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## Defunding the Police: True Police Reform or Just Political Smoke and Mirrors? A Look at the City of Camden, New Jersey and Its Approach to Police Reform

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DEFUNDING THE POLICE: TRUE POLICE REFORM OR JUST POLITICAL  
SMOKE AND MIRRORS. A LOOK AT THE CITY OF CAMDEN, NEW  
JERSEY AND ITS APPROACH TO POLICE REFORM

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April 30, 2021



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## INTRODUCTION

The summer of 2020 brought police brutality to the forefront of society. The deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd at the hands of police officers ignited a firestorm of social justice movements. Black Lives Matter and other social justice organizations were calling for cities around the country to defund their police departments as a strategy for police reform. This strategy was largely unprecedented, and highly controversial. There was a lack of understanding of what defunding the police actually meant, as it seemed to mean different things to different people. The subtle suggestions of defunding the police quickly turned to demands being made. This caused policy makers, local and national officials and social justice activists to have exploratory discussions of the feasibility of the defunding the police. During that exploration, it was discovered that Camden, New Jersey had defunded their police department in 2012, and many people were suggesting that the city should be used as a model for other cities with similar social ills and embattled police departments.

This paper examines the Camden Police Department and its decision to defund the police. I examine the reasons, the methods and the results of the controversial decision, and use those findings to answer the questions:

1. Is defunding the police a viable strategy for police reform based on the example set by Camden, New Jersey, and
2. Should cities like Baltimore, MD consider Camden as a model to emulate.

To answer these questions there are four main areas included in my research and analysis.

1. I explain the history of the relationship between the Black community and the police.
2. I explore the true meaning of defunding the police and what it aims to achieve.

3. I analyze the experience of Camden, New Jersey, who defunded their police department in 2012.
4. I determine if defunding the police should be explored by Baltimore, MD, which is a similar city to Camden, NJ.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Historic Relationship Between the Black Community and the Police**

The relationship between the African American community and the police is one that is strained at best and loathsome at worst. It is a relationship rooted in distrust, abuse and broken promises. The ill relationship between the Police and African Americans dates back centuries, even to the days of the very first police forces in the United States. I will briefly describe events throughout history that have either caused or perpetuated the severely damaged relationship between the police and the African American community.

#### ***The Nation's First Police Forces***

The United States' first police forces were born out of hatred and corruption, with the Northern states and their Night Watch and the South with their slave patrols. In 1704, in the Carolina colonies, slave patrols were made up of 3-6 whip wielding, gun toting men on horseback, equipped with ropes whose primary function was to hunt and capture runaway slaves and either kill them or return them to their masters. (Olito, 2020) These patrols tortured and terrorized African American slaves in order to instill paralyzing fear in their hearts with the intent to deter other slaves from running away from the plantation. The slave patrols didn't end with the end of slavery, instead they morphed into formal police departments and vigilante groups such as the infamous Ku Klux Klan at the end of the civil war. (Kappeler, 2014) Because

many of the first police departments were formed from old slave patrols, the mistreatment of Black people became part of the foundational makeup that set the standard for policing. As much as the mistreatment of Black people became the status quo for the early police departments, it was met by fear and distrust which became ingrained in the minds of the people they brutalized. The northern, anti-slave states did not have slave patrols, because they did not have slaves. What they did have were Night Watchmen. In the 1630s the first Night Watch was founded in Boston. The Night Watch was composed of some volunteers and some criminals who were being punished. These Night Watches were created to protect the wealthy from criminal activity. As one could expect, the criminals in charge of stopping crime created a system of corruption. The Night Watchmen often drank and slept during their night shifts. (Olito) Night Watchmen eventually morphed into formal police departments and much of the immoral and criminal behavior became normalized. Though there were no slaves in the north, there were immigrants, freed Black people and other minorities; those groups tended to be the people that became the targets of the ill doings of the newly formalized police departments. With the murderous mob turned police forces in the South and the corrupt, drunken Night Watchmen turned police forces in the North, Black people in the United States began their relationship with law enforcement on a platform of fear and distrust, this would set the stage for centuries of tattered relations amongst the two groups.

### ***The Reconstruction Era***

After the Civil War, and the abolition of slavery, African Americans were on a quest to build communities and become a part of society. Many of those who had previously been enslaved, or had been born to newly freed parents, were eager to put their tortured past behind them in hopes of enjoying the rights and freedoms granted to them by the United States

Constitution. While African Americans were freed from slavery, they were still very much enslaved by the social norms of society, both in the North and the South. Laws that dictated how they lived, where they lived and with whom they lived, were sternly enforced by the police. Southern states created what is known as “Black Codes”. Black Codes were laws that dictated where Black people could work, how much they could earn and where and how freely they could live. (Dixon, 2020). The police were the enforcers of these laws, and often used brutality as their main enforcement tactics. Often when the Black Codes were violated, White citizens took matters into their own hands by terrorizing and even killing the Black offenders. When Black citizens would report these acts, the police often turned a blind eye or even punished them for attempting to report the crimes. The reconstruction period was the beginning of the realization for Black people that freedom from slavery did not necessarily guarantee them a life of freedom and set the tone of fear and distrust of police.

### ***Jim Crow Era and the Civil Rights Movement***

With the abolishment of the Black Codes by the 14th and 15th amendments to the Constitution, a new form of oppression of African Americans was created, accepted and practiced for nearly 100 years. That form of oppression was known as Jim Crow. Jim Crow laws were laws which made segregation legal, and anyone who attempted to defy those laws, and integrate, was considered a criminal. Amongst citizens, Jim Crow laws were enforced by violence and the threat of violence. The violence that was inflicted upon violators of Jim Crow was not seen as a crime, but rather, justice. Vigilante groups such as the infamous Ku Klux Klan rose to prominence during this time, with and terrorized Black citizens by beating them, bombing their homes and lynching them. (Dixon) The police seldom acknowledged these acts of violence, and often times were members of the Klan themselves. After years of oppression, the Civil

Rights movement began. Black people and sympathizers were fed up with segregation and not having the full rights of an American citizen. The role the police played in perpetuating violence against civil rights protesters was critical in the continued violence and mistreatment of Black people. This is evident in the events surrounding the civil rights march in Selma, Alabama. On March 7th, 1965, around 600 people peacefully began to march from Selma, Alabama to the state capitol in Montgomery. The march was organized in response to the lack of voting rights and also the police killing of Jimmie Lee Jackson, a 26-year-old church deacon, in Marion, Alabama. (Sorace, 2021) As they were leaving Selma, and attempting to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge, they were met by 150 State Troopers, sheriff's deputies and a mob of armed aggressors. The police and the mob attacked the marchers and brutally beat them. There was so much bloodshed, that the event became known throughout history as Bloody Sunday. Instead of upholding justice, the police officers involved in Bloody Sunday exercised excessive force and military tactics against American citizens, for the sole purpose of suppressing their voting rights and their right to live freely. While it is understood that the police do not make the laws, they do have a duty to protect and serve, which they did neither on that day. The police behavior at the Edmund Pettus bridge on Bloody Sunday was not unique. The police regularly practiced brutality and murder; Bloody Sunday was just one of the few times the entire nation was made aware. Given the terroristic tendencies of law enforcement, Black people grew more and more distrusting of the police and never felt protected by or from them. Events during this time period would have a lasting effect on society and have permanently etched the feeling of distrust into the minds of Black people for generations well beyond the Civil Rights movement.



## **RESEARCH METHODS**

I chose a qualitative research approach when exploring information contained in this paper. This is the appropriate approach for this paper, as I explore the various points of view surrounding the use of defunding the police as a viable strategy for police reform. Using articles and journals that describe the details surrounding the issue of defunding the police and those that provide an analytical assessment of the implications of such a controversial topic of police reform. I use archived data, such as crime rate trends, city and county financial information and other statistical data and analyzed this data to form a conclusion on whether defunding the police is a police reform strategy that should be duplicated by other cities who are looking to Camden, New Jersey as a model.

The resources I have chosen are mostly subjective in nature, leaning on one side of the defund the police issue or the other. I have been careful to ensure my research includes enough data from differing viewpoints to fairly develop my conclusions. My research includes some forms of statistical data such as crime rate trends and financial data. The period in which the sources were written are also important in determining credibility due to the nature of this controversial issue. Sources written recently since the social justice movements began may tend to include the writer's personal stance on the issue. I focused much of my attention on sources that were written about Camden's decision to defund the police, prior to the social unrest that was sparked during the summer of 2020, in an effort to explore non-biased sources. In conducting my research, I did notice that most of the articles were written around the June, 2020 timeframe. This is when the idea of defunding the police first began garnering national attention, and policymakers were beginning to have serious dialogue around the matter.

## **CURRENT CLIMATE**

Given the historic context presented in the earlier section, the following section expands the discussion of the current climate and calls for action related to police departments across the country. This discussion includes 1) a summary of recent events involving police departments, 2) calls to defund police departments and investigating what that means, and 3) trends towards militarization of police departments.

### **Recent Killings of Unarmed Black People**

In recent years the disproportionate number of police involved shootings of unarmed Black men and women in comparison to that of White people has been highlighted and discussed on national and even international platforms.

*“Since 2015, police officers have fatally shot at least 135 unarmed Black men and women nationwide, an NPR investigation has found. NPR reviewed police, court and other records to examine the details of the cases. At least 75% of the officers were white. The latest one happened this month in Killeen, Texas, when Patrick Warren Sr., 52, was fatally shot by an officer responding to a mental health call.”(Thompson, 2021)*

The public outcry for change sparked the birth of the Black Lives Matter organization. The organization’s aim is to bring awareness to the issues surrounding police shootings of unarmed Black people. Violence against Black people at the hands of the police was not new, in fact, as the earlier examples have shown, it dates back centuries; but after seeing case after case of police shooting unarmed Black people, something began to stir in communities across the country. There were three killings in particular that seem to set off a powder keg in the Black community, and whatever was already brewing, began to boil over. The killing of Michael Brown, in

Ferguson, MO, the shooting death of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, KY and the choking death of George Floyd, in Minneapolis, MN. People began to organize for justice. National and local social justice organizations organized marches and protests and made demands of the state and local governments and of the police departments. Social justice organizations created demands. They demanded that the police be held accountable for the killing of unarmed citizens. They called for an overhaul of the police departments, and total police policy reform. Those demands were somewhat common, and had been the same demands that have been made for years. One unique demand that began to circulate amongst the protestors for social justice was the demand to defund the police.

### **The Call to Defund the Police-What Does That Mean?**

Shortly after George Floyd was killed by a police officer who held his knee on Mr. Floyd's neck, social justice activists began calling for municipalities to defund their police departments. (Bates, 2020) Many cities in the United States have bloated police budgets. New York Police Department for instance has a budget of \$6 Billion and commands over 36,000 officers, an arsenal of military grade weaponry and equipment, and a history of corruption and violence. (Pan,2020) Social justice activists are questioning why a city in the United States would need so much combat equipment and resources and if that funding could be better used otherwise. The call to defund the police sent lawmakers into a frenzy, unsure of how to respond. They needed to fully understand what was being asked by the people in order to choose a side on the controversial issue. Policy makers are charged with the burden of ensuring the policies they put in place are ethically, morally and legally sound and that they bring no harm to the citizens. The decision was a delicate one; by not responding, it would appear to be condoning police brutality and rejecting police reform, while on the other hand, responding in favor would certainly

distance themselves from the police and those groups and citizens closely affiliated with the police.

On its face, the call to defund the police seemed to mean abolishing police departments altogether. That notion itself is a liability. As one digs deeper into the true meaning of defunding the police, the demand is not meant to permanently abolish the police, but as a method of police reform. The term is indeed polarizing, but it also caught the attention of cities around the country and caused them to begin having conversations about what defunding the police would actually mean. Defunding the police would actually reallocate funding from the police departments' budget and use it to fund community- based programs that focus more on crime prevention and community resources than criminal punishment. (Ray, 2020) The central thought behind defunding, or reallocating funds, is to rebuild a new police force in cities whose police departments have a long history of police corruption, violence, civil complaints.

Defunding the police would essentially cause the departments to reevaluate their entire department and temporarily abolish them and hire new leadership. That leadership would then rehire the properly trained existing officers who have a proven track record of excellence and hire brand new officers, with no existing ties to the current police department and train them using ethical police practices.

Advocates for defunding the police suggest that the corruption in some police departments is so embedded that the only way to heal is to first destroy and rebuild. This by no means suggests that the police should be abolished completely, but rather restructured in such a way that lends itself to a healthier relationship with the community. Another goal of defunding the police is to improve relations between the police and the mental health community. When someone is experiencing a mental health crisis and may be acting erratically, the only thing most

people know to do is to call 911. When doing so, the police show up and treat the situation as a high threat and often times the mentally ill patient ends up being shot and many times killed by the police officers who respond to the call. For example, in Salt Lake City, Utah, in the summer of 2020, a mother called the police to assist with her 13 year-old son, who was having an episode. She informed the police that her son was unarmed before they arrived. The police showed up, and shot her son multiple times, critically injuring him. (Treisman, 2020) That mother was left with many questions. She questioned why they shot him. She questioned why real bullets were fired, instead of rubber bullets. She questioned whether or not another submission tactic could have been used. She was given no answers. The truth of the matter is that police officers are not trained mental health specialists. They are not trained to know how to deal with a person experiencing a mental health episode. They are trained to neutralize threats. On that day, that 13 year-old boy was the threat, and he was neutralized. In this case, funding diverted from police departments could be used to hire trained mental health professionals to respond to calls such as the involving the teenager in Utah. Those professionals would know how to handle such a situation, and could properly deescalate the situation without bloodshed.

### **Further Questions about Defunding the Police**

Like most things, people are leery of the unknown, the issue of defunding the police is no different. It is largely unheard of, and only recently garnering national attention. Policy makers and citizens have questions, and many have speculated on the answers.

Policing is almost as old as this nation. With a profession that old, there are legacies that people want to protect, but also, current and retired police officers and their families are rightfully concerned about their jobs and their pensions if police departments are defunded. One economist, when evaluating the possibility of defunding Chicago's police department, suggested

that if the city's police department were disbanded and the duties taken over by the county of state, the city would still owe pensions to those who have earned them. Those pensions would be frozen in time and paid out at their value at the time of the disbandment. (Bauer, 2020) This of course is just one speculation, as different people attempt to examine all possibilities. Questions about public safety, the effects on city revenue and who would make the funding reallocation decisions are all questions that citizens and lawmakers grapple with while considering the notion of defunding police departments. With little historical data to draw from, decisions about which side of the issue to stand on are largely emotionally driven, which as literature on policy making teaches, is dangerous territory.

### **Recent Trends Toward a Militarized Police Force**

One of the major complaints of the social justice groups and many citizens is that the police operate too much like a military unit and have lost touch with the idea of community policing. The fact that police department across the country function more like a paramilitary organization than civil servants poses a threat to the safety of the citizens the police departments are sworn to protect and serve. From serving warrants to patrolling peaceful riots, the police use military gear and tactics when often times it is unnecessary to do so. One example of the safety of American citizens being threatened was seen during the multiple riots that took place during the summer of 2020. To disperse crowds, even those that were peaceful, police officers clad in military gear, pointed their rifles in the faces of protesters, recklessly fired rubber bullets into the crowd and repeatedly threw tear gas with no regard to where the tear gas capsules landed or who the rubber bullets struck. (McElrath, Tuberville, 2020). When police serve warrants, especially in poor neighborhoods, they use battering rams, flash bangs and other equipment typically used in battle. The police tend to take on a battlefield mentality, with the use of bomb proof trucks and

night vision goggles; while they do need to protect themselves, sometimes their posture creates a hostile situation, that may have otherwise been calm.

A 2017 study showed, in law enforcement agencies that use military equipment, officers are more likely to display violent behavior and are more likely to kill the civilians they are supposed to protect and serve. (Casey Delehanty<sup>1</sup>, Jack Mcwhirter<sup>2</sup>, Ryan Welch<sup>3</sup> and Jason Wilks<sup>4</sup>, 2017) Cities and their excessive budgets are not the sole reason police departments have become pseudo military units. The federal government has a hand in that as well. “President Bill Clinton signed into law H.R. 3230 (National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1997). The bill contains section 1033, which allows the Secretary of Defense to sell or transfer excess military equipment to local LEAs (Law Enforcement Agencies).” (Delehanty, et al.). This law was signed directly after Desert Storm when the War on Drugs had shifted to the War on Crime in America. The law was supposed to give law enforcement agencies the equipment they needed to govern the streets of our nation with its large increase in violent crimes. The 1033 program was like Christmas for some law enforcement agencies, many of which received millions of dollars worth of used or obsolete military equipment for free. In the decade between Jan 2010 and April of 2020, law enforcement agencies across the country received \$1.7B in military equipment and supplies via the 1033 program, and \$7.4B since the program’s inception. Some departments received far more than others. According to the chart below, Texas and California were the largest recipients of items from the 1033 program.

<u>State</u>	<u>Value of Equipment</u>	<u>Value per capita</u>
Texas	\$141,519,366	\$4.88
California	\$130,221,309	\$3.30
Tennessee	\$130,062,523	\$19.05
Florida	\$95,179,044	\$4.43
Arizona	\$91,577,274	\$12.58
Alabama	\$82,629,461	\$16.85
South Carolina	\$74,315,198	\$14.43
Ohio	\$65,049,414	\$5.56
Georgia	\$57,636,601	\$5.43
Michigan	\$49,757,677	\$4.98

To further determine which individual departments received the most equipment, refer to the chart below, which breaks down the recipients by department.

<u>Law Enforcement Agency</u>	<u>State</u>	<u>Value of Equipment</u>	<u>Value per capita</u>
Houston Police Department	TX	\$11,682,951	\$5.22
Las Vegas Metro Police Department	NV	\$8,995,931	\$14.66
Washington County Sheriff's Office	TN	\$7,501,075	\$57.98
Columbus Division of Police	OH	\$6,885,949	\$7.84
Ventura County Sheriff's Office	CA	\$6,605,678	\$8.13

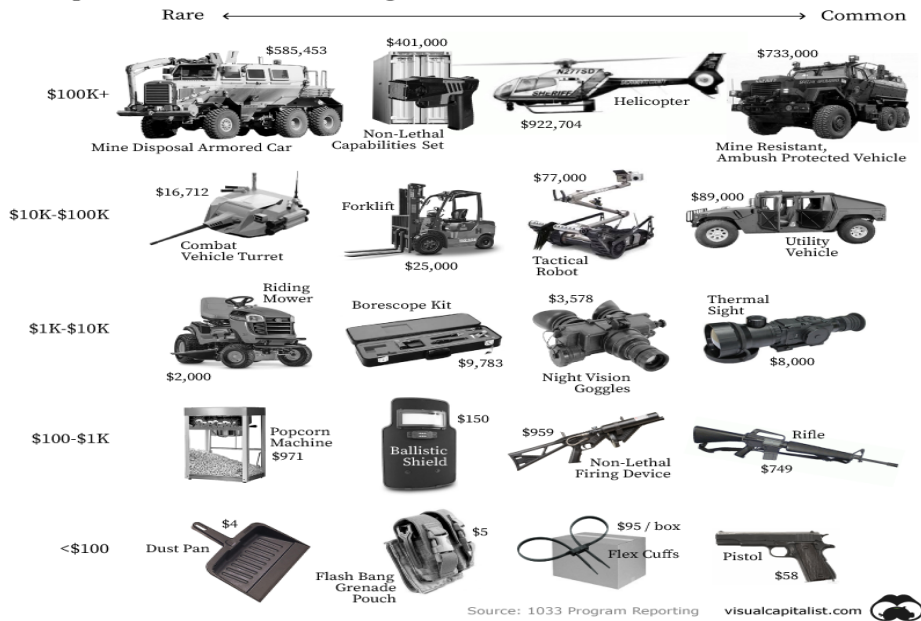


Columbus County Sheriff's Office	NC	\$6,596,927	\$117.66
Sacramento County Sheriff's Department	CA	\$6,142,009	\$4.33
Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office	CA	\$5,902,198	\$13.22
Hocking County Sheriff's Office	OH	\$5,865,008	\$207.51
Jackson Police Department	MS	\$5,823,634	\$40.55

Based on the per capita ratio in the above chart, it appears that some fairly small agencies either received a lot of equipment or the type of equipment they received were high value items. This is surprising, as one would expect the larger agencies to receive the most equipment.

The issue is not necessarily that the Department of Defense was willing to transfer its used and obsolete military equipment; it was the types of equipment that was transferred that causes alarm. The graphic below depicts the types of equipment and its value that agencies have received over the last decade. Some of the equipment shown should only be necessary in combat environments, yet police departments have them in their arsenal.

Example Items from the 1033 Program:



The federal government arming law enforcement agencies with combat equipment yet providing no oversight on its use is dangerous to the citizens of the communities where this equipment is deployed. Without proper regulations for its use, tactical equipment can and has been used in ways that instill fear and further militarizes the police departments.

The use of military equipment is just one aspect of the militarization of the modern police force. Training, leadership principles, and the qualities that are sought after when hiring the officers to serve on the police force, are other aspects that contribute to the military posture law enforcement agencies has assumed. Another contributing factor to the militarization of the police force is the fact that a large percentage of police officers are military veterans or are still serving as reservists. Research has found that though only 8 percent of the total workforce in the US have served in the military, 22 percent of law enforcement officers have prior military service. (Hussey, 2020). This is significant because those that have served in the military bring their military training, their combat experience and also their “us against the enemy” mentality along

with them. One deadly example can be found when examining an incident that took place in Albuquerque, New Mexico:

Iraq War veteran and Albuquerque police officer Martin Smith responded to a call about a suspicious black SUV. Seconds later, he shot and killed the unarmed motorist through the driver's side window. In court papers, lawyers for the dead man's family said Smith "later told his co-workers that he 'blacked out' and had a 'PTSD moment'" during the shooting. Smith had returned from deployment at a time when law enforcement across the country "was really trying to figure out how best to deal with the number of folks who were being activated," then-police Chief Ray Schultz said in depositions. According to court papers, Smith re-joined the force with a 100 percent disability rating, suffering from flashbacks, blackouts, and waking-nightmares; nevertheless, the department assigned him to patrol a high-crime area of town known as "the War Zone." (Meagher, Schwartzapfel, Weichselbaum, 2017)

The Justice Department and the International Association of Chiefs of Police put out a 2009 guide for police departments to help with their recruitment of military veterans. The guide warned: "Sustained operations under combat circumstances may cause returning officers to mistakenly blur the lines between military combat situations and civilian crime situations, resulting in inappropriate decisions and actions—particularly in the use of less lethal or lethal force." (Meagher, Schwartzapfel, Weichselbaum)

While it is typically seen as valued added to have served in the military prior to joining the police force, the lack of proper training in dealing with civilians in hostile situations can

prove to be problematic. Military veterans are highly trained and highly skilled in the art of combat and engaging the enemy, especially those who have actually served in a hostile war zone during their career. There is a huge difference in the posture a servicemember should assume when dealing with an enemy combatant and the posture a police officer should assume when dealing with citizens within the communities the officers are assigned to protect. The difference may not always be inherent to soldiers coming off active duty and joining the police force. It is imperative that leadership within the departments properly train and evaluate former military members when considering them for service in law enforcement. Creating a culture of community service and citizen protection, instead of combat soldier should be the goal of all law enforcement agencies.

## **CAMDEN, NEW JERSEY**

As the demands to defund the police grew louder, and the temperature of the debate continued to rise, those in favor of defunding the police looked for an example to use as the blueprint for crafting largely unprecedented policies to divert police funding to other areas of their cities' budgets. That city was Camden, New Jersey.

### **History and Demographics**

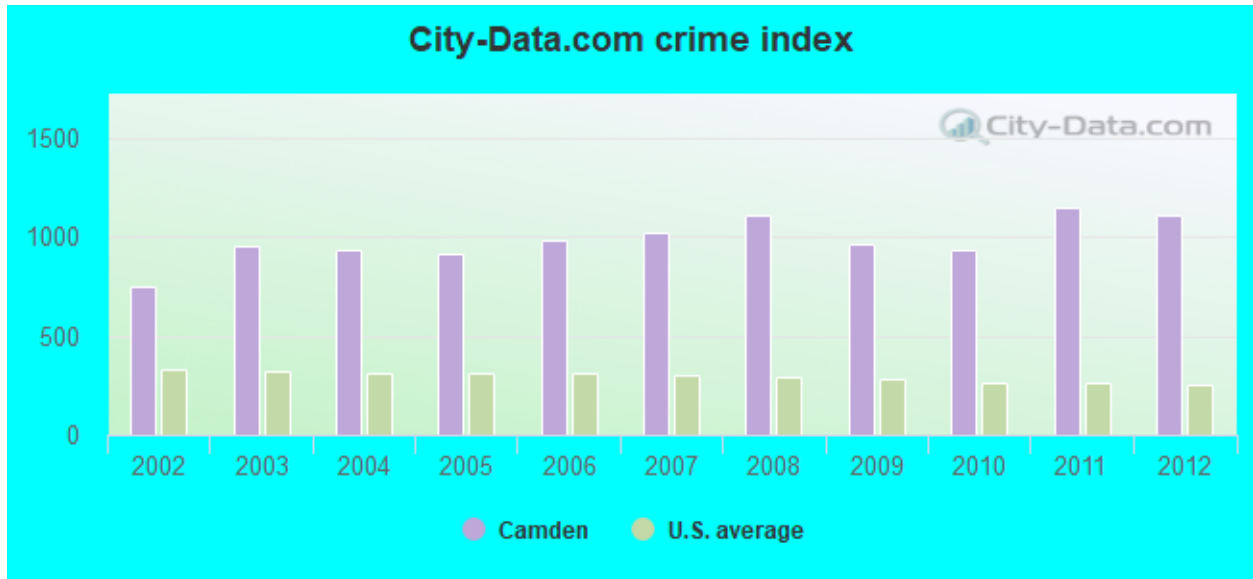
Incorporated as a city in 1828, Camden, New Jersey sits right across the Delaware river from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and is considered part of the Greater Philadelphia Metro Area. Camden was once a booming industrial city, and the birthplace of Campbell's Soup company, it remained as such until its industrial decline in the 1950s. With the deindustrialization of the city, Camden's population began to decline and the demographics began to shift. At one time, when the city was at the height of its prosperity, the population was almost all White. As the city began to experience a decline in industrial jobs, a phenomenon known as White Flight took place as

most of the White citizens moved to the segregated suburbs and the Black and Hispanic population grew. The chart below shows the continual shift of the demographic of the city of Camden, NJ.

Demographic profile	1950 <sup>[56]</sup>	1970 <sup>[56]</sup>	1990 <sup>[56]</sup>	2010 <sup>[9]</sup>
<a href="#">White</a>	85.9%	59.8%	19.0%	17.6%
— <a href="#">Non-Hispanic</a>	N/A	52.9%	14.4%	4.9%
<a href="#">Black or African American</a>	14.0%	39.1%	56.4%	48.1%
<a href="#">Hispanic or Latino</a> (of any race)	N/A	7.6%	31.2%	47.0%
<a href="#">Asian</a>	—	0.2%	1.3%	2.1%

### **The Rise of Crime Rates**

In the decades following the deindustrialization of city of Camden, as is common with many cities, the crime rate began to rise. It continued to rise until the city hit rock bottom in 2010. At that time with a population 77,000, according to Time magazine, Camden was the second most dangerous city in the United States. (Gibson, 2010) As depicted in the chart below, the crime rate in Camden was consistently above the national average from 2002 to 2012.



Poverty was a large contributing factor to the excessive crime, as 40 percent of Camden’s residents lived below the poverty line, with more than 3,000 abandoned buildings. (Landergan, 2020) As research has shown us, where there is poverty, there is crime, and where there are drugs, there is more crime. Camden had both, a high poverty rate and also high drug sales and usage. At one point, Camden was the hub for the drug trade, with 175 open air drug markets, and more than 80 percent of those arrested for drug sales, were from places other than Camden. (Maciag, 2014) This made Camden no more than a place to buy and sell drugs.

### **The City of Camden Police Department**

The now-disbanded Camden City Police Department has a sorted past. Over the years there have been many allegations of corruption, with several civil complaints against the city for police misconduct. “Lawsuits filed against the department uncovered that officers routinely planted evidence on suspects, fabricated reports and committed perjury. After the corruption was exposed, courts overturned the convictions of 88 people, the [ACLU reported](#) in 2013” (Andrew, 2020). By then, the police department had lost the trust of its residents. This trust began to erode

with divisions widening between citizens and the police during the first race riot of Camden in 1969. The riot was sparked by rumors that a police officer had beaten a young Black girl. Over 300 people took to the streets and rioted in anger over the police brutality, they had long suffered, and felt had this time gone too far. Two people were killed during that riot, one police officer and one young girl. It was reported that both were killed by a sniper. No arrests were ever made and no investigation was conducted into the alleged incident of the beating that sparked the riot in the first place. (Iaroslavtsev, 2018)

The city had time to heal for two years before the next incident would further shred the extremely thin fibers between the police and the citizens of Camden, New Jersey. In the summer of 1971,

“White police officers Gary Miller and Warren Worrel beat and killed, Rafael Rodriguez Gonzales (who identified himself to the police as Horacio Jimenez), a citizen of Camden with a Puerto Rican background. The city’s Hispanic population called for immediate justice, and for the suspension of the two officers responsible. When the city’s mayor, Joseph M. Nardi, took no action against the officers, another riot erupted. Starting on August 20th, angered Hispanics and other Camden residents took to the streets, demanding justice for the unprovoked murder. The riot produced 15 fires, 87 injuries, 300 arrests, and one death, prompting mayor Nardi to finally take action against the officers responsible. Initially the officers were only charged with battery, but after much public pressure, they were charged with murder. The jury responsible for their fate, however, acquitted the officers, charging them both with only manslaughter.”

(Iaroslavtsev)

The citizens of Camden, New Jersey and the police never quite repaired their relationship, then the crack epidemic took hold of the city in the early 1980s and introduced a totally different level of crime and crime fighting. The city of Camden was devastated and unable to recover.

### **Budget Concerns and the Need for Reform**

The city was bearing a lot of burdens. It was burdened with an extremely impoverished population, in a deindustrialized city, with a crime rate that marked it as one of the most dangerous cities in the country, and to top it all off, Camden, New Jersey was broke. In 2010 the city of Camden had a \$14Million deficit. In response to the huge financial deficit Camden found itself in, then Governor Chris Christie, called for wide spread budget cuts, in an effort to recover the \$10.7 Billion state deficit. Many cities were affected by the cuts, but Camden took a substantial blow, cutting \$59Million in aid from its budget. This huge cut resulted in laying off half of the police force in 2011, reduced services and even closing Camden's last library.

(Danley, 2020) The city was in dire straits. With budget cuts to the police department specifically, Camden was unable to properly staff the police force. With police union constraints coupled with the need to cut overtime dollars, there were times when there were only 12 officers on patrol during a shift. The police force decreased from 366 police officers in 2010, to 265 officers in 2011. The decrease in the police force had a catastrophic effect on the crime rate. Although total crime decreased by 4% from 2011, violent crime saw an increase; with an increase in murders from 47 to 67 and an increase in rape cases from 66 to 74 cases. (city-data.com) Lawmakers were in a quandary as to how to solve the problem of a murderous city and no money for a substantial police force. In 2012, the proposition was made to dissolve the Camden, New Jersey police department.



One may ask how a city with an increase in murders would even consider dissolving its police force. The answer is to save money and actually put more police officers on the streets of Camden. Camden, New Jersey, with the backing of then Governor, Chris Christie disbanded its police department and the responsibility of policing the city of Camden was transferred to the county. The police officers who served on the Camden City Police Department were all fired, and almost all of them were rehired by the new county police force. (Kalet, 2020)

### **The New Camden County Police Department**

The Camden County police department was formed based on the premise of cutting spending and consolidating multiple cities' policing needs under one department. Though the new county force had jurisdiction over all the municipalities in the county, its main focus was the city of Camden. Once the city of Camden essentially fired all of its police officers, the county rehired almost all of them, albeit at lower salaries and benefit packages. They also hired an additional 100 police officers, bringing the total officers to 418 in 2013. (Danley). The new force lacked diversity among the officers, with complaints the force was "much whiter and out of touch" with the communities they patrolled. New policies accompanied the new police force. With an effort to lower the crime rate, and declare the new department a success, the Camden County police force was tougher on crime than the City of Camden had seen in years. They adopted the controversial Broken Windows Policing policy. The Broken Windows policy is a method of policing that seeks to identify and aggressively prosecute small, petty crimes in an effort to deter more serious crimes. (Danley)

"The first year of the new force summonses increased for not maintaining lights or reflectors on your vehicle (421%) and for having tinted car windows (381%). Most

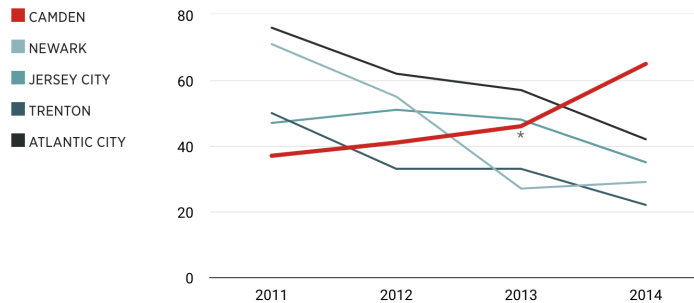
bizarrely, summonses for riding a cycle without a bell or a light shot from 3 to 339. The new force was cracking down.” (Danley)

The increase in police engagement with residents produced an increase in complaints of police brutality, and the new police force was behaving in similar ways to the old city of Camden police force.

### Excessive force complaints

Camden's excessive force complaint numbers are higher than cities with much larger populations and more police officers.

Hover to view the number of excessive force complaints.



\*Of the 46 complaints in 2013, 35 were against the Camden County Police Department, which took over policing in the city of Camden in May 2013. The other 11 were filed against the city's previous police department, which patrolled Camden prior to being disbanded.

It appeared that the Camden County police department, although it claimed to properly train its officers, was following the same trend of the former Camden City police, a high number of complaints of excessive force, with a low to zero substantiation rate.

“Yet of the 65 excessive-force complaints last year, all 44 that authorities completed investigating were dismissed. (Most of them were “not sustained”, meaning there was insufficient evidence to clearly prove or disprove the allegation.)

The remaining 21 were pending, according to the most recent data, obtained through a public records request. The Inquirer also reviewed excessive-force complaints dating to 2011, revealing that not one was sustained.”

Although the newly formed Camden County police department, experienced some criticism over its “Broken Windows” policing strategy, it has realized a reduced crime rate. “According to the department, the City of Camden has seen a 70% decrease in homicides and a 46% drop in violent crime over the past 7 years.” (Lamperiello, 2020) Some critics suggest that crime has not actually improved but the citizens have either reduced the number of crimes they report or the County is skewing the data in an effort to make the highly controversial decision to disband the city’s police department appear to be a success. While there is no way to prove or disprove those critics, there is a close eye being kept on Camden for being a trailblazer in the ways of radical police reform.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Since the high-profile deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, both killed at the hands of police officers, the country has been looking for an example of how to do policing the right way. Black Lives Matter, and other social justice organizations have shined the spotlight on Camden, New Jersey as an example of how disbanding the police can be a success story. While disbanding the Camden, New Jersey city police department did solve some problems, there has been no evidence to suggest that the social justice issues have been solved. The Camden Police department disbanded in 2012, while the demands for nationwide social justice reform did not began to be heard until 2020, it seems as though Camden, NJ happened to have a seemingly feel good story for social activists to highlight, without truly addressing the actual demands of the social justice movement. The demand to defund the police and start over with a new, properly trained force, was not met in the Camden NJ case study because the county rehired the same officers. The demand to stop over policing was not met, because the Camden County police department introduced the “Broken Windows” policy, which actually increased policing in the

neighborhoods, in an effort to deter bigger crimes. The demand to create community based policing and programs was not met, because the city of Camden completely disbanded their police force without creating any new programs. There is no evidence that the demand to demilitarize the police was met either, since most of the military equipment was not in the city's budget to begin with, but rather federally funded through the 1033 program. It seems that the only agenda that was satisfied was that of the mayor and governor, who wanted to decrease police spending at the city level and increase the police force. Both of those things were accomplished. Since receiving such heavy media attention, the police leadership of Camden, New Jersey has appeared to make an effort to host activities which spark positive engagement between the police and the citizens, however, there are plenty of residents who still question the motives, which means the long history of mistrust of the police still exists, though this could be a step in the right direction.

### **Recommendations for Defunding the Police in Similar Cities**

The term "Defund the Police" is one that is ambiguous with no real consensus among policy makers and activists about what it actually means. The city of Camden, New Jersey has been offered up as an example of a city riddled with police corruption, suffering from numerous complaints of excessive force and budget issues who disbanded its police force. I initially thought Baltimore, Maryland could benefit from modeling its police force after Camden, however, after further research, I have since decided otherwise. Camden, New Jersey only disbanded its police department because it was experiencing massive budget cuts yet needed a more robust police force, so it simply passed off the city's policing responsibilities to the county. While that was a very strategic fiscal move, it did not address the major concerns of the social justice movement, though the city's leadership did benefit from all the positive media coverage

the city has received. In order for the Camden County police department to truly address the social justice issues, there needs to be a full assessment of what the people actually need and a community task force focusing on those issues. Creating a bigger police force to save money but not allocate those funds to community development is in direct contrast to everything the social justice movement stands for, and therefore, I do not recommend any other city facing social justice issues use Camden as an example.

While I do not recommend Baltimore or similar cities to use Camden, New Jersey as a model to defund their police departments, I do have some suggestions based on the research I have done concerning the issues between the community, particularly the Black community and the police.

The main issue between the Black community and the police is and has always been a lack of trust from both sides. There also appears to be a dehumanization of the police by the Black community as well as a dehumanization of the Black community by the police. Neither sees the other as human beings. Both see each other as a dangerous threat, and often set aside the fact that they are all humans, with families and feelings. My suggestions for police reform instead of defunding the police center on ways to increase the communication between the two groups and form a more human connection.

### **1) Create Community Level Focus Groups**

As suggested by The Police Reform Organizing Project, community involvement is crucial in meaningful police reform. One way to do that is to create community level focus groups comprised of everyday citizens of the community. (The Police Reform Organizing Project, 2014) Include all age groups to ensure all aspects of the problems raised are discussed.

Develop a working list of issues and problems that the community has been facing that the police can help to solve.

## **2) Create Conversation Sessions Between the Police and the Citizens**

Conversation has a way of humanizing people. Once people understand another person's life situations, it helps each party to put their guard down and to show more compassion. The Black community especially, is suffering for a lack of compassion for the systemic problems many of its citizens face. Programs designed for police officers and citizens to have one on one conversations will assist in police in learning more about the actual lives that make up the communities they patrol. Operation Ceasfire, was a successful program implemented in Boston in the mid 1990s. This program involved repeat offenders and gang members working together with police to develop crime preventions strategies. Through conversations, police developed a relationship with the gang members and formed a truce. Police agreed to lighten up on policing as long as gang members vowed to control their fellow members and helped to reduce the killings. (Police Reform Organizing Project, 2014)

## **3) Abolish Citation and Arrest Quotas**

Many police departments will deny that citation and arrest quotas exist, however people have suggested that they actually do exist and are carried out. In policies such as the "Broken Windows Policing" implemented by Camden, New Jersey we can see how those policies could be seen as a policing quota. Giving officers a certain quota of citations to issue, or arrests to may lead to over policing, violence, and many times death. Removing those requirements and encouraging officers to use the least amount of policing necessary

will help to rebuild the trust between the citizens and the officers. In 2009, the Camden police union filed a suit against the city of Camden police department stating that some officers had been transferred to lower level positions, based on their low amount of stops and arrests. Although the department denies it, the officers claim the quota system was alive and well. (Ismaili, 2011) A report written by the Police Reform Organizing Project in 2014 offers abolishing arrest quotas as one of the ways police departments can reform their departments and reduce police violence.

Policy makers have a responsibility to citizens to create policies that benefit the overall communities which they serve. Doing so requires research, community outreach, and compassion for the people. Policies surrounding hot button issues require extra care in ensuring that the policies are fair and equitable for all affected. Social justice advocates have been calling for cities to defund their police departments and suggesting Camden, New Jersey as a city to model their police reform policies after. Defunding the police is definitely a hot button issue that affects entire cities. Given that fact, policy makers and city officials need to ensure they have explored all facets of the strategy and considered alternatives before rushing to pattern themselves after Camden, New Jersey.

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