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A Case for Abolishing Campus Police

By CHARLES H.F. DAVIS III and KAMARIA B. PORTER

CALLS TO ABOLISH POLICE from college campuses have grown considerably louder over the years. In particular, following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, colleges were forced to seriously consider their role in legitimizing the institution of policing. For decades, however, concerned students, faculty, staff, and community members have sounded the alarm that, for marginalized people, campus policing is as detrimental as municipal policing.

Beyond the moral arguments against policing, evidence-based research has chipped away at the notion that police forces should be part of a campus community. News stories and emerging research have shown that they are ineffective at preventing the kind of harm and violence most commonly associated with college life.

The specific functions of campus police — surveilling local communities, enforcing campus boundaries, and responding to crimes *after* they have occurred — don't help marginalized students who experience emotional, physical, psychological, and sexual violence in such places as college classrooms, fraternities and sororities, residence halls, and social clubs. Those students most vulnerable to harm and violence continue to encounter danger despite the often-robust presence of campus police officers — officers who come at a considerable cost to many college budgets.

In the University of California system, for example, the policing budget **nearly doubled** from \$75.3 million in 2009-10 to \$148.5 million in 2019-20. Within this same period, UC Riverside and UC Merced, the two campuses in the system that enroll the most low-income and racially diverse stu-

dents, remained chronically underfunded while food insecurity among UC students over all reached 50 percent, and the system's contingent instructional labor force (graduate teaching assistants and adjunct faculty) were not paid a living wage. These twisted priorities are found at colleges across the country.

When it comes to campus sexual violence specifically, policing has done very little to thwart assaults. In fact, roughly one-quarter of female students enrolled in U.S. colleges say they have been sexually assaulted. For women who file reports, campus police often **exacerbate harm** through the investigation process. Further, campus police have also **perpetuated** psychological and sexual harm against reporting survivors, vulnerable students, and even their own colleagues. Such instances have cost institutions millions of dollars in legal proceedings and settlements.

Lastly, and not surprisingly, campus police are noteworthy contributors to an ever-widening surveillance net that subjects Black and other **racially minoritized** communities living on or near campus to pretextual stops and harassment. This includes requiring students, staff, and faculty to **verify their identities** on campus and employing crime-alert systems that offer vague, racialized descriptions of suspected perpetrators. Together, these everyday racist and classist practices attempt to distinguish between campus insiders and outsiders while encouraging members of the campus community to act as deputies in rooting out "suspicious" behavior.

Many institutions have made commitments to the values of equity, diversity, and inclusion, as well as to free speech. However, both are routinely undermined

by institutional overreliance on campus police and policing practices. As has been the case since the advent of modern police departments on campus during the mid-1960s, political repression of student activists and workers has remained a core function, one that prioritizes the preservation of institutional profits, property, and prestige over people. This has been especially evident in the recent Black Lives Matter era and recent counterinsurgent efforts by [colleges mobilizing police en masse](#) against pro-Palestinian protestors.

What masquerades as safety is largely a misnomer for security, which are two very different things. Security, through methods of surveillance and boundary enforcement, ensures safety for some but creates vulnerability for many others. We must seriously consider reimagining safety as a set of preconditions, ones that make us all less vulnerable to harm exacerbated by reactionary approaches to violence on college campuses. This means less focus on policing as a primary or singular solution in tackling challenges that would be better served by unarmed, non-police emergency responders and trauma-informed specialists.

For instance, colleges rarely consult survivors of campus sexual assault about preventative or reparative measures. Yet research has shown that survivors, especially Black women, [want to see](#) expansive, engaging, and ongoing education on sexual consent and respecting bodily autonomy for all students, staff, and faculty. This includes providing resources and direct support to survivors, rather than exclusively focusing on retributive punishment for perpetrators.

Funds slated for campus policing could be redirected to expanding educational programs on [racialized sexual violence](#) and developing a robust infrastructure for trauma-informed, culturally responsive therapists. Altogether, such investments could not only stem the tide of costly lawsuits but also prevent the departure

of professional minorities victimized by sexual violence, as well as [be the difference](#) between student survivors dropping out or completing their degrees.

Funds could also be distributed in other helpful ways. Considering that college-counseling-service wait times often [exceed one month](#), the growing [mental-health crisis](#) on campus desperately needs an expanded ecosystem of care that does not rely on costly, armed, and largely ill-equipped police officers as first responders.

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Colleges that take seriously their commitment to being life-affirming institutions must divest from police and policing. Imagining and enacting an abolitionist future in higher education is an ongoing process, one that requires the redistribution of resources, recurring collaboration, and a steadfast desire to focus on the root causes of harm and violence on and near campus. College leaders who do their research on campus safety will find that alternative futures are not only possible but necessary.

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