

How to research policing? Talk to people who have been arrested. 4 insights from 150 arrested individuals on the role and reform of the police.

Over past months, the Black Lives Matter movement's denunciation of police violence has been spotlighted in the wake of high-profile police killings of Black men in the United States. Over the past five years, the cities of Cleveland and Baltimore entered "consent decrees" to undertake civil rights improvements in their police forces after Federal Government investigations found evidence of overly aggressive policing. One of the conditions of the decrees in Baltimore and Cleveland was to ask arrested individuals whether any of these changes were noticeable in practice. In 2019, **Todd Foglesong** and **Ron Levi**, along with research teams, went to the jails in both Baltimore and Cleveland to speak with arrested individuals.

Tamir Rice, twelve years old and playing with a toy gun, was shot and killed by a Cleveland Police officer in 2014. Just five months later, Freddie Grey, 25 years old, died in custody from catastrophic spinal cord injuries, following his violent arrest by the Baltimore Police.

While in neither incident were officers convicted, the federal government's Department of Justice launched investigations into the constitutionality of policing in these cities. In response, the cities of Baltimore and Cleveland both signed "consent decrees" – agreeing to be monitored by federal judges as they undertake civil rights improvements in their police forces. Similar consent decrees had been negotiated before in dozens of cities in the United States. Yet one of the innovative conditions of the decrees in Baltimore and Cleveland was to ask arrested individuals whether any of these changes were noticeable in practice.



Date originally posted: 2020-09-28

Permalink: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2020/09/28/how-to-research-policing-talk-to-people-who-have-been-arrested-4-insights-from-150-arrested-individuals-on-role-and-reform-of-the-police/>

Blog homepage: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/>

This is precisely what our research teams did. We went to the jails in both Baltimore and Cleveland to speak with arrested individuals to hear what they had to say. Last year we spoke with nearly 150 people in these jails, within 24 hours of their arrest. We spoke with people about the experience of their arrest, about police use of force, and about crime and violence. We asked them about their feelings about their neighbourhoods and the priority for their cities. We asked whether they thought policing was improving or getting worse. And we asked them what they thought could be done. This is some of what we heard:

1. On police violence

People in both cities were clear about police violence. There were acknowledgments that police interactions can be harsh, and many referred to the need to call the police, as one individual said, to also “handle” residents who are “doing injustice.” Yet they persistently called out the gratuitous violence that they see police use in their neighbourhoods. What they saw led them to question the humanity, ethics, and professional integrity of police officers. As one interviewee said to us, “why have you got to slam people on the ground? Why have you got to push their face in the pavement? Why do you have to use derogatory words? That’s not right.” Some identified that good policing is precisely about refraining from violence. “The whole duty of a police officer, which is to teach people how to rise above and be better and get more organized... so the areas won’t be more chaotic,” one person concluded. Another said: “We didn’t call you to an aggressive situation to add to the act of aggression.”

2. On patterns of policing

Many people doubted the success of reforming the police without moral and financial investment in their communities. They had ideals of what policing could offer but expressed disappointment in the police they observed and encountered. People identified a contempt by many police officers for the communities in which they live. “In my neighborhood,” one person said, “they’re always looking for crime. They’re never like out to help people, they’re always looking to arrest or hurt somebody.” In the Baltimore City Detention Center, interviewees recounted that the police had “given up on our city” as a whole, always residing in the suburbs or commuting to work from a distance and simply “doing their time” in places they hated. Others said the contempt they detected was combined with a neglect of their neighbourhoods more broadly. As one individual recounted, “It’s not my fault, it’s the inner city. It’s not my fault it’s the drugs running. It’s not my fault this is where I grew up. This is where my family is. This is where the people I know are at.” People alluded to a combination of disdain and indifference, which [social science research](#) identifies as part of a pernicious pattern of racism and poverty.

3. On reimagining the police

A nineteenth century trope designed for the British police emphasizes that legitimate policing occurs with the “consent of the people.” No one used that term in the jails. The people we spoke with understood that consent is not enough, and what is needed is certainly more than mere compliance or acquiescence. They were not certain that the police as presently constituted could achieve what is needed. And as one individual told us, “You know, it’s not that people don’t want to be policed. But if...the way police are policing is not right, then the community can help.”

A number of the arrested individuals we spoke with imagined a new form of policing that could live up to their ideals. They wanted respect as equal citizens. But they also stressed the importance of compassion and acknowledgment of the inequality they experience on a daily basis. For some, the key was in changes to police recruitment. One of the people we spoke with hoped for “police officers who are really police officers,” who “care about what’s going on.” Another individual suggested that people who “really love the community” should be recruited into police forces. The specific language of [defunding the police and re-allocating resources to community well-being](#) was not widespread when we conducted these interviews. But interviewees referred directly to investing in neighbourhoods and identified the community as a reservoir of potential for the future. They spoke about schools, young people, and relationship-building. As one individual encapsulated it, “if you uplift the community, you might get uplifting results.”

4. On accountability

Police leaders we have spoken with asked for proof that police acted illegally. But the people we spoke with see accountability in broader terms. They want restraint and respect. They also expect an ethic of care for their community and their individual welfare. As we heard them, they want police leaders to publicly deplore police violence generally, not just when it is patently unlawful. They want police officers to contain or curb unnecessary force by their colleagues. They want police to help build community cohesion in neighbourhoods that face disinvestment and chronic disadvantage. They want a recognition of their experiences, and they are asking for social solidarity.

Want to identify new strategies for police reform? Talk to the policed.

There have been no new consent decrees since Donald Trump’s election. On November 7th, 2018, then Attorney General Jeff Sessions signed a memorandum requiring that any new consent decrees be approved by senior political appointees. Yet across the US, city governments are reflecting about how to respond to calls to transform the role and scope of policing. Arrested individuals are the people who are most often the object of adverse police action as well as those who suffer from its neglect. We should ask them.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

Image credit: Ted Eytan