Justice report titled "Practical Implications of Current Domestic Violence Research" from 2009 states;

A major re-examination of a series of fairly rigorous experiments in multiple jurisdictions finds that arrest deters repeat reabuse, whether suspects are employed or not. In none of the sites was arrest associated with increased reabuse among intimate partners. [155] Another major study, based on 2,564 partner assaults reported in the NCVS (1992-2002), found that whether police arrested the suspect or not, their involvement had a strong deterrent effect. The positive effects of police involvement and arrest do not depend on whether the victim or a third party reported the incident to law enforcement. Neither do they depend on the seriousness of the incident assault, whether a misdemeanor or a felony. [63] A Berkeley arrest study found similarly that all actions taken by

responding officers — including arrest, providing victims with information pamphlets, taking down witness statements, and helping victims secure protective orders — were associated with reduced reabuse.ⁱⁱⁱ

As someone who has seen domestic violence lead to tragedy, this makes a powerful argument for me in favor of policing alone. Now is it possible that alternative systems could have the same deterrent effect? Yes, definitely. I'm not ruling that out. But I think of tragic cases like the very publicized Gabby Petito case last summer. Police received a call about a domestic violence situation involving Gabby Petito and her fiancé, Brian Laundry. They responded, and ultimately chose not to make an arrest. And Gabby was ultimately killed by Brian, who went on to kill himself.^{iv} While there's lots that can be said about how this case of a blond white woman got more media exposure and attention than hundreds (or maybe thousands) of cases of women of color and indigenous women combined, it's still a case being pointed to where people are saying that if an arrest had been made, then maybe a life might have been saved.

The other strong argument that I believe complicates the issue of police abolition particularly in rural communities is scarcity of financial resources to adequately provide coverage with other institutions. I can firmly get behind the idea that we've lumped too much under the umbrella of policing, and that we need to remove some things from under that umbrella, like mental health response and even some domestic violence response, and response to traffic violations, and cover them with other programs instead. And in larger urban areas, it's possible to see how a reduction of policing combined with a simultaneous increase in other services is a perfectly feasible solution. The problem is providing 24/7 coverage for all these various services in smaller and more rural areas, where the police forces are small, and subdividing tasks of policing will leave us without person to respond to the 3:00 am emergency.

It's worth noting that Massachusetts does have a 24/7 mental health emergency hotline, "Safelink": <https://casamyrna.org/get-support/safelink/>. This is a great example of the types of programs we need more of.

So those are the limitations I walk in with, in my understanding. But this is an exploration of the other side of the issue, where I think I personally need to grow in my understanding, and in keeping with the theological underpinnings of this issue, and where our faith is leading.

So I want to talk about this at two levels, the first is police reform, and the second is police abolition. I think the reasons why we would argue that reform is needed are fairly obvious. And indeed, many police themselves believe in reform efforts. Chief Sallese spoke with me about he worked, along with others, to put in place restorative justice and jail diversion programs in our community, and he's a big believer in them. He spoke to me about how for a while judges couldn't even choose a restorative justice option, and now they can. He also talked about how the use of force policy is an example of where change was needed, and change was made. Chokeholds are no longer allowed,^v and they made that change here locally in Stow before it was required. Another great example in the local area is Ed Denmark, former chief of police, now retired, for Harvard. He did some great work on trying to change the training of

police officers, training early on minimizing conflict. But at the same time, he found that it wasn't easy to make change to such a large and entrenched field as policing in America.^{vi}

And reform is needed. I think most of us here, and even many police, would agree with that. There are many ways we use policing to solve societal problems – or to make what some people see as problems – go away. We use policing in some areas to hide our homelessness problem, by arresting the homeless for doing the things that the homeless do, from loitering to sleeping in public places to public urination. We use policing to solve the problems of drugs, by instead of channeling money into drug rehabilitation programs we arrest the addicts. We use policing to address the problems that the sex industry reveals, which are exploitation of the vulnerable and issues of poverty, by hiding the problem through arresting sex workers. These are areas where reform in our system could address the issues easily in other ways. If we solve homelessness, we no longer need to use policing to arrest the homeless and hide them from our sight. The book *The End to Policing* by Alex Vitale gives a good example of the problems with arresting sex workers, stating:

In 2015, the US Attorney's office in New York raided the offices of Rentboy.com, a website where mostly male sex workers advertised their services. All of the employees were arrested and the business shuttered, despite the absence of a single complaint from anyone using the site. The result was to drive these sex workers into more financially and physical precarious positions. The Rentboy case is especially important because of the vulnerabilities faced by lesbian, gay, transgendered, and other gender-nonconforming or unconventional sex workers. These sex workers are often at risk from clients, police, and predators and are more likely to operate at the margins of the sex trade.^{vii}

And as Ayobami Laniyonu, a sociologist at the University of Toronto says, "it strikes me as more pragmatic to provide a person suffering from a serious mental illness with health care and perhaps a therapist than an armed police officer with little training. Our current model of policing asks police officers to handle situations that they are ill-equipped to handle, don't want to do, and don't do particularly well."^{viii}

So there are easy reforms to see in terms of what types of activities we police, and what things might be handed off to other agencies to address. But there are also issues we can point to about how policing itself is in need of reform. Too often we hear of police who are connected to white supremacy organizations, as highlighted in the 2006 US Department of Intelligence's report "White Supremacist Infiltration of Law Enforcement."^{ix} We know that all too often policing takes on racist and sexist forms.

We've seen the racism highlighted by the Black Lives Matter movement with the deaths of Michael Brown, George Floyd, Tamir Rice, Philando Castille, Brionna Taylor, Eric Garner, and so many others at the hands of law enforcement. And it's not just that policing has a racism

An additional issue not addressed here, but worth diving into, is the increased militarization of the police. A good article on the subject is <https://www.aclu.org/news/civil-liberties/its-past-time-to-end-the-federal-militarization-of-police>.

problem. It also has a domestic violence problem. Alex Roslin, who wrote the book *Police Wife: The Secret Epidemic of Police Domestic Violence*, says:

The major study here was done by a police officer and a sociologist in Tucson, Arizona, working with a collaborator who had studied domestic violence in military families. It wasn't by the police department officially. That study found that 40 percent of cops reported having participated in domestic violence in the previous year. The researchers questioned spouses and officers separately with anonymous questions and came up with strikingly similar figures.

An FBI advisory board later found that roughly 40 percent of officers who filled out questionnaires in a number of different settings admitted to being physically violent with their spouse in the previous six months.^x

These are issues that need to be addressed at the level of recruitment and training.

But the abolish the police movement would go further, and say these are the outward signs of a system that has been steeped in white supremacy and oppression from its inception.^{xi} In *An End to Policing*, Alex Vitale lays out the history of policing and the limits of the idea of reform. Vitale points out the origins of policing. In the North, policing came from the British model, which was created essentially for “managing disorder and protecting the propertied classes from the rabble.”^{xii} Vitale writes, “The London model was imported into Boston in 1838 and spread through the Northern cities over the next few decades... Boston’s economic and political leaders needed a new police force to manage riots and the widespread social disorder associated with the working classes.”^{xiii} Of course, in the South, the story is even worse. Because the truth is that slavery “was another major force that shaped early policing.”^{xiv}

When you think about the Jim Crow South, the fact that policing was used to uphold and enforce systems of power is readily apparent. I think of my colleague’s stories about the marches down in Selma. Here’s the words of Mark Morrison-Reed in his book *Selma Awakening*, describing the experiences of Ira Blalock and Gordon Gibson, two UU ministers:

The following Monday, when the black citizens of Selma once again marched to the courthouse to register, both Blalock and Gibson joined them. Standing atop the courthouse steps, Sheriff Clark jammed his billy club into the belly of King’s aide, James Bevel, pushing him down the stairs. The protestors were surrounded and arrested by “deputized hooligans” wielding cattle prods and billy clubs. That day fifty people were taken into custody, but it was the incarceration of two white UU ministers and a white Catholic lay theologian that made headlines.^{xv}

I've heard the stories of my colleagues standing nose-to-nose with a line of policemen, the threats of violence palpable, as they fought for civil rights. Organizer Mariame Kaba puts it bluntly, "So when you see a police officer pressing his knee into a black man's neck until he dies, that's the logical result of policing in America. When a police officer brutalizes a black person, he is doing what he sees as his job."^{xvi} To my white ears, that may sound harsh, and I recoil against it, but I also need to remember that it's a lived truth for people of color. It's important to remember that this institution, this system of the police that we have in America, it was created to uphold the establishment, and the establishment in the South was slavery, and in the North was a capitalism that used policing for union-busting and worker control. And as such, the abolish the police movement's perspective is that this is a system rooted in oppression, and fundamentally flawed. Christy Lopez, law professor at Georgetown says, succinctly, "For me, the language of abolition is important because it reminds us that there are facets of policing that reflect and perpetuate America's longstanding use of state-sanctioned coercion, including violence, to control the bodies of black people."^{xvii} Advocates for abolition argue that reform has proven ineffective, time and time again, as well.

I don't disagree. And yet, I'm not sure that abolishing and replacing all the functions of policing that we do need is feasible, and I'm not sure that what we would replace it with wouldn't come out looking the same. But it's clear to me that whether or not I hold that vision, that there is important work to be done. Some of it can be done from within, with the help of the good folks who we've named here – police leaders with the vision for justice and the vision for change. Some of it will need to be done by making legislative reforms, pushed for by the people. And ultimately, it may require an overturn of the entire system. I'm not sure where the work ends. But to that point, I don't think I need to know. I don't have to know the end to know we're at the beginning, and there is work to be done.

In the end, I look back to the UUA's final bullet point among those I read, "Rooting ourselves in theologies of liberation and abolition." And I think back to my understanding of the world "abolition." Sure, it literally means just the action of abolishing something, or the movement to abolish something. But we use this word for slavery, and we mean ending an unjust system of oppression. So when I hear "abolish the police," I can also hear, "We are working to overturn an unjust system rooted in oppression, in regards to policing." It's hard to really disagree with that for me. I think we need some sort of system to deal with the most violent crimes, particularly repeat ones, but I also think we need to end unjust systems rooted in oppression. And I may not see the way forward to do both myself clearly, but there are people working on this who do, and my lack of vision shouldn't stand in the way of progress. And that progress forward begins with building up the systems that can ultimately replace policing – we start by building the systems for dealing with mental health, drug use, sex trafficking, homelessness, poverty, domestic violence, and more. We begin by changing our understanding of security and safety into a safety net. We begin by building the world we want to see replace the police, and then policing becomes less and less necessary. We all want that world, I believe, a world with less violence and crime, (the police want this, too) with greater safety and security for all, and rooted not in oppression but in liberation. We all want to see us building a new way. Let us begin.

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- ⁱ “Amen to Uprising” 2020 Action of Immediate Witness, Unitarian Universalist Association, https://www.uua.org/files/pdf/2/20200625_aiw_amen_uprising.pdf.
- ⁱⁱ Two good articles that address the vision for policing alternatives are: “Alternatives to Police Services: Let’s Re-Imagine a New System,” *Defundthepolice.org*, <https://defundthepolice.org/alternatives-to-police-services/>, and “May Cities are Rethinking the Police, but What Are the Alternatives,” Rice/Kinder Institute for Urban Research, 22 July 2020, <https://kinder.rice.edu/urbanedge/2020/07/22/many-cities-are-rethinking-police-what-are-alternatives>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Andrew R. Klein and Kristina Rose, “Practical Implications of Current Domestic Violence Research: For Law Enforcement, Prosecutors and Judges,” (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, June 2009), <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/225722.pdf> Section 2.10, p. 11.
- ^{iv} For more on the incident, see “Investigative Review of Aug. 12, 2021 Petito-Laundrie Incident in Moab,” (Moab, Utah) <https://moabcity.org/595/Investigative-Review-of-Aug-12-2021-Peti>. Full videos of the encounter with police are also available online.
- ^v For more information, see “Use of Force,” *Stow Police Department* (12 December 2021), https://www.stow-ma.gov/sites/g/files/vyhlif1286/f/uploads/1.01_use_of_force_update_feb_2021.pdf
- ^{vi} Dugan Arnett, “The Suburban Police Chief Who’s Trying to Change Policing,” *The Boston Globe* (6 February 2021), https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/02/06/metro/suburban-police-chief-whos-trying-change-policing/?fbclid=IwAR0I0-Qy3AZBmVluAPeCWjRatluAu_XO8iR9EOPFFPvIcpA0VEJ8pDVt3s
- ^{vii} Alex S. Vitale, *The End to Policing* (London: Verso, 2018), p.111
- ^{viii} Ayobami Laniyonu qtd in Sean Illing, “The ‘Abolish the Police’ Movement, Explained by Scholars and Activists,” *Vox.com* (June 12 2020), <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/6/12/21283813/george-floyd-blm-abolish-the-police-8cantwait-minneapolis>.
- ^{ix} “White Supremacist Infiltration of Law Enforcement,” *Federal Bureau of Investigation Intelligence Assessment* (FBI Counterterrorism Division, 17 October 2006), <http://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/402521/doc-26-white-supremacist-infiltration.pdf>.
- ^x Andrew Burmon, “Police and Violence at Home: Cops Abuse Wives and Kids at Staggering Rates,” *Fatherly* (14 December 2021), <https://www.fatherly.com/love-money/police-brutality-and-domestic-violence/?fbclid=IwAR264OctUv6agxEUoXY6ePDZmO2igfe33htAFFLv2TejftKsMZgLXQzWKq8>.
- ^{xi} Useful sources on the Police Abolition movement include “8 to Abolition” <https://www.8toabolition.com/> and Critical Resistance <http://criticalresistance.org/abolish-policing/>, and for an overview of the subject, The Marshall Project <https://www.themarshallproject.org/records/3382-police-abolition>.
- ^{xii} Vitale, p. 34.
- ^{xiii} Vitale, p. 36.
- ^{xiv} Vitale, p. 45.

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- ^{xv} Mark Morrison-Reed, *The Selma Awakening: How the Civil Rights Movement Tested and Changed Unitarian Universalism* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2014), Kindle Location 1924.
- ^{xvi} Mariame Kaba, “Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police: Because Reform Won’t Happen,” *The New York Times* (12 June 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/opinion/sunday/floyd-abolish-defund-police.html>
- ^{xvii} Christy Lopez qtd in Sean Illing, “The ‘Abolish the Police’ Movement, Explained by Scholars and Activists,” *Vox.com* (June 12 2020), <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/6/12/21283813/george-floyd-blm-abolish-the-police-8cantwait-minneapolis>.