PROJECT MUSE

Toward an Abolitionist Epistemology

Alex S. Vitale

Social Research: An International Quarterly, Volume 91, Number 4, Winter 2024, pp. 1061-1084 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2025.a948883*

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/948883

[146.245.70.108] Project MUSE (2025-02-03 15:45 GMT) Brooklyn College Library

Alex S. Vitale

Toward an Abolitionist Epistemology

Abstract. The theoretical underpinnings of police and penal abolition can provide important epistemological guidance to social science researchers. A review of the conceptual frames of abolition and the social science theories underlying it provides a basis for an abolitionist epistemology that incorporates insights from queer theory, critical race theory, feminism, historical materialism, and postcolonial theory. An exposition of existing studies that conform to these theoretical frameworks shows this approach's value.

OVER THE LAST TWO YEARS, THERE HAS BEEN A SIGNIFICANT EXPANSION IN sociological research of policing that takes a critical stance. In-depth empirical studies have looked at community policing (Cheng 2023), police training (Sierra-Arevalo 2024; Simon 2024), and organized resistance to policing (Phelps 2024), helping to expose some of the concrete harms of the policing enterprise and its imperviousness to conventional police reforms. Many of these studies, however, could go further in their analysis if they were to take more seriously the methodological and theoretical imperatives of abolitionism. While we may tend to think of abolition solely as a set of political demands or a public policy framework, it can also serve as a theoretical basis for guiding policing research grounded in well-known social scientific theory.

ABOLITION THEORY

Analysis

Abolition is rooted in historical evidence about the functional nature of policing, as opposed to an idealized notion of policing tied to aspirational models of liberal democracy. Standard narratives of policing

[146.245.70.108] Project MUSE (2025-02-03 15:45 GMT) Brooklyn College Library

state that the police represent a highly legitimate mechanism for enforcing the rule of law in a way that provides broad benefits for all segments of society. In essence, they are designed to provide a level playing field for a meritocratic system of individualistic competition.

These claims are rooted in a discourse around the formation of modern policing in London in 1829 by then Home Secretary Robert Peel, for whom the blue-hatted "bobbies" are named. London at the time was experiencing an increase in crime and disorder tied to massive population growth and social change. This new system of social control faced strong opposition from the British public, who feared it would grant political leaders a new tool to suppress burgeoning liberal freedoms of political expression, similar to the functioning of already existing policing systems in France and Russia. To overcome this opposition, assurances were made that this new force would closely enforce the law and adhere to community standards of public propriety, creating a system of "policing by consent," in which the police were closely embedded within civil society. This ideal is encapsulated in the so-called Peelian principles, which claim that the police are the people and the people are the police and that policing will only function with strong community support for their actions.

Any failure to live up to these standards is attributed to either the failings of individual officers or a breakdown in the process of policing that can be remedied through new training, written standards, enhanced transparency, and civilian oversight mechanisms. The goal of such reforms is to improve the professionalism of the police and restore public trust in them so they can be more effective in their crime suppression duties. These oft-proposed "procedural reforms" are designed to make people feel better about police actions even if they are subject to official sanctions.

Abolitionists have systematically debunked this hagiography of policing. Policing was created as a tool for managing the consequences of systems of exploitation (Kaba and Ritchie 2022; Vitale 2021). The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw new forms of policing emerge as a direct response to threats to the primary

forms of economic exploitation during this era—namely, colonialism, slavery, and mass industrialization. Ben Brucato (2023) traces the origins of much American policing to the creation and enforcement of racial "differences" to more efficiently manage systems of labor exploitation in the American colonies. The most extreme form of this system of racialized labor control was chattel slavery, which required an extensive system of both public and private surveillance and enforcement. Rural slave patrols and urban watches developed into increasingly professionalized forces whose main role was to prevent slave escapes and uprisings. By the time of the Civil War, most major Southern cities had modern professional policing, whose primary job was micromanagement, on the owners' behalf, of the enslaved Black population that often traveled to and from wage work.

Julian Go (2023) points out that chattel slavery should be understood as one expression of a larger system of colonialism in which both underpaid and enslaved populations are forced to work to produce cash crops for a growing industrialized global marketplace. This system of mercantile exploitation generated resistance around the globe, and police forces were created to help manage these challenges to imperialism through a variety of proactive counterinsurgency methods. In the United States this included systems of land expropriation from Indigenous populations through early forms of policing such as the Texas Rangers, who committed massacres and forced removals on behalf of White colonial settlers.

Today, police continue to play a leading role in the production and maintenance of systems of economic exploitation. They suppress the workers' movement and micromanage the lives of the poor, who are on the losing end of neoliberal capitalism that has seen the decline in living standards for the working and middle classes and a massive increase in concentrated wealth as well as the hollowing out of the state's capacity to provide basic services to help cushion the blows of economic precarity. The result has been the growth of mass homelessness, untreated mental health problems and substance use, and the growth of black markets in sex work, drugs, and stolen goods.

The day-to-day work of police in much of the world is the management of these problems to produce and maintain a social order in which upward economic redistribution can continue.

Abolitionists understand policing as an inherently harmful institution. The earliest theorists of policing pointed out that what distinguishes policing from other forms of government is the capacity and authorization to use violence. Egon Bitner (1970) describes this as the use of coercion to solve a problem in the moment. Micol Seigel (2018) goes further and points out that police are "violence workers," who exercise state power in ways that reproduce inequality, making police an inherently political tool with vast powers. As a result of this analysis, abolitionists look to understand the negative social costs of policing. There is a growing body of research that is attempting to measure some of these costs (Stagoff-Belfort, Bodah, and Gilbert 2022), but this is just the tip of the iceberg, since these costs are both material and ideological. Individual level costs include being subjected to violence, reduced educational attainment, increased mental health problems for those subjected to intensive policing, and a diminished sense of social and political inclusion. At a structural level there are huge financial costs, but there are also ideological costs in the form of shaping social problems as issues of "crime" to be addressed by policing and courts. This serves to divert attention from the role of markets and government policy in creating these problems, which might engender demands for more social spending and taxation of the wealthy to pay for it.

Because of these harms, abolitionists develop alternative ways of addressing community needs that aren't rooted in the mobilization of coercive state power. In this way, abolition is a generative analysis, not just a new form of punishment for the police. Abolitionists want to create safer, healthier, and more just communities by increasing communal power and providing people with material needs and services that would allow them to live better lives. This includes things like enhanced mental health services, supportive housing, services for survivors of violence, and violence interruption and crisis response programs.

Process

Abolitionists also understand that creating a world free of coercive state power cannot be achieved overnight just because someone held up a protest sign saying "Defund the police." Instead, they work to develop concrete alternatives to policing rooted in addressing specific community needs through either pushing the state to provide for these needs or enhancing community capacity to deliver them independently (Kaba 2021; Kaba and Ritchie 2022). These efforts are understood as "non-reformist reforms" that take incremental and prefigurative steps toward a more just future without attempting to re-legitimate existing carceral systems. As such they are organized around a dual power strategy that helps guide abolitionists on appropriate strategy in the hopes of chipping away at existing harmful systems, establishing a set of ethical principles, and developing the political power that would make transformative change possible in the future.

Principles

The existing criminal legal system is guided by its own set of principles. While it mobilizes a discourse of "justice," we can see empirically that it is actually organized around the principles of revenge, punishment, and social control of communities that are often judged to be always already guilty and undeserving. The actual behavior of police and the functioning of the courts, jails, and prisons make clear that cruelty is the point. While there may be talk of rehabilitation, diversion, and alternatives to punishment, the overwhelming orientation of these institutions is one of achieving public safety through the mobilization of punishment. When police are confronted with a choice between producing public safety or producing punishment, they uniformly choose punishment. A recent example is police-led efforts to overturn bans of high-speed police chases, even though research shows these chases do little to enhance public safety and instead produce large numbers of injuries and deaths, including among police and uninvolved motorists and pedestrians.

[146.245.70.108] Project MUSE (2025-02-03 15:45 GMT) Brooklyn College Library

Abolitionists have a distinct set of principles that guide their decision-making. These principles are rooted in a different notion of justice that considers the need to provide for people's material and psychological needs in a sustainable and equitable way. This means they look to provide care and comfort, but also to build political power through the development of solidarity and altruism instead of the greed-based individualism of neoliberal capitalism. Abolitionists support mutual aid efforts that are truly cooperative rather than just charity by another name (Spade 2020). They support organizing to create power in ways that treat people as agents of their own fate rather than political pawns to be mobilized based on short-term polling data. They believe that people in crisis, including those who commit harms, should be treated with as much dignity as possible because it is typically people who have experienced violence themselves that go on to hurt others and that the key to breaking that cycle is to repair past harms, not create new ones through the mobilization of punishment.

ABOLITION SOCIOLOGY IN THEORY

Social scientists looking to develop an abolitionist epistemology can look to several methodological traditions within the social sciences to help us establish an abolitionist sociology, including the sociological imagination of C. Wright Mills, feminist epistemology, queer theory, historical materialism, critical race theory, and postcolonial thought.

Sociological Imagination

What makes sociology distinctive is its interest in how social structures and institutions shape the terrain in which individuals experience reality and make decisions. Mills (1959) calls this the "sociological imagination" because it asks us to see beyond the anecdotal experiences of individuals or even the immediate contextual terrain and instead look to the seemingly hidden forces that structure our everyday lives. This approach demands that we question both reducing reality to individual stories and the macro correlations that don't

account for specific institutional forces in the production of those relationships. This latter task requires a historical analysis of these institutions and the social structures that shape them and a concrete analysis of the power dynamics involved.

Feminist Theory

Feminist epistemology contains a deep critique of positivism and its insistence that a well-executed, value-free scientific method can produce generalizable truths about social dynamics. Feminists understand that people's social position, their relationship to power, and their subjective experiences shape their understanding of social reality. They also point out that the multiplicity of these social positions undermines the generalizability of social scientific findings and the very pursuit of such findings constitutes an erasure of some people's experiences. Social scientific inquiry, then, must take into consideration people's lived experiences that cannot be simplistically reduced to numerical equivalencies. The social meanings people ascribe to material realities, such as what constitutes harm or safety, denote that these categories cannot be universalized.

Feminist theory also demands that we understand the human impact of abstract ideals such as the rule of law. While legal systems may at times provide certain protections and benefits to some, this often comes at the expense of others because these legal regimes work to protect and reproduce profound inequalities. While using the police to protect women from predators is presented as a universal good, feminist theory demands that we understand how the actual impact of such endeavors can produce significant harms to women. We live in a patriarchal society in which women's well-being and safety are routinely subjugated to the desire to maintain a system of male domination. In addition, intersectional feminism shows that universal ideals of protection fail to consider the differential impacts of policing on women based on their race, class, sexuality, or disability status (Bierria, Caruthers, and Lober 2022).

Feminist theory helps us see the ways in which calling the police for protection has historically placed some women, especially women of color and disabled women, at risk of even greater harm (Richie 2012). Policing rests on a notion of patriarchal order in which only some women are considered legitimate victims, leaving others to be subjected to surveillance, criminalization, and abuse (Goodmark 2023). This helps to explain why so many women who are victims of violence choose not to call the police. To avoid the problem of treating police interventions as inherently desirable, we must center the voices, lived experiences, and analysis of women.

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory gives us tools to interpret relations of power in the contemporary world. It helps us see how imperial processes of the past continue to shape social relations. And just as importantly, it interrogates how positivist social science has been at the center of imperial systems of domination and othering (Go 2016). Imperialism posited Western Enlightenment ideals as universally superior, even though they were situated in a particular cultural and political setting in which they served to validate systems of international plunder. Western ideals about citizenship and the rule of law were tied to a system of limited suffrage within the imperial core and the absence of legal rights for those on the periphery, leaving both groups unable to challenge their exploitation through these systems. Neither domestic slaves nor overseas agricultural workers caught in systems of peonage had redress to the much-lauded systems of democracy, courts, rights, and police power to improve their position. The very systems that produced these ideas of liberal democracy relied on imperial systems of exploitation to make themselves possible. They then weaponized these ideas both as comparative proof of cultural inferiority and as justifications for continued imperial domination. Social science played a vital role in this by utilizing universalist methods that uncritically assumed the superiority of Western ideals in their assessment of colonized populations. Their causal modeling of social problems

in the Global South assumed that the judicious application of liberal democratic values and practices would be of inherent benefit, despite their active denial of those rights and liberties in any meaningful sense.

Postcolonial thought also shows us how the systems of domination at the heart of colonial practices shaped the modern state and its notions of social control. The imperial system rested on a foundation of othering and the demeaning of those it exploited through "scientific" studies of racial inferiority and cultural inadequacy and then developed systems of violent suppression of any resistance to the processes of political and economic domination. This has produced systems of oppressive policing of the colonized, which in turn has fundamentally shaped the nature of policing in the metropole through the normalization of counterinsurgency practices at home and abroad (Go 2023; McCoy 2009; Schrader 2019; Seigel 2018). Today, we continue to see a constant back-and-forth of imperial entanglements that reproduce and disseminate these colonial practices through international police reform initiatives that serve primarily to bolster the power of Western allies in the developing world, so that systems of geopolitical and economic domination can be maintained (Go and Schrader forthcoming). Any analysis of policing and other systems of state social control that fails to account for this back-and-forth of colonial processes risks fundamentally misunderstanding the true drivers of these practices. When we talk about community policing, we should always link it to the counterinsurgency practices of imperial powers that originated and refined these practices before sending them back to the metropole, to police the former colonial subjects turned immigrants.

Queer Theory

Queer theory demands that we question taken-for-granted social binaries and look for the power dynamics that produce these identities as well as for those who benefit from them (Seidman 1994). Male and female may be associated with certain biological characteristics,

[146.245.70.108] Project MUSE (2025-02-03 15:45 GMT) Brooklyn College Library

but the social meanings we give these identities, the importance we place on the differences, and the social value we place on them are the result of social processes involving power dynamics. The same is true for categories like "crime" and "criminal." A huge amount of social scientific research on policing and safety fails to interrogate these categories. They accept uncritically both the category of crime and the social meanings attached to it. Too often the concept of crime is reduced to the presence or absence of a police report for a specific legal violation. They also accept that it is a social good for police to take steps to stop these behaviors. This is a kind of simplistic Manichaeism that fails to consider that systems of laws and the means of their enforcement are not constructions free of politics or value. They also fail to consider the ways in which the police are an interested party in the construction of ideas about what constitutes crime and who is a criminal. It is the police who interpret community complaints into legal and bureaucratic codes that then become the raw material for assessments of "crime problems" and their effectiveness in addressing them.

Abolition sociology is a queer theory in that it constantly interrogates claims about crime, the labeling of people as criminals, and the precept that police enforcement of the law is automatically a social good. Queer theory also realizes the police have played a significant role in the production of normative gender and sexuality roles through the enforcement of the law and the implementation of everyday public order policing (Mogul, Ritchie, and Whitlock 2012). Queer people have a long history of having their identities criminalized by the police, leaving them with a deep skepticism about a simplistic binary between the guilty and the innocent. They also experience police as agents of harm because their own existence is perceived as a threat to social order and thus not deserving of real protection.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory shows how the criminal legal system has always been part of a system producing racialized inequality. The origins of

our constitution, legal system, police, and prisons are all rooted in racial oppression. Central elements of our constitution were created to facilitate the practice of chattel slavery and today continue to give undue political power to smaller states with disproportionately White populations, allowing them to exercise minority rule through the structure of both the US Senate and the Electoral College. This theory uncovers the everyday biases of all actors within the criminal legal system and the ways in which the very structures of these systems produce racially disparate outcomes, regardless of the motives of the actors working within them. The professional and legal implementation of the war on drugs produces racist outcomes regardless of the motives of narcotics police, prosecutors, or judges because it was designed to demonize Black people as part of a politics of racial animus in the wake of the civil rights movement (Baum 1996; Hari 2015).

Critical race theory also points out that race-making has been a central feature of capitalist and colonial systems of exploitation, and the characteristics used for race-making can shift over time, in the way the once-racialized Irish became White. The objective of racial justice activities should be to dismantle the race-making process rather than demanding equal rights for one racialized group to participate in systems of exploitation. This analysis can help us avoid the mistake of thinking that diversity training or hiring a few Black police officers would significantly change the impact of policing or the race-making process, much less reduce the everyday harms policing perpetuates as part of that process.

Historical Materialism

Historical materialists are interested in how the state facilitates exploitative modes of production and manages class relations. Karl Marx provides little direct guidance on the role of police but does mention it as a state tool for improving capitalist productivity. Mark Neocleous (2021) lays out the specific ways policing is essential to the state's efforts to manufacture a stable working class within modern

capitalism. According to this approach, police exist to manage opposition to capitalist processes of accumulation through the direct suppression of organized resistance, by breaking strikes and subverting social movements. In addition, everyday policing exists to micromanage the lives of the working class in ways that conform with the production of stable families and communities allowing for the reproduction of a working class and ensuring that workers engage in productive labor. This is done by restricting working-class pleasures and cutting off subsistence activities outside the system of wage labor.

Sociological research must link the actions of police to state interests. The police are not a freestanding independent entity. This is one of the reasons it is so hard to reproduce results in positivist research. The political context in which policing operates shapes police priorities and methods and the ways these are received by the public. It also helps explain the failures of police reforms. When the police are enacting state priorities, it comes with a level of impunity for the police institution. When elected officials tell police to wage a war on drugs, gangs, immigrants, crime, and so on, we can expect that there will be casualties and state actors will indemnify the institution, if not always every individual officer.

ABOLITIONIST EPISTEMOLOGY

These theoretical frameworks help us to both critique existing systems of social research and develop guidelines for an abolitionist epistemology. We should start by critically interrogating a variety of positivist research approaches that are often touted as "evidence-based policing." The proponents of this approach (e.g., Sherman 1998) claim we can utilize quantitative modeling to arrive at fundamental truths about what works in the operation of policing and the production of public safety. This whole endeavor, however, rests on a set of deeply problematic essentialized binaries and assumptions about human behavior. It assumes that the tool for addressing social harms is policing and then endeavors to make that intervention "work" without concerns about the social costs of these interventions or the

availability of alternatives. It also takes for granted the validity of core inputs into its models, such as what constitutes crime and the amount of it. It also assumes a universality of experience that imagines that if an intervention produces certain results at one time and place, it would succeed in doing so in others. But this approach rests on the false assumption that human behavioral reactions are somehow fixed in the way chemical reactions are, when in fact human behaviors are relational and include learning. There is little reason to believe that a drug interdiction strategy that works on day one will continue to be effective two months later, after drug distributors have adjusted their practices in response, or that a gang suppression strategy that works in the context of an urban setting will work in a suburban or rural one. They also assume that an intervention in one area doesn't inform social behavior in other areas. If police target street-level sex work in one area, it is likely that street-based sex workers in other areas will hear of it and begin to adjust their behavior accordingly, undermining the fixity of the treatment in a controlled study. But the proponents of randomized control trials to assess public safety interventions make exactly these errors.

In fact, randomized control trials and other forms of experimental research employ exactly the imperialistic practices critiqued by postcolonial theory and then apply these same practices to what are internally colonized populations. In this way, they erase the lived experience of those populations, the role of systems of exploitation and domination in shaping their life circumstances, and the inherent harms of mobilizing the criminal legal system in their communities. And these expensive and cumbersome studies are funded by the Department of Justice and private foundations that have a fixed interest in legitimating carceral systems of policing and punishment.

This does not mean we cannot do quantitative research that aggregates large amounts of information in ways that allow us to model potential complex relationships. It means we must view the results with a critical eye. We must ensure that studies claiming to show the effectiveness of an intervention measure the true costs of that

[146.245.70.108] Project MUSE (2025-02-03 15:45 GMT) Brooklyn College Library

treatment, be it related to policing, parole, or community-based alternatives. Those costs must include not just financial costs, but also the costs to health and well-being for individuals and communities. We should always ask about effectiveness relative to other potential interventions. Studies should place the data in a historical and geographic context rather than universalizing the claims. We should be aware that the social meanings attached to certain behaviors and social conditions may shift depending on one's social position and historical and geographic context. We should be very careful about the strength of claims made. Just because a meta-analysis finds a statistically significant outcome across studies does not necessarily make it a universal truth. The built-in biases of much current research can easily skew the findings of many studies concurrently. Even if the findings are robust today, would they be so in a new historically situated moment? We should be clear about what the taken-for-granted values are behind a study. Does it uncritically accept categories of guilt and innocence, deserving and undeserving, lawful and unlawful, disorderly and normative? Finally, we must look closely at funding sources and the research questions and designs that funders favor, to uncover their political agendas.

Avoiding Reform Talk

A huge amount of scholarship on policing is "reform talk" in which significant and sustained reforms that fundamentally change the nature of policing are treated as inherently possible and desirable. This can be seen most clearly in the commitment to the reform paradigm in the face of contrary evidence. Every failure of reform is treated as a justification for trying harder or attempting different reforms, or as a failure of implementation. But the validity of the endeavor is never questioned. A massive industry of reform talkers helps to perpetuate this approach. Federal monitors, oversight commissioners, academic researchers, elite funders, and politicians all have an interest in legitimating policing through reform talk because they benefit from the perpetuation of both policing and the reform narrative.

Simon Hallsworth (2013) describes the ways in which academics, police, the media, and governments create a discourse around gangs that reifies and misrepresents violent street worlds in ways that serve their own political and economic interests and, in the process, empower harmful state interventions that in some cases make the levels of street violence worse. Travis Linneman (2016) provides a similar analysis related to the policing of methamphetamine, in which he describes the political benefits of instilling moral panics around drugs that legitimate state punitiveness at the expense of public health outcomes.

Abolitionist Values

An abolitionist epistemology of policing should be empirically grounded. It should look at the role of police as experienced by those who are policed. It should measure the true costs to policing financially, socially, politically, in terms of public health and well-being and in relation to other possible interventions. We must center the voices, perspectives, and analysis of those who are directly affected by policing if we want to understand these costs and what alternatives look like. This includes validating the experiences and opinions of those who have committed harm, violated laws, and engaged in behaviors deemed disorderly. We must talk to sex workers, unhoused youth, gang members, shoplifters, and graffiti artists if we are to get a handle on the causes and solutions to problems of social harm. This also includes directly involving those populations in our research teams through participatory research projects and the development of a praxis that centers the needs and knowledge of communities rather than the agents of state-sponsored social control.

Abolition sociology should place policing in a historical context focusing on capitalist and imperial processes that produce the "problems" to be managed by police, the forms of acceptable policing, and the functional mission of policing. While we are not using police to manage colonialism and slavery in the nineteenth-century sense today, police continue to be directly affected by imperial entan-

glements and processes of racialization and economic exploitation. Policing today is a tool for managing the consequences of a system of neoliberal capitalism that produces a huge amount of social harm in ways that allow for the perpetuation of those harms.

We must call into question the taken-for-granted binaries that structure both policing and the study of policing. We must point out the problematic nature of labeling people as good or bad, guilty or innocent, lawful or criminal. We must instead challenge these binaries by looking for the ways in which powerful interests mobilize these conceptual categories to justify punitive social controls and deflect blame from their own harmful practices.

We must avoid engaging in reform talk that treats reform as an inherent good that just needs to be perfected. Police reform should be understood as a historically rooted process of manufacturing consent for oppressive social control mechanisms. We should make clear that procedural reforms fail to address the substantive injustice of carceral practices and instead try to paper over them by making people feel better about what is happening to them.

There is no such thing as value-free social research. Those who make such claims are merely masking the values animating their research designs and findings or failing to see them because they conform to dominant, normalized conceptualizations of how the world should work. Social researchers should be open about the values and principles that guide their assessments. Abolitionists are motivated by the desire to produce safe, healthy, sustainable communities in ways that provide dignity and security to everyone, not just the "law abiding." We believe state social control interventions should involve as little coercion as possible and be avoided whenever possible. They should treat people with as much dignity and provide them with as much agency as possible. We privilege efforts that seek to enhance social justice by ending systems of oppression and repairing past harms in ways that create future sustainability and security.

Not every study can do all these things, but by avoiding the pitfalls of reform talk, centering police narratives, and overgeneral-

izing findings, we open the door to a broader and better-grounded understanding of the insecurities we face and the best strategies for addressing them.

ABOLITION SOCIOLOGY IN PRACTICE

Several monographs have embraced these practices. While I am labeling these works as consistent with an abolitionist research framework, the authors may not think of themselves as abolitionists or use abolitionist terms in their works. Nonetheless, these works rely on an analysis of the historical functional nature of police and tell us important things about their actual role in society as experienced by those subjected to their actions. These researchers work in public health, criminology, gender studies, or other fields, but they all deploy a sociological imagination and conduct empirical research about the role of social structures and institutions in shaping the lives of individuals and communities.

William Lopez, in his 2019 book *Separated: Family and Community in the Aftermath of an Immigration Raid*, provides us with an ethnography of the social impacts of immigration enforcement. Lopez looks at this issue from the perspective of the community affected by raids and local police who conducted them along with ICE agents, who refused to be interviewed for the project. His findings are based on a year of direct observations and 24 structured interviews with community members. Before that, he had been involved with voluntary work in the community for six years, creating a base of trust and understanding prior to beginning formal research. Lopez finds immigration enforcement has concrete detrimental effects not just on those who might be the direct target, but also on entire families and communities, including many who are US citizens. When a raid happens at a business or home, everyone present is subjected to a form of police terror. Many of those taken into custody or deported leave behind families and friends who must now struggle to maintain long-distance relationships, find new forms of financial support, and deal with the loss of a loved one. In addition, even those who may be in

[146.245.70.108] Project MUSE (2025-02-03 15:45 GMT) Brooklyn College Library

the United States legally can be subjected to detention and violence for not having the right papers on them at a particular time. Some US citizens have even been deported for lack of paperwork, expanding our notion of what it means to "have papers." Lopez also shows how local police cooperation with ICE contributes to a siege mentality among targeted communities, as people must constantly worry about a loved one being stopped for driving or even walking without the right papers, and alter their routines to attempt to avoid unnecessary risks.

Throughout the book, Lopez provides historical and contextual information about the problematic history of immigration enforcement and domestic policing. He participates in some ride-alongs with local police but makes clear the ways in which police control these experiences and how they fit into a larger context of racialized policing. In this way he avoids accepting the police-centered worldview in a taken-for-granted way, instead understanding it as "giving accounts" in which a self-serving ideology of policing is produced. In the conclusion, Lopez makes clear that home raids are deeply harmful to entire communities and should be abolished. He also argues against all local law enforcement cooperation with ICE enforcement efforts. He then suggests some steps that might reduce their harm as an interim measure, but he does not couch these as permanent reforms designed to restore public trust in ICE or local police.

Jennifer Musto wrote about the ways in which the carceral system, which claims to help victims of sex trafficking, makes their lives worse. Her 2016 book, *Control and Protect: Collaboration, Carceral Protection, and Domestic Sex Trafficking in the United States*, was based on years of direct involvement in sex-work policy and organizing. In addition, she conducted four years of direct observations of the criminal legal system's responses to sex trafficking, including 40 interviews with law enforcement agents, policy advocates, social workers, and sex workers identified as having been trafficked by carceral systems.

Musto points out that the drive for a response to trafficking located in the criminal legal system is the result of a combined effort

by government and a range of advocacy groups that have taken on the trafficking issue as part of a broader conservative morality politics. While all these groups produce an ideological discourse about wanting to help those who have been trafficked, their practices, rooted in the methods and logics of the criminal legal system, cause additional harms and fail to provide long-term help to stabilize the lives of participants. In addition, she points out that much of the sex-work activity targeted under the "trafficking" label is in fact consensual and the involvement of the criminal legal system in the lives of sex workers is almost entirely punitive. Throughout the book she takes seriously the statements and understandings of police and other actors in the criminal legal system, but balances this with how sex workers actually experience these systems as deeply harmful. Musto makes clear that the drive for a punitive approach to trafficking is part of a larger neoliberal project of framing social problems as individualized crime problems resulting from moral failure that should be managed through carceral interventions. This also helps explain the popularity of the kinds of public-private partnerships that drive a huge amount of suppression policing of sex work. Faith-based campaigners, under the banner of abolishing sex work, have found a sympathetic audience among many police and prosecutors and have managed to frame themselves as subject-matter experts who can collaborate with the carceral state in a way that privatizes policing.

Musto concludes that the criminal legal system is a poor tool for managing the problems of sex trafficking. She argues for a system of decriminalization that would bring sex work out of a hidden underworld that leaves sex workers more vulnerable to extreme exploitation. She also calls for the provision of essential services to those at risk of coercion, such as unhoused youth and undocumented migrants, to better allow them to avoid involvement in black-market economies and allow them greater avenues to report abuse and escape exploitative situations without the loss of housing and income.

In *Pacifying the Homeland: Intelligence Fusion and Mass Supervision*, Brendan McQuade (2019) describes the functioning of multi-juris-

dictional "fusion centers" that provide intelligence reports for law enforcement agencies within certain geographic areas. The project was the result of six years of research in the New York and New Jersey area, including time spent at fusion centers, interviews with participating law enforcement officers, and a community study in Camden, New Jersey. McQuade was able to gain direct access to two fusion centers to investigate the actual social functioning of this relatively new form of intelligence-led policing. They were created in the wake of 9/11 with the stated intent of beefing up the coordination and dissemination of intelligence with local and state police in the hopes of weeding out potential terror attacks, whether of foreign or domestic origin. McQuade shows that they quickly ran out of activities that could be connected to terror threats, which are extremely rare occurrences, especially around the locations of many of the centers. Instead, they pivoted to an "all threats" mission that often amounted to helping local police with various forms of computerized crime mapping and sometimes more complex "predictive policing" applications.

By looking at what these centers do, as opposed to the rhetoric surrounding them, McQuade was able to uncover the harms they produce in terms of both the suppression of political dissent and the criminalization of poor communities. He puts these centers into historical perspective by linking them to the long history of the use of police to monitor, harass, and criminalize social movements. He links the expansion of intelligence-led policing in Camden to a larger history of capital and state abandonment, in which mass criminalization serves as a bulwark against both organized political resistance to neoliberalism and a series of economic and social survival strategies deemed to be disorderly or criminal. McQuade makes no effort to suggest ways to reform the use of fusion centers to conduct either political policing or conventional crime suppression. Instead, he calls into question the legitimacy of using the police as a tool for suppressing social movements and addressing the deprivations of Camden through intensive and invasive policing. In this way he exposes the importance of policing to the state mission of facilitating systems of exploitation.

For the past several years, the Policing in Chicago Research Group has been working closely with community-based organizations to develop research agendas that look at the impacts of policing practices on those subjected to them. This research group is composed of former and current graduate students at the University of Illinois Chicago and supervised by Andy Clarno. Their research is designed to directly assist ongoing campaigns to push back against aggressive and invasive police practices. This work culminated in the book *Imperial Policing: Weaponized Data in Carceral Chicago* (Clarno et al. 2024). Chapters deal with the harms of focused deterrence and gang suppression policing, the police manufacturing of "terrorists" as a social category that expands police power and demonizes suspect groups, and resistance to the criminalization of immigrant communities. Each of these chapters is the result of direct collaborations with community members, including their involvement in agenda setting, data collection, and analysis.

Throughout the book, policing is understood as an inherently harmful intervention that subjects communities to significant human and social costs that contribute to injustice and even insecurity. The conclusion links these practices to the long history of policing as a tool for enabling colonization, slavery, and other forms of economic oppression and calls for replacing policing with alternative public safety strategies that prefigure a world in which systems of state-backed exploitation are eliminated.

CONCLUSION

The social movements responding to police violence in the last 10 years have increasingly organized their demands around an abolitionist framework that seeks to replace police functions with community-centered public safety initiatives that could move society toward more fundamental transformations rooted in ideals of justice, care, and solidarity rather than violence, coercion, and exploitation. Police researchers need to not only hear and accurately explain those demands but also embrace the theoretical frameworks that underpin these demands and utilize them in the organization of their own

[146.245.70.108] Project MUSE (2025-02-03 15:45 GMT) Brooklyn College Library

research agendas. While there are numerous examples of high-quality peer-reviewed research that takes this approach to heart, it is noteworthy how few of these studies are conducted by academics housed in sociology departments, even though so many of the intellectual underpinnings of abolition are widely espoused within our field. We need more sociological research on the criminal legal systems of police courts, jails, prison, parole, and other potentially carceral systems such as children's services, asylums, and schools. But we must do this in a way that does not presuppose the legitimacy of these institutions and the need to restore public confidence in them a priori. We must also look to expand our methods to include meaningful partnerships with those directly affected by systems of coercive state social control through modalities like participatory action research and the coproduction and cowriting of research monographs. Until we reject reform talk and police-centered research perspectives, it is the legitimacy of sociology that should be questioned.

REFERENCES

Baum, Dan. 1996. *Smoke and Mirrors: The War on Drugs and the Politics of Failure*. Boston: Back Bay Books.

Bierria, Alisa, Jakeya Caruthers, and Brooke Lober, eds. 2022. *Abolition Feminisms*. Vol. 2, *Feminist Ruptures against the Carceral State*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

Bittner, Egon. 1970. *The Functions of the Police in Modern Society*. Chevy Chase, MD: National Institute of Mental Health.

Brucato, Ben. 2023. *Race and Police: The Origins of Our Peculiar Institutions*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers U. Press.

Cheng, Tony. 2023. *The Policing Machine: Enforcement, Endorsements, and the Illusion of Public Input*. Chicago: U. Chicago Press.

Clarno, Andy, Enrique Alvear Moreno, Janaé Bonsu-Love, et al. 2024. *Imperial Policing: Weaponizing Data in Carceral Chicago*. Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press.

Go, Julian. 2016. *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory*. New York: Oxford U. Press.

Go, Julian. 2023. *Policing Empires: Militarization, Race, and the Imperial Boomerang in Britain and the US*. New York: Oxford U. Press.

Go, Julian, and Stuart Schrader, eds. Forthcoming. *The Imperial Entanglements of Policing*. Durham, NC: Duke U. Press.

Goodmark, Leigh. 2023. *Imperfect Victims: Criminalized Survivors and the Promise of Abolition Feminism*. Los Angeles: U. California Press.

Hallsworth, Simon. 2013. *The Gang and Beyond: Interpreting Violent Street Worlds*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hari, Johann. 2015. *Chasing the Scream: The First and Last Days of the War on Drugs*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Kaba, Mariame. 2021. *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transformative Justice*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

Kaba, Mariame, and Andrea Ritchie. 2022. *No More Police*. New York: The New Press.

Linnemann, Travis. 2016. *Meth Wars: Police, Media, Power*. New York: NYU Press.

Lopez, William. 2019. *Separated: Family and Community in the Aftermath of an Immigration Raid*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins U. Press.

McCoy, Alfred. 2009. *Policing America's Empire: The United States, the Philippines, and the Rise of the Surveillance State*. Madison: U. Wisconsin Press.

McQuade, Brendan. 2019. *Pacifying the Homeland: Intelligence Fusion and Mass Supervision*. Los Angeles: U. California Press.

Mills, C. Wright. 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford U. Press.

Mogul, Joey L., Andrea Ritchie, and Kay Whitlock. 2012. *Queer (In)justice: The Criminalization of LGBTQ People in the United States*. New York: Penguin.

Musto, Jennifer. 2016. *Control and Protect: Collaboration, Carceral Protection, and Domestic Sex Trafficking in the United States*. Los Angeles: U. California Press.

Neocleous, Mark. 2021. *A Critical Theory of Police Power*. New York: Verso.

Phelps, Michelle. 2024. *The Minneapolis Reckoning: Race, Violence, and the Politics of Policing*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton U. Press.

Richie, Beth. 2012. *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation*. New York: NYU Press.

Schrader, Stuart. 2019. *Badges without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing*. Los Angeles: U. California Press.

Seidman, Steven. 1994. "Symposium: Queer Theory/Sociology: A Dialogue." *Sociological Theory* 12 (2): 166–77.

Seigel, Micol. 2018. *Violence Work: State Power and the Limits of Police*. Durham, NC: Duke U. Press.

Sherman, Lawrence W. 1998. *Evidence-Based Policing*. Washington, DC: Police Foundation.

Sierra-Arevalo, Michael. 2024. *The Danger Imperative: Violence, Death, and the Soul of Policing*. New York: Columbia U. Press.

Simon, Samantha J. 2024. *Before the Badge: How Academy Training Shapes Police Violence*. New York: NYU Press.

Spade, Dean. 2020. *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity during This Crisis (and the Next)*. New York: Verso.

Stagoff-Belfort, Aaron, Daniel Bodah, and Daniela Gilbert. 2022. *The Social Cost of Policing*. Brooklyn, NY: Vera Institute of Justice.

Vitale, Alex S. 2021. *The End of Policing*. New York: Verso.