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Social Work and Diverse Models of Public Safety: Advocating with and on Behalf of African American Communities

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George Floyd's death sparked an intense national debate about policing practices. In social work, the discussion has generally focused on whether the profession should partner with, or shun, law enforcement. While affirming the need for structural change, this paper suggests a different approach; that social workers should advocate with and on behalf of African American communities to implement a public safety model that reflects their preferences. After discussing how practitioners can facilitate structural reform in this arena, five alternative models of public safety are reviewed to familiarize readers with options that may have some degree of currency with African Americans: (1) reforming existing police departments; (2) increasing community policing; (3) disbanding police departments; (4) abolishing policing; and (5) indigenizing law enforcement.

Keywords: African Americans, police reform, alternative policing models, public safety, social justice

George Floyd's death on May 25, 2020 at the hands of members of the Minneapolis Police Department ignited an intense national debate about the role of police in society, especially in Black neighborhoods (Foreman et al., 2020). Vigorous discussions about policing practices have also occurred in social work (Singer, 2020). Much of this debate has focused on whether the profession

should join with, or eschew, law enforcement. Some scholars, for example, contend that NASW should officially call for defunding police departments while others argue for continued or enhanced partnering with police (Singer, 2020).

While affirming the need for structural change, this paper proposes a different approach. The NASW Code of Ethics (2017) states that social workers promote social justice *with and on behalf of* communities (preamble, emphasis added). The Code goes on to state that social workers enhance the capacity of people to address their own concerns and needs. These sentiments are echoed later in the Code, where social workers are called to promote people's right to self-determination and assist them in clarifying their goals.

In keeping with these ethical injunctions, this paper suggests social workers should work with African Americans to develop a law enforcement system that reflects their needs and concerns. Rather than employing a single top-down solution, this paper contends that social workers might seek to give voice to the perspectives of African Americans in a given community and then work to see that perspective implemented. Given the historic injustices African Americans have experienced at the hands of law enforcement, it is critical that African Americans' right to self-determination in this area be respected (Taylor, 2018). Accordingly, social workers might use their skills to facilitate the implementation of the law enforcement vision that reflects the views of African Americans.

Facilitating this process is likely contingent upon developing some degree of familiarity with various conceptualizations of law enforcement. To assist a community in clarifying their goals regarding policing, it may be helpful if social workers have some understanding of the various approaches for securing public safety. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to familiarize social workers with five public safety options that have some degree of currency with African Americans. Before discussing these options, however, the important role that social workers can play as facilitators of structural reform with, and on behalf of, African Americans is discussed.

Social Workers as Facilitators of Structural Reform

In the United States, most police agencies are accountable to municipal governments (Fisk & Richardson, 2017). City governments, for example, typically oversee the law enforcement agencies in their jurisdictions. They determine the shape and form that law enforcement takes in their local catchment area.

Due to their proximity to local voters, city officials may be especially responsive to their constituents' views. This opens up opportunities for social workers to facilitate structural change through democratic engagement (Tice et al., 2020). Social workers can facilitate structural reform with and on behalf of specific African American communities.

Community practitioners, in particular, may be ideally situated for this task (Reisch, 2016). Practitioners might work with African American residents to assess support for various public safety options in a particular community. During this process, it is particularly important to ensure the most vulnerable community members' voices are included (i.e., those who are: older, disabled, caring for small children or the elderly, living in poverty, etc.). Practitioners should work to provide forums to include the views of African Americans who have no effective platform for making their voices heard. Once a clear consensus has emerged, practitioners might help create networks of community-based actors to encourage local government officials to implement public safety models that reflect the desires of African Americans in local settings.

It is important to note that different African American communities will have different perspectives regarding law enforcement (Yglesias, 2020). As noted above, police departments are a municipal entity. As a result, departments frequently have distinct cultures that influence their interactions with residents in their jurisdictions (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016, 2017). In turn, these cultures interact with the diversity that exists among African Americans to shape how local law enforcement is viewed and what changes should be prioritized.

Consequently, it is essential to have some degree of familiarity with the various options that African American communities

might support. Wide dissatisfaction exists with law enforcement as it currently exists (Crabtree, 2020). All of the following options represent structural change—in varying degrees—from the status quo. It should also be noted that the models often overlap in some ways and that some observers use different labels to denote the same options. It may also be helpful to note that law enforcement is conceptualized broadly, encompassing both traditional and nontraditional approaches to ensuring public safety and wellness. With these caveats in mind, the five public safety alternatives might be summarized under the following rubrics: (1) reforming existing police departments; (2) increasing community policing; (3) disbanding police departments; (4) abolishing policing; and (5) indigenizing law enforcement.

Reforming Existing Police Departments

One popular option is reforming existing police departments. Gallup data indicates that 81 percent of African Americans want police to spend the same amount of time or more time in their area (Saad, 2020). Of African Americans who experienced interaction with police during the past year, most reported they were treated with respect (73%) and fairly (74%) and that the overall experience was positive (59%) (Lloyd, 2020). Concurrently, it is important to note that these latter percentages were substantially lower than those reported by European and Hispanic Americans (Lloyd, 2020). This may help explain why 88 percent of African Americans believe that major changes in existing policing practices are needed (Crabtree, 2020).

These data suggest that many African American communities endorse existing policing models but want to effect significant reforms. In keeping with this line of thought, the NAACP (2020) has issued several proposals to curb police misconduct. Specifically, they endorse tracking problematic police officers to hold them accountable, implementing use of force guidelines, a ban on knee and chokeholds, and the use of citizen review boards to provide community accountability regarding instances of police misconduct. These recommendations are similar to those advocated by Law Enforcement Action Partnership (LEAP, 2020) to transform policing. In addition to recommending many of the same ideas as the NAACP, LEAP has also endorsed changing the reward system

in which police officers work by, for example, deprioritizing arrests in favor of diverting people to sources of assistance outside the criminal justice system, training officers in de-escalation tactics, and implementing collaborations with social workers (Patterson & Swan, 2019).

In a manner consistent with the recommendations of several social work scholars (Bailey et al., 2020; Sherraden, 2020), LEAP (2020) advocates removing social issues from the scope of police responsibilities. Funding would be transferred to social service agencies to handle these issues. Social workers might implement evidence-based interventions to address substance use, mental health issues, and homelessness (Sherraden, 2020). It is important to note that these recommendations have already been implemented in various forms in diverse cities, including Los Angeles, CA (Mazarella, 2020), Alexandria, KY (Wood, 2020), and Eugene, OR (Andrew, 2020b). In the latter case, the CAHOOTS (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets) program has been in operation for approximately three decades, successfully providing emergency responses to non-violent mental health 911 calls.

Data suggest these reforms generally have wide support among African Americans (Crabtree, 2020). In communities where residents want to reform existing policing models, social workers might seek to work with community leaders to implement these and other needed reforms (Hodge & Boddie, in press). Since many of these ideas have extensive support among African Americans, social workers might also seek to incorporate them in other models when they are warranted in a given community context.

Increasing Community Policing

Another popular option in many areas may be increasing community or neighborhood policing (Crabtree, 2020). According to one study, approximately 58 percent of African Americans have a favorable view of their local police and 60 percent support hiring more officers to deal with crime (Yglesias, 2020). Interestingly, some research also suggests that African Americans who report unfair treatment at the hands of police are more likely to favor an increased police presence in their communities (Yglesias, 2020).

These perceptions are consistent with the notion that Black neighborhoods experience disparate treatment in the area of law enforcement staffing (Kennedy, 2012). Groups with financial or political power typically have sufficient numbers of police officers, or even private security personnel, to secure their personal safety (Gstalter, 2020). The concentration of law enforcement resources helps to ensure that members of these groups are not victims of serious crimes, such as homicide or rape. Furthermore, in cases where members of such groups are victimized, ample law enforcement resources are commonly expended to quickly apprehend perpetrators. In contrast, limited officers are deployed in Black neighborhoods, leaving them without enough officers to prevent or investigate serious crimes (Pew Research Center, 2020).

The absence of sufficient neighborhood law enforcement personnel results in what has been called under-policing (Kennedy, 2012). Little attention is paid to major crimes that directly impact the security of African Americans (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016). Conversely, Black neighborhoods may be over-policed for relatively minor crimes that require relatively minimal law enforcement presence and resources (Kennedy, 2012). For instance, African Americans may be arrested for playing cards or dice on street corners, arrests that would not typically occur in more affluent neighborhoods (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016).

Social workers might work with community partners to change municipal law enforcement priorities in African American communities that support increased neighborhood policing. Eliminating the policing disparity by placing more officers on local beats—officers who are dedicated to responding to the public safety priorities of the community they are tasked with serving—can help reduce crime (Yglesias, 2020). Governments might be encouraged to deploy more officers in Black neighborhoods so that policing can be refocused on protecting people from serious crime as opposed to monitoring minor infractions that represent insignificant community concerns (Pew Research Center, 2020). As implied above, these changes might be implemented in conjunction with other reforms mentioned in the previous section.

Disbanding Police Departments

In some communities, African Americans may favor disbanding or defunding existing police departments (McDowell & Fernandez, 2018). In some neighborhoods, law enforcement may be so ineffective and corrupt that residents may believe that it is necessary to eliminate the department. After dissolution, new, more community-oriented law enforcement agencies can be created.

Camden, NJ serves as a case example of this alternative model. Historically, violent crime rates in Camden were among the highest in the United States (Andrew, 2020a). Corruption in the police department was rampant which, in turn, facilitated crime and stymied efforts to implement reforms (Andrew, 2020a). Complaints of police misconduct were common. Due to these factors, the police department had little, if any, community support (Belz, 2020). Consequently, the department was dissolved in 2012 (Andrew, 2020a).

After its dissolution, a community-based policing model was implemented that emphasized officer visibility and proactive partnerships with community organizations (Holder, 2020). In keeping with the reforms mentioned above, new officers were hired and trained in de-escalation tactics, use of force guidelines, and other measures designed to promote transparency and accountability (Andrew, 2020a). The number of officers on the force was increased, they were outfitted with body cameras, and then assigned to neighborhood beats (Holder, 2020). To develop trust and positive relationships with community members, officers would host community barbeques, become acquainted with residents on their beats, and seek out residents' opinions about how they could better serve and protect the local community (Andrew, 2020a).

A central element in this model consisted of developing partnerships with faith-based leaders (Belz, 2020). Law enforcement officials set up weekly meetings with clergy and other community leaders to better understand and respond to community needs and concerns. As part of the process of meeting residents' needs, social workers were integrated into law enforcement efforts (Skoufalos, 2019). Social workers collaborated with key community actors to provide a range of services including diverting people from the criminal justice system, connecting residents to housing, behavioral

health services, addiction counseling, and other programs. Together, these practices played a strategic role in legitimizing the police in the eyes of the larger community.

The changes resulted in a dramatic drop in both complaints about police misconduct and violent crime (Holder, 2020). It should be noted that African Americans are disproportionately likely to strongly support policing practices that require officers to develop good relationships with the community (Crabtree, 2020). This model, however, may not represent an ideal fit for all African American communities. In the following sections two additional alternatives, which are largely still theoretical in nature, are discussed.

Abolishing Police

A fourth option is the creation of police abolition zones. Some 22 percent of African Americans support the concept of abolishing police departments in favor of alternative models of public safety (Crabtree, 2020). In some communities, the systemic problems with any traditional law enforcement model may be so deeply rooted that African Americans want their neighborhoods to be governed by a completely different approach.

As implied by the name, these neighborhoods would have essentially no police presence (Vitale, 2017). As Abrams and Dettlaff (2020) posit, funding would be redirected away from law enforcement toward community-based public safety alternatives. In many ways, police abolition zones are analogous to enterprise zones. In the same way that reduced regulation in the latter is designed to spark economic innovation, the abolition of policing would spark innovations in community wellness and justice.

In keeping with this aim, proponents have proposed several precepts that would guide the implementation of abolition zones (Vitale, 2017). First, many lifestyle infractions would be decriminalized in favor of a more libertarian approach. For instance, penalties for selling untaxed cigarettes—which resulted in Eric Garner’s death at the hands of police in New York City—might be eliminated (Fryer, 2019). Second, funding would be redirected toward social programs that address crime at the level of root causes (Vitale, 2017), an idea that has broad support

among African Americans (Crabtree, 2020). Take, for example, the nexus between substance use dependency and criminal activity (Vaughn et al., 2016). Individuals struggling with addiction would receive treatment to help them overcome or manage the cravings, ameliorating the need to engage in criminal activity. Social workers might be involved in providing these and other services that reduce crime (Doleac, 2018; James-Townes, 2020). Third, when problematic behaviors do occur, alternative means would be employed to deal with unproductive actions that threaten public safety (Vitale, 2017). Examples in this regard include restitution-based systems of justice, community forums for conflict resolution, and other transformative models for dealing with problematic behaviors (Carlen & França, 2020). For instance, churches and other faith communities that have developed peacemaking models might be encouraged to apply them more frequently and broadly (Puls, 2017).

Although police abolition zones exist primarily at a theoretical level at this point in time, some embryonic attempts have been made to create police abolition zones in various locations, including Minneapolis in the neighborhood where George Floyd was killed (Kolls, 2020). Perhaps the most notable, or publicly visible, attempt occurred in Seattle, with the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ), which subsequently evolved into the Capitol Hill Organized Protest (CHOP) zone (Reeve & Guff, 2020). This experimental community was characterized by a relatively short existence. For these and other reasons, caution should be exercised in attempting to draw lessons from the CHOP zone experience. Nevertheless, this experiment did raise questions about how public safety would be protected at a practical level when faced with people intent on perpetuating acts of violence against innocent individuals (Reeve & Guff, 2020). The fifth option provides one method of dealing with that issue.

Indigenizing Law Enforcement

In some neighborhoods, African Americans may favor indigenizing law enforcement. In this model, respected community members are trained, equipped, and paid to provide public safety. This approach is essentially a bottom-up, as opposed to top-down, model of law enforcement (Nanes, 2017). This alternative may

be a good fit for communities that desire personnel dedicated to protecting public safety but do not trust traditional police departments to achieve that aim.

Although this model has not been implemented widely in the United States, it has been successfully employed in other nations where minority groups have tenuous, conflict-based relationships with the majority population (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2017). In Shiite-dominated Iraq, creating police forces comprised of Sunni members helped restore security in Sunni areas (Wilbanks & Karsh, 2010). The indigenizing of policing in Sunni neighborhoods fostered a change in residents' perceptions. Instead of viewing the state as a perpetrator of violence, residents began to perceive the state as an agent committed to their security (Nanes, 2020a). Similar, related findings have been observed in Israel among the non-Jewish, primarily Arab population living in this Jewish-dominated nation. Stationing non-Jewish officers in Arab districts has been linked to increased trust among residents of these districts, along with decreased levels of crime over the six-year time-period examined (Nanes, 2020b). In Canada, an indigenization strategy has been endorsed in Surrey, BC to incorporate the perspectives of Semiahmoo First Nation people into law enforcement (Surrey Police Board, 2020; Zytaruk, 2020) and tribal police departments have been created on some American Indian tribal lands in the United States (Wells, 2014).

Some nascent movement toward this model has already occurred organically in the United States. In Minneapolis, the local NAACP chapter issued a call for residents to protect Black neighborhoods from the looting, fires, and destruction that engulfed much of the rest of the city (Lee, 2020). In response to this call, a group of armed Black men, all with professional backgrounds, formed a group called the Minnesota Freedom Fighters (Littlefield, 2020). These citizens patrol and protect their community, attempt to provide mentorship to youth, and seek to deepen their ties with residents by, for example, holding meet-and-greets (Burks, 2020). Although they have not established a formal relationship with the Minneapolis Police Department at the time of writing, they have established an informal relationship with the Chief of Police and they regularly communicate with precinct commanders (Lee, 2020). Donations are used for tactical training,

equipment (e.g., uniforms, vests, walkie-talkies), first-responder training, and psychological testing (Burks, 2020).

Indigenizing law enforcement in this manner represents what might be viewed as a one manifestation of what Bent-Goodley and Smith (2017) refer to as an African-centered approach to community policing. Although research does not exist on the popularity of this specific model among African Americans, its organic emergence in Minneapolis suggests this model may garner wide support in certain Black neighborhoods. As occurred in Iraq, state funding might be directed to indigenous groups, such as the Minnesota Freedom Fighters, to support their (a) mission and (b) professionalization (Wilbanks & Karsh, 2010). Regarding the former, funding would enable residents to leave their day-jobs and focus full-time on protecting and serving their communities. Regarding the latter, increased funding could be used for training to equip residents to make the split-second decisions police officers are often called to make in a professional, unbiased manner. The implementation of indigenizing law enforcement models has the potential to restore trust between African Americans and law enforcement (Bent-Goodley & Smith, 2017).

Practice Caveats

Social workers should be cautious about rank ordering the alternative models of public safety presented above. In course of depicting the various models, several cross-sectional studies were cited to relate the views of African Americans regarding different options that have some degree of currency in public discourse (Crabtree, 2020; Lloyd, 2020; McDowell & Fernandez, 2018; Saad, 2020; Yglesias, 2020). Although these data are typically nationally representative, they only relate perceptions at a single point in time (Babbie, 2020). Accordingly, it is risky to assume African Americans will favor one model over another based upon cross-sectional data, as perceptions can and do change over time. Furthermore, perceptions in one community may differ from those in another. Consequently, it is likely more beneficial to view these data as suggestive of possible options that can be discussed at the community level.

In keeping with this line of thought, it is important to bear in mind that the five models are not necessarily discrete, but potentially interrelated and overlapping. African Americans may desire elements drawn from multiple models (Crabtree, 2020). For instance, in some communities, residents may want to disband the existing police department and redirect some of the funds to social programs that deal with the root causes of criminal activity (Vaughn et al., 2016). In place of the old department, residents may desire a new, less expensive police department that emphasizes neighborhood policing and works in conjunction with indigenous law enforcement personnel, all operating from an Afrocentric framework (Bent-Goodley & Smith, 2017).

In working with African Americans, the diversity that exists among members of this population should be emphasized. While 88 percent believe that major changes to policing practices are needed, 12 percent report that minor or no changes are required (Crabtree, 2020). No single approach will likely be suitable for every community. Social workers should respect this diversity and seek to facilitate the creation of law enforcement models that reflect the needs of the diverse communities they serve (Tice et al., 2020).

Central to this process is privileging the views of African Americans, especially those who are vulnerable and lack the means to voice to their perspectives. As stated in the United Nations' (1948) Universal Declaration of Human Rights, African Americans have a fundamental human right to life, liberty, and security. Law enforcement plays a critical role in securing these foundational human rights. Furthermore, these rights are often most salient in lives of vulnerable African Americans. For example, older African Americans and young mothers may be much more dependent upon law enforcement to protect their lives, freedom of movement, and basic security relative to young men.

This paper focuses on various public safety options that may hold some appeal to different Black communities. Concurrently, it is also important to note that public safety is just one of many issues that merit attention. African Americans experience many economic, social, and health disparities (Marsiglia & Kulis, 2016). Social workers should not neglect these issues. Rather, they might seek to learn from and assist churches, community organizations, and

other local actors operating in various neighborhoods to address these concerns.

Conclusion

Most decisions about the shape, form, and nature of public safety are determined at the municipal level in the United States (Fisk & Richardson, 2017). This opens opportunities to create structural reforms that reflect the diverse needs of various Black communities at the local level. In keeping with that goal, this paper presented five public safety options that research suggests may have some support among African Americans, namely reforming existing police departments, increasing community policing, disbanding police departments, abolishing policing, and indigenizing law enforcement.

A central theme of this paper is that social workers should center the views of African Americans in community practice, particularly those who are vulnerable and living in poverty. African Americans have a long history of oppression at the hands of law enforcement (Taylor, 2018). Consequently, it is particularly important that African Americans determine the public safety models that govern their neighborhoods (Dominelli, 2018). Rather than advocating for their own preferred model of community safety, the social work profession should seek to advocate with and on behalf of African Americans, using their skills to help broker a model that fits the needs and concerns of African Americans in a given local community.

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