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Defund the Private Police: Rethinking Police as Affective Labor

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For today's policing activists, justice in a single case of police brutality or even the end of racism in everyday law enforcement is no longer adequate. Calls to [defund the police](#) have received increasing attention in public debates. Yet these demands have largely been targeted toward public police departments, insisting that taxpayer money should be spent on alternative approaches to public security. But public policing has never been the full picture of securitization in the United States. Private policing has become an emerging industry that can no longer be ignored (see Sparrow 2014). If calls to defund the police mean to curb expanding processes of securitization and criminalization, then a matrix of policing/security institutions must be taken into account.

This essay aims to expand the scope of analysis by incorporating private police into current critiques of policing. In 2019, I conducted two months of fieldwork with a police organization hired by a private higher education institution in a deindustrialized metropolis in the U.S. Midwest. All of the police officers I worked with are either African American or Latinx, most of whom were born and raised in the underprivileged and heavily policed neighborhoods in the city where I conducted the research. Their experiences of growing up as inner-city youths and, now, working as private police officers shed light on key dynamics of the private policing industry.

It was an April evening, and I had been riding along with Anthony on his daily patrol for about an hour. From time to time, tasks popped up on the call list of his in-car computer, followed by instructions from the police radio, explaining the situation that the officer in the relevant area would have to deal with. From the call list, we could see what was happening in the neighborhood around campus: a panhandler was outside the dining hall; an intoxicated person was walking across the campus area; someone had used the abandoned mobile toilet beside a university building; a family, coming from a different part of the city, had a conflict with the university hospital staff and refused to leave.

Anthony listened closely to the radio talk about the fight at the hospital and then broke into laughter. He shook his head and turned to me: "You know, sometimes there are those weird things."

As I spent more time talking with Anthony and his colleagues about their daily responsibilities, though, panhandlers on campus and quarrels in the hospital ceased to be just some of "those weird things." Instead, they revealed the inequality between the university and its surrounding neighborhoods.

According to Marte, who was stationed at the emergency room of the university hospital, conflicts and quarrels were regular occurrences. These conflicts were mostly brought to the hospital from outside the university. He recalled that on the night prior to our interview, six or seven gang members were shot in another part of the city and were brought to the university hospital, because there was no hospital in the neighborhood where the shooting happened. “And what happened,” Marte explained, “is that gangs come, and their family comes, and another opposite gang comes, so there’s a lot of violence happening in the hospital. ... And then they can have weapons, they [can] come here and start fighting.”

Marte then pulled out a map of the city and gave me a lesson on the geography of local medical resources: downtown, you have one major hospital, and on the west side you have two. In the northern part of the city, where the most privileged residents live, “they have their own hospitals.” But in the southern part of the city, which is both the largest area and most underprivileged part, there are only two hospitals: the university hospital and another one that technically falls outside of city limits. The university hospital therefore draws patients from across the southern part of the city. For police officers, this means that conflicts may be brought with them from other neighborhoods, and it is their job to prevent such conflicts from disturbing the function of the university hospital.

Marte told me about the last arrest he had made: a conflict erupted between a couple when they brought their sick child to the hospital, and the husband was arrested for domestic battery. He also needed to step in if there were parents who were visibly on drugs: “The hospital has the responsibility, because it’s state law, that the sick child cannot be released to the parent if the parent is intoxicated.” Areas beyond the university are conceptualized as conflict-ridden places with unqualified parents, criminalized gang members, and drug users. These social actors cannot simply be kept out from the university neighborhood due to the scarcity of medical resources elsewhere; thus, the university finds it necessary to install police officers in the hospital to manage these unavoidable conflicts.

Patrolling officers also frequently have to deal with panhandlers and homeless people in the campus area. The university police department was granted power by the city government to patrol in an extended area beyond the campus and its immediate neighborhood, but it is only within the campus area that officers have the authority to ask panhandlers and homeless people to leave—and to make arrests if they are disobeyed. David, who used to patrol on a commercial street in the campus area,

remembered receiving reports from business owners or students about homeless people stealing things and “chasing or scaring” people. Although he was supposed to make arrests in some of these cases, David does not see incarceration as a helpful solution: “I don’t think they should be arrested for that. Most people steal because they don’t have. ... They need something else. They steal because they’re addicted to drugs. They steal because they’re homeless. Sending them to jail isn’t going to help them. It just, you know, puts them in ‘time out’ for a while.”

David, an African American police officer, grew up in some of the most underprivileged neighborhoods in the city. He lived through the lack of job opportunities, which resulted from a process of deindustrialization that began long before he was born, and a decline of public resources due to a more recent neoliberalization of urban policies. With his father working all day and his mother taking care of his many siblings, David remembered that there was nothing to do after school; without a sense of belonging, young people were also vulnerable to gang activities. He said that he only stayed out of trouble because he emulated his older brother in joining after-school activities, and his mother signed him up for a mentoring program. The program was organized by a local nonprofit, which assigned David a mentor who would take him on weekend outings. Another African American officer, Matthew, shared a similar childhood experience. While his parents were working overtime, he recalled that the community center played a significant role in providing shelter and preventing him from “going astray.” However, due to shrinking public resources, this community center was closed eight or nine years ago.

Several officers provided me with their analysis of what this lack of resources means for their police work. Business owners, they reasoned, rarely choose to open their stores where residents cannot afford their services or products. Without business, job opportunities remain scarce, and if there are no other sources of support, then poverty will lead to an increase in crime, with gang activities serving as an “alternative economy,” in one officer’s words. Crime, poverty, and joblessness, according to my interlocutors, form a vicious cycle.

The university police department’s strategy to cope with this cycle, beyond daily policing, is to organize police-sponsored mentoring programs for inner-city youths under a special unit known as the Community Relations Unit (CRU). Matthew works full-time in the CRU and is committed to various relationship-building activities with communities, without participating in daily patrols. Other officers participate in these programs as volunteers in their spare time. But the kind of social support provided by

the CRU is different from that provided by community centers or nonprofits, Matthew admits: “The major difference is that the police positively engage with the community, so that [the community] will have a good perception of the police.” In other words, the overall mission of the CRU is to normalize the relationship between the police and the community, which means “to make [community members] accept that we are a part of their everyday life, and we are always here to help.”

Because the CRU is a branch of a privately funded police department, it is also obliged to prioritize the interests of the university. For instance, the schools that the CRU worked in were selected primarily due to their proximity to the university, rather than the extent to which they need after-school support. Such priority setting is also not limited to the CRU. All of the police officers I worked with were well aware of the priority of the university’s interests over the general safety of the community in their daily police work. During major university events, the police department can refuse to deal with crime reports from other parts of the neighborhood, handing them off to the city police and focusing solely on the campus area.

“The university’s a business,” said Marte, who had worked both as a public and private police officer. “You’re selling your education; you’re providing a service. And if your clients who are your students don’t show up, then you don’t have your business, unfortunately.” Marte pointed out that it is the vested interest of the university to stop violence in the neighborhood; otherwise, parents would be too worried to send their children to the university from around the world.

This sense of security is not only important to the profitability of the university as an educational service provider, but also as a property owner. In the 1960s, the university launched an urban renewal project that included a focus on crime prevention. The purpose, however, was not simply to reduce crimes, but to change the public image of the area so as to attract better-off residents. Such efforts gave rise to a university safety department, the precursor of today’s police department. Even today, according to Marte, most of the properties on a major commercial street are owned by the university, which is why officers are stationed there. Only with a sense of security can the neighborhood attract the business owners it wants to retain.

The daily job of private police officers, whether they are stopping the homeless from “chasing and scaring people” or keeping “those weird things” out of the neighborhood, is to produce a sense of security among the university population. In the larger context of inequality and scarcity resulting from the flight of industry and privatization, such a sense of security is profitable for the university. Private police, therefore, can be seen

as a kind of affective labor, in that it “involves the production and manipulation of affects” (Hardt 1999: 97–98). On the one hand, the police department aims to provide a sense of security to the university population; on the other hand, it aims to alter perceptions of the institution and to ameliorate police–community tensions in surrounding neighborhoods. The affects thus produced by private police officers ultimately serve their employer, the private higher education institution. And to defund private police forces like these, it is no longer sufficient to ask whether policing is really the best way to provide public safety, since public safety was never really the goal for such a department. Rather, we should examine the profitability of the sense of security produced by private police officers, even if at the expense of the well-being of community residents.

The form of private policing discussed in this essay is also only part of the security matrix, which consists of public police, private security companies, and much more. But it serves as a starting point for incorporating processes of privatization into the movement to defund the police, and examining policing against the historical backdrop of industrial flight, privatization, and the emergence of the security business.

Author Bio

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Preview Image

Photo by [Chris Henry](#).

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