Transcript

Upstream Podcast
Ep 11: Abolish the Police

Featured Guests:

Cat Brooks – Co-founder of the Anti Police-Terror Project in Oakland, Executive Director of the Justice Teams Network, and co-host of Upfront on KPFA
Alex Vitale – Professor of sociology, coordinator of the Policing and Social Justice Project at Brooklyn College, and author of The End of Policing published by Verso Books
Kay Gabriel – Teacher and organizer with the #DefundNYPD campaign
D'atra Jackson – National director of BYP 100
John – Part of the Working Class History Project
Sen. Sydney Kamlager – State Senator for California's 30th Senate District

Della Duncan: This episode of Upstream was made possible with support by Sustainable Economies Law Center — a worker self-directed non-profit that cultivates a new legal landscape by supporting community resilience and grassroots economic empowerment. This September, the Law Center is hosting Coopaloza, a week of workshops, debates, policy discussions, and more. Coopaloza will connect the dots between worker control, immigrant justice, and economic democracy." To find out more about Coopaloza, please visit theselc.org.

[Upstream Theme Music - Lanterns]

[River sounds]

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Della Duncan: A podcast of documentaries and conversations that invites you to unlearn everything you thought you knew about economics. I'm Della Duncan.

Robert Raymond: And I'm Robert Raymond.

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Men's and Women's voices: To the heart of our economic system and discover cutting edge stories of game-changing solutions based on connection, resilience, and prosperity for all.

[Music: Godspeed You! Black Emperor – Static]

[News Montage]

News Anchor: Violence in America. President Biden...

News Anchor: A new issue has pushed its way onto President Biden's agenda tonight. The current rise in violent crime...

News Anchor: The surge in violent crime that's sweeping the nation...

News Anchor: Well now the White House is preparing for yet another summer spike in violence. And so the President laid out his strategy to keep cops on the beat...

News Anchor: The President is urging hard-hit communities to use COVID relief money to help local law enforcement efforts…

News Anchor: Now this is a president who, during the course of the 2020 campaign, went against the grain of his party in opposing the "Defund the Police" movement…

President Biden: I totally oppose defunding the police officers...

President Biden: I'm the only one who's talked about increasing police budgets…

[Fade out music]

Crowd Chanting: Hands up! Don't Shoot!

[Music: Collections of Colonies of Bees — Ruins]

Della Duncan: It kind of feels like the 90s again, doesn't it?

Local and national news networks airing story after story on rising crime rates, policymakers promising tough on crime policies, Joe Biden stirring up hysteria reminiscent of the alarmism which led to his notorious 1994 Crime Bill…

Oh, but this time it's gonna be different, they say. Yes, we're putting more cops on your streets, but this time they'll be deployed in a *responsible* way, none of that overly punitive, police brutality stuff, no racist or classist profiling...just good, decent police officers ensuring the safety of all. What's wrong with that, right?

Funny to think the rhetoric around this most recent surge in crime just happens to be coming after one of the largest sustained uprisings in recent American history — an uprising which brought thousands of people onto the streets in cities and towns all across the country, chanting "Black Lives Matter," and demanding not just police *reform*, but in most cases, the defunding of, and the outright *abolition,* of policing altogether. We're sure this is just a coincidence, though, right? Definitely not some kind of *manufacturing of consent*, or anything like that…

Della Duncan: Don't read too much into it...Or maybe we should. Because the backlash against 2020's summer uprising is real. And it's coming from both sides of the aisle — not to mention the entire media establishment.

In New York, Atlanta and Seattle, for example, Democratic city politicians have abandoned or scaled back police budget-cutting efforts and other proposals they gave lip service to during the summer of 2020. New York pivoted from slashing almost $1 billion in police funds last year to adding $200 million this year. Oakland, California, boosted its police budget in June by $38 million after setting a goal to cut it by $150 million last year. Austin, Texas, this year passed its largest-ever police budget under pressure from state Republicans over rising crime. In Atlanta, talk of reinventing the police department has quieted, and the council added 7%, or about $15 million, to this year's police budget.

In D.C., things aren't any different. Sen. Tommy Tuberville, a Republican from Alabama, introduced an amendment in the recent $3.5 trillion budget to punish "woke" cities that "*cancel* the police department" in an attempt to provoke Democrats over "the dangerous rhetoric and policies of the defund the police movement," despite the fact that the Democratic party largely doesn't support defunding the police. In fact, Democrats recently rallied around a nonbinding amendment proposed by Sen. Josh Hawley, a Republican from Missouri, which called to hire 100,000 new police officers around the country.

Biden even doubled the 2022 budget going towards the C - O - P - S, or COPS, grant program, which provides funding to state and local governments to hire and rehire police officers, inflating the size of police departments throughout the country.

So yeah, there might be a little bit of an establishment backlash happening. But what does more cops on our streets actually mean? Does more police and more police funding actually lead to safer communities? How about reforms — do they actually lead to *better* policing? What's happening with the defund or abolish movement, which seemed so unstoppable just a year ago?

In this episode, we'll not only examine these questions, but we'll go further and ask, what is the history and function of policing? How is it inextricably intertwined with racism and capitalism? Whose interests do the police *really* serve? Is it even possible to reform this institution? And if not, what should take its place? And How can we bring about safer and better resourced communities — for everyone?

[Fade out music: Collections of Colonies of Bees – Ruins]

Della Duncan: The events in the Summer of 2020, sparked by the cold-blooded murder of George Floyd by former Minneapolis Police officer Derek Chauvin, catapulted an important question into the public imaginary: is modern day policing...reformable? Or do we need to move beyond it entirely?

Most of the thousands of people who poured out into the streets last summer understood that the murder of George Floyd was not just an isolated incident — not just the actions of a single *bad apple*. They understood that the entire institution of policing was responsible, that despite the years of reform, police continue to kill about a thousand people every year, they continue to terrorize Black, Brown, and poor communities, and they do what they do, for the most part, with zero accountability. For the first time since this institution was actually created — and we'll get

into that history in a bit — people, in very large numbers, were saying, “No. We’re done with reform. It’s not a few bad apples — the entire barrel is rotten.”

Cat Brooks: When you look at the millions of dollars we've wasted on reform, the millions of dollars in training, the millions of dollars in technology, the millions, right? And rewriting policy — none of that shit has worked. We've done it, right? We've done all of those things.

Della Duncan: Cat Brooks is the co-founder of the Anti Police-Terror Project in Oakland, California — a Black-led, multi-racial, intergenerational coalition that seeks to build a replicable and sustainable model to eradicate police terror in communities of color.

Cat Brooks: We've rewritten use of force policies, we've made people learn about the history of racism in this country, we've spent money to train Black and Brown people inside of communities to take law enforcement jobs, we've done work around gender — not "we," but I mean, like all of those things that those are all things that we paid for. It's not like law enforcement hasn't been given opportunity after opportunity to get its shit together, right? It either doesn't want to or it can't.

Della Duncan: It’s probably a bit of both — and it’s a pretty well-documented pattern. Remember, for example, when body cameras were first introduced in the early 2000s? They were heralded as a game-changer for police transparency and accountability. Turned out that cops could, and often do, simply just turn them off. Not to mention that the video footage from the cameras that were kept running was the property of the police departments themselves, lacking any independent oversight. Oh, and even when horrendous acts of violence and outright killings by police were caught on body, security, phone, or dash cams — there was still no accountability. No indictments, no justice, nothing. Laquan Macdonald, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Philando Castile...you know the history.

Alex Vitali After the police killings of Mike Brown and Eric Garner and Tamir Rice and so many others in the period around six, seven years ago, we were told, don't worry, we're going to fix the police, we're going to reform them.

Della Duncan: Alex Vitale is a professor of sociology and co-ordinator of the Policing and Social Justice Project at Brooklyn College. He’s also the author of *The End of Policing*, published by Verso Books.

Alex Vitali: President Obama created a task force on 21st century policing that laid out a whole list of what we often think of as procedural reforms to policing, things like training and oversight mechanisms, changes to policies. And a number of cities have embraced some of these reforms, implicit bias training, body cameras, de-escalation training, etc. And unfortunately, it doesn't seem to have made much of a difference.

The officers, for instance, involved in the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis had had implicit bias training, de-escalation training, mindfulness training, were wearing body cameras, were operating under a whole set of new policies around use of force and accountability. And none of it seemed to make any difference. And my view is that if we want to reduce the harms of policing, we need to quit naively imagining that we can change the nature of policing with a few training regimes and instead ask why we're using police to address every social problem under the sun, especially those in poor non-white communities.

One of the most sort of ridiculous reforms that's been touted and is included in the House of Representatives police reform bill is this idea of implicit bias training. This idea that the racially disparate impacts of policing are the result of unconscious, unintentional bias that can be eliminated with a few hours of lectures about the history of racism. And the research shows that this is — just it doesn't work, and part of the reason that it doesn't work is, well, first of all, we have a problem of explicit racism in American policing. When we look for it, we find it. The chat boards, the Facebook pages, the official statements of police union leaders too often are rooted in racist discourses. We know that many police officers have been sympathetic to rightwing racists and nationalist movements participating in the capital assault in January. So the FBI has numerous investigations of white supremacists actively infiltrating local law enforcement. So this idea that we can fix these racial problems with a couple of hours of training just doesn't make any sense in the face of that.

But in addition, we've got a problem of structural racism at a couple of different levels. A lot of police departments, a majority of officers now are non-white, a lot of big city police chiefs are not white — but the racial elements of this are deeply embedded in the institution. These institutions have been central actors in the production of racial inequality — and they see the world through a racialized lens too often. But maybe even more importantly is the decision by elected officials to turn the problems of Black and Brown communities into problems of crime, to be resolved by policing and mass incarceration, and that can't help but produce racially disparate outcomes.

Kay Gabriel: Many of the commonly proposed reforms to policing have variously been experimented with and in some cases been implemented — and they do not work.

Della Duncan: Kay Gabriel is a writer and teacher. She's also an organizer with the Defund N.Y.P.D. campaign, run through the New York City chapter of DSA.

Kay Gabriel: We can see that they don't work because the numbers of people who the police murder, since these reforms begin to be implemented in 2014 and 2015, following the murders of Mike Brown and Eric Garner and Sandra Bland, the death in police custody of Sandra Bland, I should say, following the situation, these reforms begin to be implemented, and police still kill a thousand people every year, right? So, all of the data is showing us that these reforms, these reformist reforms do not answer or solve the problem of police violence because police exist to be violent, they exist to be violent because they are defending the interests of capital, they are going to commit egregious acts of racist violence whether or not it ends up in the news. That's the function of policing, that is the pattern that they themselves are locked into. That's why the problem is not individual police officers, and it's also why you can't train away the problem of police violence — because the problem is policing and policing as a relationship.

[Music: Chris Zabriski – Is That You or Are You You]

Della Duncan: To better understand modern policing both relationally and as an institution, and to really get why the *entire* barrel is rotten, it might help to take a step back, *in time*, and explore policing's rather disturbing origin story.

Alex Vitale: So modern policing as we think of it conventionally has only been around about 200 years. Early police forces were created in direct relationship to the three primary mechanisms of producing economic inequality in the modern world. We see them emerge in

relationship to the management of slavery, colonialism, and mass industrialization. So we often hear that the first modern police force was the London Metropolitan Police, created in 1829 by Sir Robert Peel, Robert, Bobb, the Bobbies. And the argument is this was an innovation to create something that was professional, law enforcement-oriented, civilian — and that they would attempt to solve problems by evoking the righteousness of the law, a kind of policing by consent.

But what is rarely talked about in the standard discussion of this is where Sir Robert Peel got the idea for this from. Well, he had been in charge of the English occupation of Ireland — a colonial project. And he needed a mechanism to more efficiently and effectively suppress agricultural uprisings than just relying on the British military, which at the time was tied up with Napoleon. And so he developed the Irish Peace Preservation Force, which he then further adjusts into what becomes the Metropolitan Police, not to manage colonialism, but to manage the massive influx of rural agricultural workers streaming into London from the British countryside as a result of the enclosures movement — the privatization of collective lands.

In the US, we can see a similar approach happening in the creation of early forces in places like New York and Boston and Chicago, where police are produced to manage the influx of agricultural workers from Europe and to mold them into a stable working class by suppressing labor uprisings, suppressing disorderly behavior, working class pleasures, etc. In the American South, I argue actually, that the first police department that fits the definition of a modern police department is the Charleston City Watch and Guard created in the late 1780s. And I think the reason they're not pointed to as the first police force is that the law that they were enforcing was the law of slavery.

Charleston, like many of the big cities of the South, Savannah, New Orleans, etc., involved having slaves work outside the home of their owners. So they're moving about the city, working on wharves and warehouses and in other settings. And so this means there's a massive mobile slave population that generally even outnumbers the local white population. And so the Charleston City Watch and Guard is created to manage that mobile slave population to prevent slave uprisings, disorderly behavior, also to make sure that slaves weren't forming reading groups or trading goods in an underground economy, etc.

Out west in the U.S., policing is much more rooted in colonialism. The Texas Rangers and groups like that were created primarily to facilitate white settlement by driving out and exterminating Indigenous populations, driving out long standing Mexican landowners. And so when we understand this as the early origins of policing, we can see how today policing is rooted in this production of inequality through the micromanagement of those who've been on the losing end of a set of economic relationships — homeless folks, folks with untreated mental health and substance abuse problems, unemployed folks who turn to black market activity, drugs and sex work, and stolen goods. And that's really how police spend their time is primarily the management of these populations.

[Music: Chris Zabriski – Divider]

Della Duncan: Living in a modern day police-state makes it a little difficult to imagine a world without cops. But, as Alex just mentioned, police have only really been around for a couple hundred years. And just like many other aspects of modern capitalism, like wage-labor or private property, we take policing kind of, well, for granted. But this wasn’t always the case.

John: I think policing is one of those institutions, like many things in our lives now, at the beginning, they were fiercely contested, fiercely resisted, and they were only imposed by massive, overwhelming violence controlled by an elite.

Della Duncan: This is John, who's part of Working Class History — an online people's history project that includes a daily calendar of working class historical events, as well as a podcast.

John: But nowadays, a couple of hundred years later or one hundred years, depending on whereabouts in the world we are, they seem completely natural and like things have always been this way and couldn't be any different. And it's hard to imagine anything different.

Della Duncan: To illustrate just how aberrant and amiss policing was when it was first shoe-horned into communities, we asked John to tell us a story from the Working Class History archives — a story about how much people hated the police.

John: They were extremely unpopular because people knew what they were there for and it wasn't as many people see them today as being to help people or protect people. It was to police and control working class people. And so they were especially unpopular in working class areas of London. So this manifested itself in lots of ways. For example, in working class areas of London, a popular children's game was just to hide in doorways, wait for a police officer to walk past and then throw a brick or a stone at him. And it also manifested itself in the nicknames which the police were given. So people would routinely mock them in the street. And they were called things like Blue Devils, Raw Lobsters, along with more, let's say, derogatory nicknames like The Filth, which emerged later on.

So this also manifested itself quite early on in more striking ways later. So, for example, the following year in 1830, so the year after the MET police was founded, a man called Joseph Grantham became the first police officer of the MET Police to be killed in the line of duty. What happened was he intervened in a fight between two drunk men in Summers Town, in north London, and he was then kicked to death. Now, that death was then deemed to be justifiable homicide. And at the inquest investigating the death, the jury designated his killing as a justifiable homicide, and they said that Grantham himself was actually responsible for his own death due to, quote, overexertion in the discharge of his duty. So essentially that he shouldn't have been there at all, he shouldn't have done what he did.

John: That really shows how the police were perceived when they were started, because I'm sure if that happened nowadays in most places in London or in the United States, if some drunk guys kicked a cop to death, they would very much be going to prison or worse for a very long time. But inquests were governed by juries of peers, so this is how the police were perceived at that time.

There's another similar example which came less than a year after that, on the 15th of May in 1831. So here there was a demonstration in London of a group called the National Union of the Working Classes. So this was amidst a powerful wave of working class self-organization, so people fighting for better pay and conditions and also fighting for universal male suffrage. Up to 3,000 police officers violently attacked this protest. But many members of the National Union of the Working Classes, they weren't pacifists, they were militant and they were prepared to defend themselves from the police — and defend themselves they did.

And so after the police attacked, three of the officers got stabbed and one of them was killed. So one of the police officers that was stabbed, Police Constable Culley, he died from his injuries. He managed to run to a nearby pub, but then he died. And a participant in the demonstration at George Fursey, he was arrested on a charge of murdering PC Culley and also wounding a PC Brooks. But he was acquitted of both offenses. And then there was also an inquest on the death of PC Culley. This inquest was overseen by a jury of 17 men — 17 local men, mostly workers from the area in north London. And at the inquest, the coroner called on the men to return a verdict of murder and the jury deliberated, but then they responded that they couldn't do that and instead they wanted to condemn the police in their verdict. But this is what the jury sent back as their verdict, they said, "We find a verdict of justifiable homicide," and they condemned the "disgraceful" behavior of the police in the verdict. So, after this, the coroner then locked the jury in the jury room to try to get them to change their minds and deliver a different jury. But despite being locked in the room, the jury were very clear, they refused to change the verdict — and that it would be justifiable homicide, so. Yeah. That's pretty much the end of that.

And I think that's why history is so important, because looking at history, you can see, well, what is actually something that is a more natural state of things, what are things which are consistent throughout all of human society, but these things other things, like the police and wage labor, they are very new inventions. And so, yeah, that is important. And yes, the perception has changed, especially over the past year and a half in the wake of predominantly Black-led protests against police violence and white-supremacist violence, has significantly shifted public opinion, again, for many people.

John And I think you can also see this in cultural ways as well, with the kind of resurgence of the acronym ACAB, A - C - A - B, All Coppers Are Bastards. This was a kind of phrase that emerged almost certainly out of working class counterculture in London, where it was first recorded in the 1920s in a song. And the song just went, “Here's a song, it's not very long, All Coppers are Bastards.”

[ACAB song]

So it's a short song, but those kind of four letters, A - C - A - B, now from being something that was relatively obscure or just kind of circulating in bits of working class subculture in Britain, for example, on being scrawled on the walls of prisons and things like that, you know, you can now see those letters spray painted on walls around the world, from Baltimore to Cairo to Myanmar, which I think is a testament to the existence of working class counterculture, which has always been around, sometimes under the surface and sometimes bubbling to the top.

[Music: 4-Skins – ACAB]

Cat Brooks The job of police have always been to defend the status quo and to do that by any means necessary. And the controlling surveillance, incarceration or sometimes elimination of Black bodies, they're still doing their job.

Della Duncan: Here’s Cat Brooks again.

Cat Brooks: They're still protectors of property, protectors of economic system. And they are the front line soldiers for the larger beast of U.S. imperialism, white-supremacist practice and policy. And that's why reform won't work, right, because those are its roots. Those are the roots it has desperately clung onto and that have served America — not Black America or Brown America, Indigenous America, but American institutions for four hundred years. The basic premise is one of violence and punishment. And that's not how you get to healthy communities.

[Music: Tristeza – Balabaristas]

Kay Gabriel: So the best way I think that we can think about policing is that police exist as the kind of, let's say, municipal army of capital. They protect property and they protect property relations.

Della Duncan: Here's Kay Gabriel again.

Kay Gabriel: You can sort of you can look at this historically and you can see the true thing that people will often say, which is that in the south, police forces developed out of slave patrols. In the north, they developed out of strikebreakers, right, to crush the labor movement. In both cases — and when these things kind of like fused together, right — in both cases, what police are doing is they are protecting property and they're protecting property relations.

So what does that mean concretely? That means the criminalization of poverty. That means broken windows policing. That means hostile architecture. So you have benches that you can't sleep on. It means that you criminalize drug use. You have all these kind of like quality of life ordinances that give police all kinds of power to act punitively towards people simply for like being present. These are all parts of a shared program of remaking public space to serve the interests of people who already have a lot of resources, even as more people find themselves with fewer and fewer resources. So this is what I mean by policing, is an ongoing form of class war.

And then when you look at situations that, like the murder of George Floyd, like many high profile, scandalous murders by police of civilians, these situations often arise out of the increasing punitiveness of the state, which has, you know, sort of further pushed people into desperate situations, further empowered police to exercise violence, and which, once again, produces and reproduces forms of racial dispossession in a bunch of different ways that inevitably lead to the disproportionate murders of Black people.

[Music: Do Make Say Think – The Landlord Is Dead]

Della Duncan: George Floyd was murdered by police for allegedly using a counterfeit $20 bill to buy cigarettes — this isn't just the *criminalization* of poverty. It's turning poverty into a death sentence.

One way to understand the role or intention of policing in modern society is to simply look at under which circumstances police are deployed — and importantly, which circumstances are they *not*.

Let's take something simple, like shoplifting. Say you're caught lifting something from a store. Most likely, the police will be called, and you'll begin a whole process that could not only land you in jail — but much worse. Take for example, the case of Kalief Browder, a 16-year-old Black kid from The Bronx who was arrested and subsequently held at the Rikers Island jail complex, without trial, from 2010 to 2013, for allegedly stealing a backpack. During his imprisonment, Browder was in solitary confinement for *two years*. And two years after his eventual release, after all charges had been dropped, Browder hanged himself at his parents' home. All this — just for allegedly stealing a backpack.

Now let's take a look at another form of theft, this time — wage theft. Wage theft is the withholding of wages or employee benefits rightfully owed to an employee. It can be conducted by employers in various ways, among them failing to pay overtime, violating minimum-wage laws, the misclassification of employees as independent contractors, illegal deductions in pay, forcing employees to work "off the clock", not paying annual leave or holiday entitlements, or simply not paying an employee at all. Wage theft accounts for approximately three times more money than all other property crimes *combined*.

If you're an employer who's accused of wage theft, you're not detained and thrown into Rikers for several years until things are sorted out. *If*, and that's a big if, an employee files a claim, it'll likely go through the U.S. Labor Department bureaucracy, and could take months to process. And if you're found guilty? You'll have to simply pay back the wages, maybe a fine. Some states are moving towards including prison-time as a penalty, but this is the exception.

Quite a difference between these two cases, right?

Kay Gabriel: What we have to recognize is that policing and incarceration are forms of class war, they are visited upon the working class in all kinds of ways and all kinds of forms. And the casualties of this class war include the absolutely unjustifiable murders of Black and Brown people and of working class people by police, but are not limited to those murders.

When we look at the relations that are produced by the hyper incarceration and massive expansion of policing, and when we say class war, what we mean is we are talking about human life, right? We're talking about lives on a scale of millions who are subject to this every day. And if we are going to achieve a world in which that is no longer true, then we have to recognize what the situation is. And we have to confront it at the scale that it requires and not through a series of paltry reforms.

Della Duncan: Okay, okay. Sure. There are many problems with the police, you might say — admittedly, even *structural* problems. But how else are we supposed to maintain *law and order*? How else are we supposed to keep our communities safe from "criminal" activity? That's a great question, to understand the answer, we first need to take a deep dive into the conditions of neoliberalism, of capitalism — of our entire economic system.

Cat Brooks: One of the co-founders of the Anti Police-Terror Project talks about primary and secondary predators, right? And the primary predator is, of course, race-based capitalism, white-supremacy, the foundations of this country. And because of the disparate and desperate

conditions that it creates it then creates secondary predators, right? Folks that are trying to survive in impossible conditions. So from my perspective, the number one driving force behind so-called crime-rate is survival. And so I say a lot that if people cannot survive in the above ground economy, they will make a living in the underground economy, as many of us would, right? A lot of us take for granted that we could wake up, go to work, put a roof over our head, put clothes on our body, food in our mouths, not worry if there's gonna be food. Folks gotta eat, right? And the ability to do that, the ability to meet basic needs in BIPOC communities is made intentionally difficult by the state.

That then leads to what I believe is a secondary driver of crime, and that is the mental and emotional stressors of poverty that create trauma and people that are damaged. And I don't mean to be cliché or coy, but hurt people hurt people. Right? I just wrote an article for the San Francisco Chronicle because one of the things that happens we know in violent surges is because it often is centered on young people, is the criminalization of our young people. And the question that I posed in the article is how — where do we hold responsibility? If we tell this Black boy from the time that he's born that his life don't mean shit and he ain't shit and that actually we expect him never to be shit? How surprised are we then when he can pick up a gun and point it at someone who looks just like him and pull the trigger? That is a reflection on what we have taught that child about what he's worth and what he can expect his life to look like.

So economic and emotional, I guess, if I had to be pithy about it, is what I would say are the two main drivers. And you can't police your way out of either of those things. You can't incarcerate your way out of poverty. You cannot incarcerate your way out of a mental health crisis — though we try. I mean, the vast majority of people that are languishing in American concentration camps, a.k.a. jails and prisons, are there because they suffered some sort of mental health crisis. So that has been actually our answer as a country. But you can't police your way out of those things.

Alex Vitale: Ultimately, I think the biggest impediment is actually a whole host of more or less liberal politicians who have decided that all they can do in the face of global competition, is to turn the economy over to a handful of extremely wealthy economic actors — multinational corporations, big banks, etc. And in the process they hope that those entities will become so successful that some of their wealth will trickle down to the rest of us. And so they defunded essential services, they cut salaries, they've implemented austerity in order to pay subsidies and give tax breaks to these elite economic actors. And the result has not been broad prosperity — it's been growing inequality. The creation of a class of billionaires, and then a massive group of people who've become largely disconnected from the formal economy, who have substance abuse and mental health problems that are unaddressed, who turn to property crime, and drugs, and other things for survival. And then these elected officials, rather than going back and addressing these core economic issues, have turned those problems over to police to manage, never really to solve, but to just put a lid on. And that is producing this incredible outsized role for police. And these elected officials don't want to reduce the scope of policing in any way, because then this will beg the question of what's producing these social problems in the first place. It would be taking away the tool that they've used to facilitate their downtown real estate deals and their economic subsidies for elite actors.

Kay Gabriel: When we look at prisons and policing and we think about social function that they fulfill, we are trying to answer a bunch of questions about the structure of society in general. Why is it the case that the U.S., which has a 20th of the world's population, has a quarter of the world's incarcerated population? So that thing happened in the kind of turn towards the series of cataclysms that we politely call neoliberalism. That's sort of a nice way to describe the war on

poor people globally that began to take place in the late 70s and the early 80s. But it's also not the case that every country, even every highly developed country, sort of follow the same path as the US. in terms of this massive turn towards the intense use of state violence to contain and control working class populations. So, if we are people [with a great degree of principle who look at the world and look at our society and think: this is not a way to live — we do not have to live this way, and these kinds of patterns whereby people are policed and controlled and subjected to violence and forced to live in cages en masse for years or decades of their lives in ways that produce and reproduce racial dispossession. We do not have to live this way.

When we say that, we also are looking at the society that has produced this as a provisional solution to actual problems of crisis. So then we have to ask, what are those real problems of crisis? And then we sort of see — I mean, it's kind of particularly true in the U.S., right, which is, you know, the wealthiest state in human history, and one of the most unequal right, and we see the real problems, therefore, are that people are deprived en masse of things that they need to survive, are forced to live without housing or in horrible housing without healthcare or with inadequate healthcare, are compelled to deal with the building effects of climate crisis. And so the answer, when we say abolition, right, when we say that our aim is abolition, what we mean is that in order to address these problems, we both have to stop the force of prisons and policing and other forms organized state violence, right, and we have to redirect those energies, and resources, and social structures, and practices, and distributions of resources — that sustain everyone's ability to live and live well.

[Music: Chris Zabriskie]

D'atra Jackson: My name is D'atra Jackson, but most people call me Dee Dee.

Della Duncan: Dee Dee is the National Director of BYP100, or the Black Youth Project, a national, member-based organization of 18-35 year old Black organizers, movement builders, activists, and creatives fighting to create justice and freedom for all Black people.

D'atra Jackson: The way that I grew up was that I never grew up trusting the police. I grew up in a neighborhood that was highly policed and grew up in and the particular part of Philly that was very much at the height of the murder rate when I was a teenager. And also my school was incredibly covered in surveillance and different types of security, not just the local police, but also, you know, a 40 minute process of getting into school every morning, which included scanning your ID and included going through a metal detector and included being wanded and included chains on the doors and bars on the windows and cops basically stationed on the floors on a regular basis. So my interactions [with the police have never been good. They are always there to enforce the law and criminalize Black people across this country. And the work that I've done has been particularly trying to really eliminate the amount of interactions that Black people have with the police.

Della Duncan: Dee Dee's experience growing up in a hyper-policed part of Philadelphia deeply shaped her thoughts on policing, but it wasn't until she was in grad school, in Miami, at the time of the Trayvon Martin murder — and the nonindictment of George Zimmerman — about a decade ago, when she really got politicized. She got involved in a variety of organizations and ended up landing in Durham, North Carolina, where she helped to build the Durham chapter of

BYP100 as well as the Durham Beyond Policing campaign, a coalition of community members that formed in 2016 in opposition to the building of a new police headquarters.

D'atra Jackson: The plan that was being pushed by the city council at the time was this $80 million police headquarters. And we were uplifting this narrative of there's been so many unresolved — and whatever resolution means — but unresolved police involved murders and they still get a brand new building, they still get $60 million in their budget every year, they still get brand new cars every year.

And so how can we kind of chip away and have a real conversation about what do the police do and for Durham Beyond Policing, it's two different frames that we had to move from. One was around really pushing for the defund, the disarm, the demilitarization, and the delegitimization of the police as being real harm doers and enforcers and an apparatus that feels unstoppable, that feels impenetrable to regular everyday people and the people that are being most impacted by the actions and the policies of the police. But also what is it that we really need to exist so that people feel a level of confidence and courage to build something outside of policing? How do we continue to have those conversations?

And so, for the most part, like folks are like, "I think, you know, I think we might need more police because there's always these break ins and I don't feel safe. And there's this, that, and a third happening on a day-to-day around me. And like, how can we actually have the conversation? That's like, okay, cool. I can understand that that is happening. And if you had $81 million to spend on your city, what would you spend it on? And that's what we actually did. We went out and asked people in our cities, if you had $81 million, which is how much they were allocating towards the new police headquarters. What would you do with these funds?

And the responses that we got was food access. It was more things for the kids to do, recreation centers and community centers and updating our parks, it was more access to health care — different types of health care. It was towards education. And all of the surveys that we collected, which was hundreds, nobody mentioned more police. And so we used that in our mobilizing and organizing efforts towards the city council to really push it, like, we already did y'all's work of asking people in our city, what actually would they spend this money on instead of a brand new shiny police headquarters? And this is what folks have said. And in a lot of the pushing and partnering with many other organizations, such as UE 150, which is our city workers union, we were able to create collective demands, that was around, definitely around defunding the police, but what we would do, we want our money to go towards.

Della Duncan: What Dee Dee and the Durham Beyond Policing Campaign were introducing to the public conversation was the concept of participatory budgeting, a community-driven, collaborative approach to municipal budgeting that would actually give community members a voice in how their money was spent. And although the campaign wasn’t able to stop the funding of the new police headquarters in 2016, they did have a major success two years later.

D'atra Jackson: In 2018, there was a plan from the Durham City Police Department to have an additional $2.5 million to their annual budget. And so essentially, our campaign, we took that same amount and was like, actually, let's take the same amount, this $2.5 million that the police are asking for and make a people's budget out of it and engage in a community of what a people's budget could look like for instead of increasing the police budget. And we pushed that forward towards our city council, towards the mayor. And in that year, we won $2.4 million

allocated towards participatory budgeting, which was the most that had been allocated for any city in the south for participatory budgeting.

[Durham Participatory budgeting clips]

Della Duncan: Over the last year, organizers in several cities across the US have begun creating "people's budgets," demonstrating how cities could cut police funding and invest in housing, healthcare, and other social services instead. One result of these efforts is that the Seattle city government cut $12 million dollars from the Seattle Police Department and allocated the money to a participatory budgeting process that gave everyday people a say in how the money should be used. Similar conversations are taking place in L.A., Nashville, New York, and a number of other cities across the country.

D'atra Jackson: As long as the police have existed, resistance against the police have existed. But also reform has existed, too. And in the way of the police reforming themselves has always existed. And we still have an apparatus that is strong and that holds the strings of so many different types of decisions, not only at the safety level, but within our economy, within access, within healthcare. And it's taken on really a system and institution of its own with the growth and development of capitalism.

And so I think for me, defunding the police is a type of reform, it is reforming how much money is going to the police on a regular basis. It is reforming how we think about our budgets and how we think about safety in our cities — how do we think about safety for ourselves. If we are consistently saying that — and proving, you know, through data that more police in our neighborhoods does not actually equal more safety, that we have the data to actually prove it, then what is the reform? But also, I think the question too around like is it about abolishing the police, is like, well, what does it take? What does it take for the police and the apparatus of policing to do in order for folks to feel like this is not a legitimate method, a legitimate institution of justice, a legitimate institution of peace-keeping, a legitimate institution of safety.

And for me, abolition is the aspiration, abolition is the goal for me because it opens up our world to actually be in real, real discussion, to be in real practice about what we mean when we say safety for ourselves and for our community and for the overall well-being and health of ourselves and of each other. And so it feels like, you know, hundreds of years of unresolved police murders is not enough. And that is still just reform — we're still just at reform. And for me and for many other organizations that are within this abolishing the police movement is that actually we've experienced enough as a people. We have experienced enough in this country that we can get to a place where we feel like abolition is the only way.

Kay Gabriel: One of the things that defunding the police and refunding communities, refunding people, reinvesting in people, the thing that this demand helps to consolidate is an understanding that budgets are documents that allow certain agendas to flourish and they frustrate others, right? And so what — in order to actually produce all of these like these neighborhoods and cities and social relations that the advocates of policing say that they want to produce, right, safe neighborhoods, safe streets, cities where people want to live. Okay, well, you know, that sounds good for everybody, right? In order to produce that for everybody, the solution is actually not policing. It is to reinvest and to build out all of the kinds of social programs that have been variously starved through round after round of divestment. Those are actually ways to produce the situation of safety for everyone. That's what defund is about, in a sense that's one of the things that abolition is about, and that is why abolition poses a real

answer to these problems that policing cannot solve. It was not designed to solve these problems.

[Street interviews]

Robert Raymond: So, hey, how's it going?

Al: Going well. My name's Al from the Bay Area.

Rowan: I'm Rowan.

Robert Raymond: Nice to meet you both. So the first question that I'm going to ask you is, what do you think — and it's okay, it's totally okay if it's a wild guess — is the total amount of the city's budget that is allocated towards the police department? The Oakland Police Department.

Al: I've no idea. What percentage of the budget? Maybe like 15 percent, 20 percent.

Rowan: I was going to guess around 30.

Robert Raymond: Okay, so you're both a little under. It's forty two percent of the general funds. And so I'm wondering if you had the chance to reallocate, say you were in charge, to reallocate half of that, would you actually reallocate it somewhere else? And if so, what kind of programs or services do you think those would be?

Al: Yes, definitely would reallocate some to maybe more education programs or improving infrastructure or helping unhoused residents of Oakland.

Rowan: Yeah, my first thought was also education, mostly because I work in schools, so probably first there. But also I think our environment is really important. So helping to clean up and keep everybody healthy and safe that way.

Interviewee: Let me, let me hear it.

Robert Raymond: Okay cool. So do you mind introducing yourself?

Interviewee: [Inaudible]

Robert Raymond: And where — are you from Oakland?

Interviewee: Yeah, I'm from Oakland.

Robert Raymond: Nice. And so we're asking two questions. The first one is how much of the city's total budget, do you think — and it's totally okay if you don't know and you just want to guess — comes, goes towards the Oakland Police Department.

Interviewee: I want to say at least. Three fourths of that. Maybe, maybe, you know, 50 percent. And that's like the least.

Robert Raymond: You're pretty close. So it's around, 42 percent right now.

Interviewee: Okay.

Robert Raymond: Depending on how you like, look at all the different specifics in there. And so follow up question is, if you were in charge of half of that budget, would you reallocate it towards any other public services or programs?

Interviewee: All of it. All of it. Oh, every last percentage of that would be going towards another program but tha, if you ask me.

Robert Raymond: And what kind of programs are you thinking?

Interviewee: I'm thinking the other programs I would fund towards is like the libraries, making sure they got more book schools because they need the money even more, um, funding for education and stuff like that.

Robert Raymond: Cool. Well, thanks so much. Really appreciate your time today.

Interviewee: No problem. Thank y'all.

Robert Raymond: Take care.

Interviewee: Y'all too.

Robert Raymond: So I guess to start so we're in Oakland right now and what's your name? Sophie.

Sophie: Sophie.

Hi, Sophie. So I'm just curious, what do you think is the amount of the city's budget that goes towards policing in Oakland? If you have just a guess.

Sophie: Seventy five percent?

Robert Raymond: Well, actually, that's that's higher than it is. It's 42 percent.

Sophie: I thought I would wildly...42?

Robert Raymond: Forty two percent of the general funds. Yeah.

Sophie: It's still too high...

Robert Raymond: What's that?

Robert Raymond: It's still too high.

Robert Raymond: You think so?

Sophie: Yeah. Yeah.

Robert Raymond: Do you want to articulate why?

Sophie: Because I think we need to completely rethink the way that we think about public safety. And I think we should abolish the police and abolish the prison state. And like, you know, it's like tearing it down to build it back up better again. And when I say rethink public safety, I think we need to stop giving money to one kind of like conglomerate group and kind of like facet it off into different skill sets, basically, because the police respond to way too many things. And I don't think they need to do that. So that's my...

Robert Raymond: So that leads perfectly to our follow up question, is if you could reallocate half of the police funding towards other programs, anything that you want. What are some things that you would do?

Sophie: I'd say the top thing is reallocate funds to experts in mental health and people who are really good at what's the word I'm looking fork kind of, going into situations and kind of calming everything down without violence, people who are...

Robert Raymond: De-escalation.

Sophie: Yeah, that is exactly the word I'm looking for. So that would be the first thing I think that we need besides people who just respond to violent things as people who are responding to situations where there is no need for violence, there's just need for de-escalation. And people who are experts in that field, we need to start allocating funds to. And that's just that's just like one facet, you know, but I think that's the first is because police respond to things that like don't need violence at all. So yeah...

Robert Raymond: Cool. Thank you so much.

Sophie: Thank you.

Cat Brooks: We launched the Defund OPD campaign in Oakland six years ago, and it was in reaction to two events.

Della Duncan: Here's Cat Brooks again to share about the Anti Police-Terror Project's campaign to defund the Oakland Police Department.

Cat Brooks: One was what we called "Bloody 2015," and that's the year that the Oakland Police Department murdered eleven Black men with absolutely zero accountability. And then on the heels of that, there was the rape scandal of Celeste Guap, who revealed to the world that the Oakland Police Department, along with 13 other local, or Bay Area law enforcement agencies, had been raping and trafficking her since the time she was sixteen. And it generated this conversation at first facetiously, right, like what the fuck are we paying them for? Literally we're paying to be murdered, we're paying to be raped, we're paying to be harassed.

I think it's important that we not divorce the power that the Oakland Police Department has from the neoliberal agenda that exists inside of city hall. Right. And so for decades, no matter what the mayoral administration has looked like, OPD has had a blank check to terrorize this community. OPD has had a blank check in terms of our dollars, and it had a blank check in terms of not having to be held accountable to the results that most people in most municipalities want law enforcement to produce.

Della Duncan: Despite giving the Oakland Police Department almost half of its general fund every single year, Oakland remains on America's top 10 most dangerous cities list. Their homicide solve rate vacillates between four and six percent. And not only is the OPD pretty bad at doing its job, it's also one of the most notorious police departments in the country. In 2000, a group of rogue OPD officers were found to be terrorizing the residents of West Oakland, beating up drug dealers, taking their drugs, and reselling them. They were also sexually assaulting and threatening sexual assault on women and framing people for crimes that they didn't commit.This landed them in big trouble with the federal government — and they're still under direct federal oversight to this day.

But the harassment, profiling, and violence inflicted on Oaklanders hasn't stopped, and this is exactly why, in 2015, the Defund OPD campaign began demanding that the city reallocate half of the police budget towards 24/7 mental health response team in the city of Oakland — as well as the creation of a non-911 response line for mental health crises.

Cat Brooks: So that was a lot to defund OPD, right? And folks locked us out of rooms and called us names and just figured there's that radical Cat again talking out of her backside. Six years later, right, it's a national conversation to the point where presidential candidates had to say the words "defund" — we were able to fight for and win a task force whose job it was to come up with a series of recommendations that would get us to a 50 percent defunding of the Oakland Police Department. We did not achieve a win in this last budget cycle — the police actually were funded $38 million more than they had last budget cycle. But what we did win, and which is a critical piece of the defund conversation which the opposition often wants to leave out, is $18 million of reinvestment in community for actual crime prevention and alternative pathways to public safety.

[Oakland defund protest chant]

[Music: Chris Zabriskie]

Della Duncan: In 2019, police officers in Walnut Creek, a town just outside of Oakland, shot and killed 23 year-old Miles Hall, a Black man whose family had called the police because he was having a mental health crisis. This is, unfortunately, not at all uncommon.

One of the Oakland defund movement's biggest successes has been the creation of The Mobile Assistance Community Responders of Oakland, or MACRO, program — a pilot project put together by the city that will send civilians with medical and mental health training, instead of police, to respond to non-violent emergency calls in East Oakland. If the one-year pilot in East Oakland is successful, it will then be expanded to zones in Fruitvale and eventually West Oakland. Inspired by the Anti Police-Terror Project's own program Mental Health First, the pilot is one of a number across the country, from Oregon to New York, aiming to circumvent police and decriminalize mental health crises.

Sydney Kamlager: I am Sidney Kamlager. I am a state senator for the 30th Senate District here in California. This year I authored AB 118, also known as the CRISES Act, and essentially it is a bill that would fund community-based organizations to enable them to respond to 911 calls so that law enforcement doesn't have to. We know that 70 percent of the calls that come in through 911 are generally non-lethal, non-violent, non-criminal in nature, and yet we send law

enforcement that has very limited tools in their toolbox with very clear instructions of how to use those limited tools, and we have seen the results are not what they should be. Fatalities, arrests, undue harm and trauma is not how you build safety and it's not how you build trust.

So I authored this bill because I think we should be looking at other ways to resolve issues, to de-escalate crises and to solve problems that don't involve law enforcement. It is not illegal to be poor. It is not illegal to be schizophrenic. It is not illegal to have a mental health breakdown. It is not illegal to be homeless. And yet we have decided that the answer or the solution to those questions and problems is to send in law enforcement. I think it costs us too much money. I think it takes away too many lives.

Della Duncan: If passed and signed by the governor, California's Assembly Bill 118 would unlock $10 million dollars of funding that would be given as grants to community organizations like the Mental Health First. And although $10 million is really a pittance when it comes to statewide programs, Senator Kamlager is hoping it will result in a successful pilot program that will begin to chip away at the state's hyper-punitive, hyper-carceral strategy.

Sydney Kamlager: I do think we have to have a very real discussion about what we want from our police departments because they are the first stop in this carceral system. And the more we arrest folks and give people records and connect them to jail and to prison, we will find ways to arrest — we will find ways to sentence them. You know, no one can be perfect. And what we do is we save for this population. If you call 911, I'm going to begin to create a record and then I can monitor you. And invariably you're going to do something, right? You're going to mess up because we all do. But this growing population of mostly Black and Brown folks are over-monitored by the police because of calls that they make or things that they have done in the past. And there we never forgive them as a society. And that is what expands the pipeline into the carceral system, where we then put folks who are in jail or in prison for years and years and years, if not decades. And we are allowing them to be subjected to all kinds of violence and trauma. And then when we do eventually get them out, we say, okay, now you have to go back to being perfect. So that's just a system that doesn't work. And I am firmly a believer that we have to undo it, get rid of it, abolish it.

[Music: Chris Zabriski – John Stockton Slow Drag]

Alex Vitale: I think that as much progress as the movement is making, winning, you know, real resources to implement non-police interventions, we have a long way to go. And police remain largely unreformed. I think anyone who watched how the police have been handling these protests can see that the police have not been reformed despite millions of dollars spent on training and oversight and new policies. So, unfortunately, the police continue to kill about three people a day. Some of that gets captured on videotape. And that is the kind of thing that unfortunately is going to, I believe, keep propelling the movement forward.

Kay Gabriel: It's not as if individual politicians, right, could actually alter this scenario one way or the other because we are all collectively locked into a pattern. And obviously there are some people who are very villainously in favor of this pattern, there are some people who benefit from it. But we're all locked into this pattern, this reproduction of social life that actually pushes a kind of radicalism off the table whenever it can. And therefore in order to decisively break the power of prisons and policing, again, we need to be thinking about these things in continuity with what I

would say is like continuity with the socialist movement and continuity with the labor movement, because what we are doing collectively with this really big project is building class power from below. And, you know, that is going to manifest in certain forms. So that's the only way that is. It is actually the only way out. And we can't think of this as being — we can't think that this problem is being addressable through individual policy changes, no matter how necessary. And some of them are necessary.

Cat Brooks: Our basic premise around supporting or opposing any type of reform is whether it is regular reform, which reinforces the status quo, which basically says that policing is something that can be fixed, that if we just tinker around the edges that we can get it to a place where it works for everyone. My challenge to folks is, show me where on the timeline, since the time that the first slave patrols were formed, that policing has ever worked for people who look like me. The answer to that is never, right? So for us, it's not about going back to some magical place in time and returning policing to how it worked before. And that's what regular reform is attempting to do, fix something that's not broken. We support radical reform. And radical reform are things that chip away at this beast of policing and the carceral state as we know it and try to dismantle it. Right. So as much as many of us would like it to be one big crushing blow to the carceral state as we know it, and then creating a pathway to rebuild something else, it's going to take a long and what is clearly an arduous process to get to where we want to be.

Alex Vitali: All over the world this is done in different ways. So Portugal defunded all narcotics enforcement. They dramatically shrank the footprint of policing by decriminalizing all drugs. And the result has been reductions in overdoses, reduction and transmissible diseases, reductions in public disorder. And they're very happy with the results. In New Zealand, parts of Australia, some parts of Latin America, they defunded the vice units. They've legalized or decriminalized sex work and eliminated the police role in that endeavor and instead treat it as a labor rights issue. And the outcome so far have mostly been much better than the system of mass criminalization.

In most of Europe, the idea that they would put armed police officers in schools seems completely insane to them. So they didn't defund it, they just never did it. They would never use police in that way against their own children. So there are many places that have mental health infrastructure so that they don't have to send police on mental health calls. Now, in the US, what we see is a growing number of cities who are beginning to learn these lessons. So voters in Oregon in November voted to decriminalize low level possession of all drugs. That's going to shrink the scope of policing and they turn the problem over to public health authorities. Oakland, California, joined a growing list of cities that's eliminated school policing. Denver, Portland, Austin, a growing number of cities are trying to get police out of the mental health business, they're creating non-police crisis response teams. The results so far are incredibly positive. So there's no real magic to this. It's, we just need to look at the specific things we've asked police to do and begin to implement alternative strategies to address those problems.

Kay Gabriel: You know what the data show solves gun violence? Is jobs. Like if people have employment that they can rely on that feels like, you know, somehow fulfilling and they like to do, that gives them a living wage — that actually, like, that drives down gun violence, right? Similarly, if you put money that could be put into like putting a police officer on every corner, if you put that money like this, if you put that money into like, I mean, it sounds stupid, it sounds like a hippy thing to say, but it's actually true. If you put that money into parks and sanitation and trees on streets, that actually has — that is positively correlated with crime rates going down, right?

Cat Brooks: We've been lied to. We've been told from the time that we were in the womb that this entity that perpetrates violence against our bodies and our minds and our communities is the only pathway possible to create the communities that we all want to live in. I want people to take a minute and think about the irony that the very same entity that literally creates the conditions for these horrible things to happen is telling us that they are also the only entity that can help us escape these conditions. And then I want people to think about what would it look like to live in a world where we invested in our humanity and our communities and our children and our women and our elders and our health and our hearts on the front end. As] opposed to graves and tombstones and jails and prisons on the back end. That's the world I want to live in. And I think regardless of how you feel about police, or think about police, you agree with me, you don't agree with me — I don't really give a shit honestly, like I'm done with that argument.

I believe that the vast majority of us all want to live in that world and at some point we have to divorce ourselves from the lie that we've been told, look at the data and the metrics. The results tell us that what we're doing, what we've been doing, does not, is not working. If any other industry failed in terms of response to the degree that law enforcement has, it would cease to exist. Black, white, Red, otherwise you would be in the streets railing about the tens of millions of wasted dollars that go into that failed sector. Policing as it exists today is a failed sector. It doesn't mean we don't need something. We do. White supremacy has done enough damage that we're going to need something for a while. I would like that to be something rooted in humanity, morality and justice that actually works as opposed to this violent, corrupt thing that we have not working now.

[Upstream theme music]

Della Duncan: Thank you to Godspeed You! Black Emperor, Collections of Colonies of Bees, Chris Zabriskie, Do Make Say Think, and Tristeza for the music in this episode, and thank you to Phil Wrigglesworth for the cover art. Upstream theme music was composed by Robert.

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