

Rethinking police reform: From defunding to promoting sustainability

December 10 2021, by Angela Workman-Stark



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[Derek Chauvin was convicted of the murder of George Floyd](#) on June 25, 2021. Since then, calls for police reform haven't been as loud.

One explanation might be attributed to the language of "[defund the police](#)." This slogan [has been polarizing](#), alienating police and other stakeholders from crucial conversations about change.

The never-ending pandemic and an increased focus on climate change may also have helped stall talks; however, the issues that led to the many calls for change have not gone away, nor are they new.

Calls for reform

Since the 1980s—and throughout my 24 years of policing experience—recruitment of diverse officers and diversity training have been consistently identified as key to improving police-minority relations.

For instance, in 1989, the [Royal Commission on the Donald Marshall, Jr. Prosecution](#) (an Indigenous man who was wrongly convicted), recommended the police establish recruitment targets to reflect the general population, develop policies on racial stereotyping and deliver cultural sensitivity training to their members.

Recently, a [House of Commons committee](#) also recommended enhanced training and diversity hiring as part of a response to reports of systemic racism in policing.

Similarly, President Barack Obama's 2015 [Task Force on 21st Century Policing](#) called for the creation of a diverse law enforcement workforce to improve understanding and effectiveness in working with communities, along with the adoption of a police culture of accountability and transparency and efforts to proactively promote [public trust](#) through non-enforcement engagement activities.

While a [seemingly impenetrable police culture](#) has been consistently

cited as a barrier to reform, from my related academic research, I propose that an equally problematic issue is the continued reliance on outdated indicators of police performance. In short, these indicators reinforce conventional ideas of police sustainability rather than align with the concerns of "defund the police" advocates.

Sustainability now

Traditionally, police sustainability has been associated with police effectiveness and demonstrations of value, which have often been linked to [crime stats, crime clearance rates and arrests](#).

Unfortunately, these metrics provide no information about the experiences of Black, Indigenous and other racialized people. They also fail to provide information on [public perceptions](#) of fair and equitable treatment by police.

Internally, limited attention has been paid to assessing the experiences of women and racialized officers. Therefore, it is no surprise that their [representation within the police](#) is lower than in the general population.

Women and racialized officers are also continually subjected to [discrimination](#) and [harassment](#) within their own departments.

Additional problems with traditional indicators of success were highlighted in a session on [policing and public safety](#) at the Harvard Kennedy School. A summary report from this session noted that: "Just as we measure internal organizational success by employee adherence to rules, we measure external operational success through crime rates and arrest statistics. We do both to the detriment of building trust and legitimacy, because they ignore what the research tells us and what the public and the rank and file tell us. Both the public and rank-and-file officers want to be treated fairly by those in authority. We should not be

surprised that we end up with poor morale among our officers echoed by the lack of trust from the community."

Studies show a promising link between fair treatment and several [positive outcomes](#), including [increased openness of officers to change](#), [improved attitudes about community policing](#) and increased support for more [democratic forms of policing](#).

My own research also suggests that treating officers fairly and with dignity and respect may [counter harmful aspects of police culture](#).

Clearly, it's time to rethink how we approach police reform as well as how we define and assess police sustainability.

Redefining police sustainability

In the book, [*Policing for Sustainable Development Goals*](#), the authors advocate for a more human-rights oriented style of policing that focuses on: protecting the vulnerable, working within the rule of law and being representative of a transparent, effective and accountable public organization.

Consistent with the [UN sustainable development goals](#), police sustainability should also be concerned with providing a safe and secure workplace.

Repositioning police sustainability as creating public value while also ensuring a positive societal impact means paying attention to policies and practices that promote a safe and healthy working environment on top of police actions that benefit communities.

Under this new interpretation of sustainability, indicators of success pertain to both the internal and external environments. Internally, these

indicators include positive assessments of interactions that may also act as early warnings of possible misconduct.

Externally, a key outcome of police sustainability is [enhanced legitimacy](#), which can be measured through citizen perceptions that the police act lawfully, treat community members fairly and with respect and keep them safe.

Rethinking what we mean by police sustainability, how we measure it and how we hold the police accountable for outcomes, may create the opening for a more viable path to reform.

Such actions call for examining [police](#) reform through the lens of [sustainability](#) rather than "defunding." In the end, we may just achieve the same goal of meaningful change without alienating key stakeholders in the process.

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