

## **Panel Title**

*Abolishing the Police: Theory and Practice*

## **Panel Proposal Abstract**

In 2015 alone, law enforcement officers in the United States shot and killed 1,130 people (The Guardian, 2015). A majority of those killed were Black, Brown, and Native men in the prime of their lives. The deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and Freddie Gray at the hands of white police officers sparked uprisings against police brutality across the country. Arguably, these uprisings, alongside Black Lives Matter – a national movement for Black liberation – have provoked the most serious legitimacy crisis law enforcement agencies have faced since the 1992 L.A. riots, after L.A. Police beat Rodney King. In response, state actors, non-profit organizations, and many academics, including criminologists, have proposed a number of liberal reforms to address what many perceive as the twinned crisis of racialized mass incarceration and police misconduct. More importantly, challenges to the police are also coming from movements and individuals (and some criminologists) that call for abolishing these institutions outright. While Critical Criminologists have been debating prison abolition for a few decades, the issue of abolishing law enforcement remains under-theorized. This panel brings together scholar-activists who are thinking through strategies to replace the police. Written from an abolitionist perspective, the papers in this panel will examine the historical origins of the police, the recent riots in Baltimore and Ferguson that followed the non-indictments of the white police officers responsible for the deaths of Freddie Gray and Mike Brown respectively, as well as identify abolitionist alternatives to the police more generally.

## **Individual Paper Abstracts**

*“Abolish the Police!”*

*Looking at the forces that changed the common sense on law enforcement*

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There is currently a robust tradition of scholarship seeking abolitionist approaches to social problems, both within and outside criminology. Yet, this scholarship is conceptualizing abolition differently. Cohen, for instance, suggest that the term “abolition” refers to attempts at doing way with punitive responses to criminalized problems, usually focusing on alternatives that include dispute settlement and redress of wrong doing. At another level, scholars like Van Swaaningen argue that “abolition” is about eliminating state institutions that are no longer legitimate, which usually includes a call for the dismantling prisons. Further, Ignatiev presents a political abolitionist approach, one that argues for a link to working class movements that aim to destroy

entire systems of subjugation, such as white supremacy and patriarchy. This paper will outline different approaches, and then expand on the political abolitionist approach. Using the rebellions in Ferguson and Baltimore as examples, the paper will describe how sharp political conflicts shifted the common sense regarding law enforcement. As such, claims about abolishing the police resonate as plausible, at least for a moment. The paper will argue that it is the task of scholars not only to understand how abolitionist political moments open up, but also how to use these moments to further the possibilities of abolitionist practices.

*'We Don't Need the Police to Keep Us Safe':  
Identifying Abolitionist Alternatives to State Protection*

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Over the past five years, mass incarceration, police brutality, and evidence of systemic racial biases that plague every component of the criminal justice system has generated a consensus – held by a diverse range of people, including the general public, politicians on both sides of the aisle, non-profits, activists, and academics alike – that the system is “broken.” The question of how to address police brutality in particular has been widely debated, but generally rests on a (neo)liberal-reformist approach that promises solutions through technological innovations (i.e. body cameras), improved data collection, strengthened community-police relations, and more diverse and culturally responsive law enforcement personnel. However, what has been under-theorized is the idea of abolishing the police altogether. In this paper, I take up this provocation through an analysis of findings from the *(Re)imagining Public Safety Project (RPSP)*. RPSP sought to identify an abolitionist model and practice of safety from the perspective of people who have been directly impacted by racist policing and/or incarceration. In contradistinction to the forms of state protection exercised under the seemingly innocuous rhetoric of “public safety,” project participants’ theorized what I am calling insurgent safety. I understand insurgent safety as a set of locally determined practices and ethics that generate safety, not by attacking or reacting to the state, but by “squeezing out the state” (Smith 2010) through creation – by proliferating alternative structures of care, exchange, education, and pleasure that do not rely on banishment (via jail, prison, or deportation) or policing. As critical criminologists and scholar-activists, we must begin to take seriously the idea of police abolition. RPSP is a modest, but important effort to employ the imagination to radically (re)conceptualize safety beyond state protection.

*In the Service of Inequality: The Origins of Modern Policing*

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Most liberal accounts of policing focus on their role in maintaining social stability through the control of crime and disorder. This approach assumes that the state's primary interest is in maintaining the well-being of its members through the legitimate use of authority and if necessary force. Current police reform proposals such as the President's Task Force on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing, view recent abuses by the police as indicative of failures of adequate training and bureaucratic oversight. They fail, however, to capture the ways in which the current over policing of communities of color and the poor are the historical norm and consistent with their origins in the institutions of colonialism, slavery, and industrial labor management. This paper will explore those origins and show how these institutions speak to the core function of policing, which is the management of inequality. I argue that the chief aim of policing is and has always been the maintenance of existing unequal social relations, not the production of safety or justice, which exist as occasionally beneficial byproducts of a system of social control in search of just enough popular legitimacy to maintain itself. Therefore, proposals for changes to policing should focus on reducing their role and power, rather than enhancing their professionalization and legitimacy.