

June 25th, 2020

***Letter to City Council on Behalf of Faculty and Scholars from Universities and Colleges
Across New York City: Defund the NYPD by \$1 Billion***

Dear Speaker Johnson and Members of the New York City Council,

In recent weeks, a renewed and energized national movement to stop the police from beating and shooting African-Americans and other people of color has issued a call to “defund the police.” Opponents of this movement have tried to deflect attention from the newly energized campaign to abolish the police power as we know it. They refuse to address the crisis of policing and police violence in a serious or substantive way. Critics have instead tried to distract from the mounting body count of our loved ones and community members who have died at the hands of the police by muddying the conversation. Opponents of change have seized, predictably, on the language the movement has used to demand an end to police violence and to laws and customs that have permitted police to kill with impunity.

Efforts to divert us only strengthen our resolve. Quibbles over the word “defunding” should not blind us to two fundamental truths the current crisis has thrown in stark relief. First, if Black lives matter, we can no longer deny that the violent taking of Black and Brown life we see today has always been part of the essential work of policing in this country. The U.S. police power would not exist without anti-Black racism and the racial politics of criminalization, surveillance, harassment, imprisonment and death. Second, we must stop pretending that the cascading violence against African-Americans and other people of color has no connection to our massive investment, over many decades, in punitive policing. We have spent lavishly on the policing of Black and Brown communities while starving these same communities of decent housing, health care, education and other basic public goods. No serious response to the problem of police violence in our society will occur without a fundamental shift in priorities, and an historic redeployment of money and material resources.

Accordingly, we support the movement’s call for defunding the police, and a fundamental change in the investments in our communities. In New York City, advocates and community members alike are calling for a \$1 billion cut from the NYPD budget in FY 21. We support this call wholeheartedly. The demand to defund the police is a declaration of our democratic right as community members to wrest the power to commit violence away from the police. We support the call for reinvestment into the welfare of our communities, and for a reimagining of our relationship to public safety. We must embrace a democratic vision of “human justice” that moves beyond the punitive, state-centered preoccupation with police, jails and prisons and other blunt tools for safety and justice. A post-punitive policy that redistributes resources freed up by shrinking police budgets will promote both the security and the safety of our communities. We need a massive increase in funding to meet the human needs that have been denied to our communities for far too long. We also need greater public investment in community-based violence reduction and intervention programs, alternative sentencing and restorative justice practices that seek repair instead of retribution. We stand with those who seek to make policing an unnecessary relic of the past, and support the calls for budget justice that will help to pave the way.

On behalf of the Center for Justice at Columbia University, the Institute for Research in African-American Studies at Columbia University, the Center for the Study of Law and Culture at Columbia Law School and more than 350 faculty and scholars from universities and colleges across New York City.

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