

WHY WE SHOULD UNBUNDLE THE POLICE

Lauren Lyons

THE ALARMING RECURRENCE of unjustified killings by police highlights systemic issues that should be deeply concerning to us all. Beyond excessive use of force, the police treat marginalized people in disproportionately harmful ways that reflect and perpetuate endemic injustice; they respond inappropriately to complex social and public health problems like homelessness, addiction, and mental illness, risking harmful escalation and exacerbating underlying issues.¹ Police culture tends towards cynical authoritarianism, adopting an “us-versus-them” mentality that positions (at least a subset of) citizens as adversaries.² All of this has resulted in severely diminished public trust in the police, fraught police-community relations, and rising skepticism of the legitimacy of policing institutions.³

Public outcry over these problems has catalyzed the ongoing Black Lives Matter movement. The police murder of George Floyd was followed by mass protests in the summer of 2020, and since then, there has been widespread public debate on how to mitigate police violence and the distrust it engenders. Some call for incremental reforms, like changing laws and policies governing police use of force or strengthening misconduct reporting and decertification processes.⁴ Others demand that we reimagine the role of policing in our institutional landscape, reallocating powers, resources, and responsibilities from the

- 1 On police brutality, see Zimring, *When Police Kill*; Ralph, *The Torture Letters*; the *Washington Post* police shootings database (2015–2024), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>; and Mapping Police Violence, “2024 Police Violence Report.” On race and policing, see Butler, *Chokehold*; Ritchie, *Invisible No More*; and Davis, *Policing the Black Man*. On policing poverty and the effects of policing on people with addiction, housing insecurity, and mental illness, see Macaré et al., *Who Do You Serve, Who Do You Protect?*; Clifford, *Policing, Mental Illness, and the Media*; Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*; and Vitale, *City of Disorder*.
- 2 See Balko, *Rise of the Warrior Cop*; and Sierra-Arévalo, *The Danger Imperative*.
- 3 See Bell, “Police Reform and the Dismantling of Legal Estrangement”; Goldsmith, “Police Reform and the Problem of Trust”; and Brown and Lloyd, “Black Americans Less Confident, Satisfied with Local Police.”
- 4 For an overview of the state of these sorts of reforms in the United States, see Subramanian and Arzy, “State Policing Reforms Since George Floyd’s Murder.”

police to other institutions.⁵ The goal of this paper is to refine and defend this reallocative demand, which I refer to as the *unbundling proposal*.⁶

There has been a promising uptick in philosophical discussions of policing in recent years. Some focus on principles to guide police conduct, often drawing on theories of self-defense and professional ethics.⁷ Philosophers also propose measures to address police misconduct such as expanding legal statutes to outlaw harmful tactics, revoking the licenses of bad actors, providing reparations to victims of police violence, implementing self-evaluation and evidence-based improvements to departmental policy, restructuring police departments, broadening police participation in harm reduction and other forms of nonviolent order maintenance, and avoiding tactics that heighten the risk of illegitimate policing.⁸

These strategies, especially when combined, can improve policing. Rather than a discussion of their comparative merits and disadvantages, I present and defend an alternative ameliorative approach. The unbundling proposal asks not how police should act but rather what the scope of policing should be: Which situations require police presence? In the ethics of war, we distinguish between *jus in bello* (the ethics of conduct in war) and *jus ad bellum* (the ethics of whether war is justified). The unbundling proposal addresses an issue that is analogous to *jus ad bellum* considerations: when police should be deployed (instead of how they should behave).⁹ This approach complements rather than

- 5 Some organizations that support the reallocative demand include MPD150 (Minneapolis), Critical Resistance (international), Project Nia (Chicago, New York), Interrupting Criminalization (United States), and the Oakland Power Project (Oakland). Some influential defenses of police abolition and reallocative measures include Kaba, “Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police”; Vitale, *The End of Policing*; Maher, *A World Without Police*; Kaba and Ritchie, *No More Police*; and Purnell, *Becoming Abolitionists*.
- 6 The term ‘unbundling’ was coined by musician and activist Trevor McFriedies (Thompson, “Unbundle the Police”) and has entered common usage. Some illuminating discussions of unbundling include Thompson, “Unbundle the Police”; Thacher, “Shrinking the Police Footprint”; and Friedman, “Disaggregating the Police Function.”
- 7 See Hunt, “Policing, Brutality, and the Demands of Justice”; Monaghan, “The Special Moral Obligations of Law Enforcement” and *Just Policing*; and Page, “Defensive Killing by Police.”
- 8 On expanding legal statutes and revoking the licenses of bad actors, see Hunt, “Policing, Brutality, and the Demands of Justice”; and Jones, “Police-Generated Killings.” On reparations for police violence, see Page, “Reparations for Police Killings.” On reforms to departmental policy, see Monaghan, “Legitimate Policing and Professional Norms.” On restructuring police departments, see Monaghan, *Just Policing*, ch. 8. On police participation in harm reduction, see Monaghan, “Broken Windows, Naloxone, and Experiments in Policing.” On avoiding tactics that heighten the risk of illegitimate policing, see Monaghan, *Just Policing*, chs. 3–6.
- 9 Alice Ristroph draws several helpful analogies between the ethics of war and criminal law, arguing that philosophical and legal approaches to punishment should adopt a *jus in bello*-inspired principle aimed at limiting the violence of punishment—what she calls *jus*

conflicts with many proposed reforms, but it also addresses a broader and less examined issue. Moreover, despite substantial public support, there has been no sustained discussion of unbundling in analytic ethics and political philosophy, and the attention the proposal has received is largely critical.¹⁰

The unbundling proposal is connected closely to movements to defund and eventually abolish the police. The slogan “defund the police” really means “defund and refund,” with activists calling for cutting police funding *and* reallocating it to other nonpolice institutions and community organizations.¹¹ As such, “defund, refund” is one public finance-focused component of the broader unbundling proposal. For abolitionists, unbundling and other measures that reduce the scope and power of the police are critical steps toward ultimately dismantling the institution. Though I am not defending abolition here, the discussion should (1) clarify the practical action strategy of police abolitionists and (2) offer a more robust and appealing picture of the defund demand.¹²

The structure of this paper is as follows. In section 1, I present the unbundling proposal, identifying the specific dimensions of policing that proponents argue should be unbundled and reallocated. There I also discuss the definition of policing upon which unbundling is based. Then, I present a novel set of normative arguments for unbundling that reflect various rationales emanating from policing-critical social movements. The case for unbundling is strongest if we take them in tandem. The first two arguments (section 2) draw on principles

in poena. She does not explicitly link *jus ad bellum* and the scope of policing introduced here, but she does discuss how interpersonal morality-focused approaches to punishment tend to obscure the role of the state as the agent of violence. See Ristroph, “Just Violence.”

- 10 Joseph Heath, Luke Hunt, and Jake Monaghan critically discuss proposals related to unbundling. Heath warns of the “deleterious consequences” of removing police from order maintenance, citing potential increases in crime and police violence (“The Challenge of Policing Minorities in a Liberal Society”). Hunt raises similar concerns with “reallocative policing,” though he is open to piecemeal reform (“The Limits of Reallocative and Algorithmic Policing”). He questions how reallocative measures would work given high gun ownership and the *definition* of policing upon which reallocation is based. Critiquing abolitionism, Monaghan poses a similar challenge about defining policing, noting that all alternatives to policing involve some form of social control and thus policing, meaning “the risk of unjust policing is always with us” (*Just Policing*, 17). Elsewhere, Monaghan advocates restructuring police departments to separate law enforcement from order maintenance (*Just Policing*, ch. 8). My proposal extends this idea, arguing that police should not be involved at all in routine order maintenance.
- 11 Kaba and Ritchie, *No More Police*; and Vitale, *The End of Policing*.
- 12 Daniel Fryer argues that police abolitionism does not “provide a structured and clear vision of radical change” (“Idealizing Abolition,” 558). My sense is that while some proponents talk about abolitionism in terms of grand idealizations, others focus on concrete ways that we can build “new non-police institutions” (561). One goal of this discussion is to shed light on these tangible alternatives.

of institutional design. I argue first that we should unbundle policing because public institutions with violent capacities should have narrow mandates; nonviolent, noncoercive responses to social problems should be the default. I then claim that unbundling constitutes a better distribution of epistemic labor. Catchall order-maintenance policing is epistemically overdemanding, while more narrowly defined roles foster better expertise and outcomes. The argument in section 3 centers on the effects of policing in unequal societies with historical injustice—specifically, how policing disproportionately burdens Black people, other people of color, and members of marginalized groups, driving structural injustice. I aim to reconstruct one argumentative thread that leads us from (1) these unfair effects to (2) the unbundling proposal. In doing so, I address the broader question of what forms of solutions are appropriate when institutions are infected with injustice, suggesting that in this case and others, justice-undermining effects require us to turn towards extra-institutional, reallocative measures. My hope is that the paper will be interesting for skeptics *and* advocates of unbundling and related proposals, adding some clarity to divisive debates and expanding the library of solutions to the pressing problems with policing defended within philosophy.

1. THE UNBUNDLING PROPOSAL

Though cutting police powers, responsibilities, and funding has gained prominence in recent social movements, it has a long history in Black radical and abolitionist organizing.¹³ Today, unbundling and police abolitionist movements are vast and varied.¹⁴ I present and defend one version of the unbundling proposal, reflecting key demands from these movements, in order to set a clear target for arguments and objections. To understand unbundling, we must first consider current policing practices, as they set a baseline for reallocative measures. In his seminal book *The Ethics of Policing*, John Kleinig argues that (contrary to popular opinion) police work is best characterized as “social

13 Historian Robin Kelley describes how “abolishing the police is not the brainchild of some extreme left-wing think tank,” noting that the Black Panther Party was formed “to monitor police violence, to create community-based models of public safety, and to provide for the social needs of Black communities where the state failed” (“What Abolition Looks Like, From the Panthers to the People”).

14 There are a variety of organizations around the world, especially in the United States, working on unbundling, defunding, and abolishing police. Some include MPD150 (Minneapolis), Critical Resistance (international), Project Nia (Chicago, New York), Interrupting Criminalization (United States), and the Oakland Power Project (Oakland).

peacekeeping,” as opposed to crime fighting.¹⁵ He finds that most of police officers’ time is spent doing non-crime-related social service activities such as “intervention in family crises, searching for lost children, rescuing animals, directing traffic, supervising crowds, visiting schools, assisting the elderly, and so on—or in various administrative tasks.”¹⁶ In his view, while police are the “repositories of coercive power,” their central role is “to ensure or restore peaceful order.” Decades of empirical research support this, finding that police indeed spend most of their time doing routine, catchall order maintenance.¹⁷ A 2020 *New York Times* analysis by Jeff Asher and Ben Horwitz of police activity in three jurisdictions illustrates this characterization.¹⁸ Using police dispatch data, they found that noncriminal calls dominated the workload of officers: they made up about 37 percent of calls in New Orleans, Louisiana; 37 percent in Montgomery County, Maryland; and 32 percent in Sacramento, California. By contrast, violent crime calls accounted for around 4 percent in each city, while the remaining share was split among traffic incidents, property crimes, proactive patrols, medical or other assistance, and miscellaneous “other crimes.”

The unbundling proposal questions the social peacekeeper model of policing that is the status quo. Requiring police to be the default response to diverse and complex social problems drives police violence and incompetence. Because of this, we should carve off many of these responsibilities. Proposals about what sorts of powers and responsibilities should be reallocated vary, though proponents tend to focus on reallocate measures in five areas, all of which offer paths towards unbundling.¹⁹ My aim is not to offer a comprehensive positive proposal about how we can maintain social order without police but rather to point to some responsibilities that can be plausibly reallocated from police to other institutions. Determining the details about how those other institutions should operate requires attentiveness to context-specific concerns as well as experimentation and revision.

15 Kleinig, *The Ethics of Policing*.

16 Kleinig, *The Ethics of Policing*, 23. Brandon del Pozo also discusses this motley bundle of police duties (*The Police and the State*, 10–12).

17 See Ratcliffe, “Policing and Public Health Calls for Service in Philadelphia”; Webster, “Police Task and Time Study”; Wuschke et al., “What Do Police Do and How Do They Do It?”; and Bittner, “Florence Nightingale in Pursuit of Willie Sutton” and “The Police on Skid Row.”

18 Asher and Horwitz, “How Do the Police Actually Spend Their Time?”

19 Some sources upon which this version of unbundling is based include Friedman, “Disaggregating the Police Function”; Kaba, “Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police”; Kaba and Ritchie, *No More Police*; Karma, “4 Ideas to Replace Traditional Police Officers”; Thompson, “Unbundle the Police”; and Vitale, *The End of Policing*.

The first area of intervention is to institute social service–based crisis response. Police are currently responsible for addressing the downstream failures of other social systems, in particular, managing the complex and interrelated problems of serious mental illness, addiction, and homelessness.²⁰ These issues should not be within the purview of the police but rather managed by community organizations and public institutions more narrowly trained and equipped to deal with them. Social service–based crisis response programs have been instituted throughout the United States and elsewhere. For instance, in Eugene, Oregon, many 911 calls are directed to a program called Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets (CAHOOTS). This publicly funded program has handled calls related to homelessness, addiction, disorientation, and serious mental illness since 1989.²¹

A second intervention tasks trained civilian de-escalators to (1) intervene in minor disputes and (2) promote community safety through patrols. Police presently deal with a variety of minor conflicts related to noise, pets, trespassing, nonviolent arguments, and so on. Domestic violence also comprises a substantial proportion of emergency calls.²² Police are also present in many schools, where their role has expanded beyond responding to serious threats to include addressing routine behavioral issues. Evidence shows that police presence in schools tends to increase suspensions, expulsions, and student arrests—part of the broader phenomenon of the criminalization of school discipline that disproportionately affects marginalized students.²³

In a variety of cases, mediation and de-escalation by unarmed trained professionals without the coercive tools of the criminal law are preferable to potentially escalatory police responses. In some models, community safety

20 Thacher, “Shrinking the Police Footprint.”

21 CAHOOTS dispatches two-person medical teams equipped to deliver “crisis intervention, counseling, mediation, information and referral, transportation to social services, first aid, and basic-level emergency medical care.” Of an estimated 24,000 CAHOOTS calls in 2019, only 311 required police backup. See the case study on CAHOOTS in Vera Institute of Justice, “Behavioral Health Crisis Alternatives.” CAHOOTS is funded by the police budget, however, which may be objectionable for some proponents of unbundling. Many places have adopted similar models. San Francisco has opted to dispatch unarmed civilian responders in noncriminal matters such as neighbor disputes, calls about homeless people, and school discipline issues. Albuquerque has created a new category of first responder (beyond police, fire, and EMTs) to dispatch in noncriminal emergencies. Both models are described in Friedman, “Disaggregating the Police Function.”

22 Friedman, “Disaggregating the Police Function,” 952.

23 See Weisburst, “Patrolling Public Schools”; Mowen and Brent, “School Discipline as a Turning Point”; and Sorensen et al., “Making Schools Safer and/or Escalating Disciplinary Response.”

professionals can issue citations but are unarmed and do not have the power to arrest.²⁴ Police also dedicate significant time to patrolling areas where there is a high risk of violence and to monitoring events like concerts and protests; this work could be reallocated to civilian de-escalators as well.

A third intervention is to institute a civilian traffic patrol system. Police in the United States make over twenty million traffic stops per year.²⁵ Some of these interactions escalate and have devastating consequences. According to a report by Mapping Police Violence, in 2024, 154 people were killed by police following traffic violations.²⁶ One way to reduce the incidence of violence in routine traffic interactions is to decouple traffic enforcement and the criminal legal system. Many jurisdictions have systems like this. One example is Highways England, which deploys unarmed traffic officers in nonpolice vehicles to enforce traffic laws through civil means. As described by Barry Friedman, the “law can be brought to bear without force anywhere nearby.”²⁷

Finally, any reasonable version of the unbundling proposal involves a class of specialized violence responders who are trained and equipped to deal with serious and violent emergencies. In some situations, it is necessary for them to be armed. From an abolitionist perspective, these institutions ought to be distinct from the police, created from the ground up with different training, rules, and procedures. On a more moderate unbundling view, we should do away with most of the present police roles, personnel, and responsibilities, shrinking the size of police departments so that they only intervene in instances where force is potentially required—in other words, reallocating many police powers and responsibilities while keeping some of our present institutional architecture in place.²⁸

24 Civilian de-escalation and patrol programs have been successfully implemented in France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Australia, and South Africa. See Gray, “Community Safety Workers.”

25 For this data and more, see the Stanford Open Policing Project, <https://openpolicing.stanford.edu/>.

26 Mapping Police Violence, “2024 Police Violence Report.”

27 Friedman, “Disaggregating the Police Function,” 960.

28 Currently, 911 dispatchers decide whether to send police, firefighters, medical services, or other responders, often erring on the side of caution by deploying multiple services. Expanding the list of dispatch options by unbundling may complicate these initial decisions. To address this, some cities have introduced nonemergency lines to ease the load on 911 dispatch, and additional dispatcher training can help them recognize situations suited to alternative responders. For example, in Eugene, dispatchers receive training to identify nonviolent cases with mental health components, routing them to CAHOOTS. As with current dispatch systems, mistakes are inevitable. But while sorting calls is challenging,

Proponents of unbundling emphasize that these reallocative measures must be installed alongside increased investment in upstream social support and violence prevention. This dimension of unbundling, unlike the others, does not question police responsibilities; rather, it asks that we take the complex social causes of violence and antisocial behavior seriously and invest in nonpunitive ways to prevent them before they occur. Most concretely, upstream crime prevention entails increased resources for health care, housing, mental health and addiction support, neighborhood improvement, community organizations, and education to reduce social strain and harmful behavior. The scholarly consensus among criminologists and sociologists is that these upstream social reforms effectively curb crime and other forms of violence.²⁹ Broadly implementing them may render much of what is presently police work “obsolete” in the long term since it will reduce the incidence of problems that demand responses in the first place, as framed in Angela Davis’s work on prison abolition.³⁰

You should now have a more concrete sense of what the unbundling proposal involves. Using the catchall order-maintenance model of policing as a

investing in specialized dispatcher training for new response options is more efficient than broadly training police to handle every type of crisis.

- 29 There is broad scholarly consensus that crime rates are negatively correlated with levels of welfare assistance and participation. See, e.g., Deshpande and Mueller-Smith, “Does Welfare Prevent Crime?”; Foley, “Welfare Payments and Crime”; and Hannon and DeFronzo, “Welfare and Property Crime.” Improvements to the built environment (e.g., greening vacant lots, improving lighting) are also effective. See Eck and Guerette, “Place-Based Crime Prevention.” There is also evidence that supports the preventative capacities of education and youth programs (especially youth employment programs). See Modestino, “How Do Summer Youth Employment Programs Improve Criminal Justice Outcomes, and for Whom?” Moreover, health care and mental health/addiction treatment access is correlated with lower crime rates. See Bondurant et al., “Substance Abuse Treatment Centers and Local Crime”; and Vogler, “Access to Health Care and Criminal Behavior.” Measures to increase access to affordable housing and reduce neighborhood segregation are also effective. See Chyn, “Moved to Opportunity”; and Freedman and Owens, “Low-Income Housing Development and Crime.” Finally, investment in community organizations is correlated with significant reductions in violent crime. See Sharkey, “Why Do We Need the Police?”
- 30 Davis, “Are Prisons Obsolete?” Another related approach is to restructure existing institutions so as to reduce the necessity of police response, as suggested by David Thacher (“Shrinking the Police Footprint”). Thacher discusses the case of Paducah, Kentucky, where at one point, nearly one in every seven calls handled by the police were initiated by two Walmart stores (largely for shoplifting). In response to this, the police met with store managers and encouraged them to reduce opportunities for shoplifting. Thacher argues that sometimes we should “force recalcitrant institutions to take more responsibility for their own problems” (75). The background view is that police step in when other institutions fail.

baseline, implementing these five interventions would dramatically reduce the size and scope of policing, thus shrinking its institutional footprint.

1.1. *Unbundling and the Definition of Policing*

Before turning to arguments for unbundling, I address an important conceptual issue. The idea that we should reallocate powers and responsibilities from police to other institutions relies implicitly on a definition of policing. What then, precisely, is the most suitable definition?³¹ In common language, we use the word ‘police’ in various ways. It is intelligible to say, “Instead of police, social workers should respond to mental health crises.” And for someone to respond, “Well, social workers are still police!” There are two senses of policing evoked in this exchange.

One is a narrow, formal, and institutional sense of Policing (which will be denoted with an uppercase *P* for clarity in this section), whereby Policing is defined with respect to a formal, specified role within our legal and political system. Laws and policies determine the mandate and official capacities of the Police. Some central distinctive powers include interrogation, search, issuing summons, and arrest. Institutions confer the title of Police to government officials who undergo relevant training and have these capacities. Framed otherwise, Police are just those who have the Policing role within law enforcement agencies, which include local police departments, sheriff’s offices, state police, and highway patrol. On this definition, we may claim, “Well, they aren’t really Police; they are just mall security.”

Alternatively, we may adopt a broad, informal, and practice-based understanding of policing, evoked in the claim that “social workers still police.” This definition of policing (denoted with a lowercase *p*) involves coercive norm or rule enforcement. The implication is that teachers who enforce codes of conduct police; people who monitor parking meters and give out tickets police; and child protective services agents who tell parents to change their behaviors police. This definition also has the rather counterintuitive implication that abolitionist protesters may themselves be “police” if they take on distinctive policing roles like directing traffic.³²

31 This issue was helpfully raised in detailed comments from an anonymous reviewer. Similar issues are discussed in Hunt, “The Limits of Reallocation and Algorithmic Policing, 29; and Monaghan, *Just Policing*. Monaghan in particular worries that the alternatives proposed by abolitionists and others still amount to police, as he defines policing broadly as coercive social control. As he claims, “all abolitionist alternatives involve social control and the policing of public space,” and as such, “the risk of unjust policing is therefore always with us” (17).

32 Del Pozo, *The Police and the State*, 87–88.

The unbundling proposal implicates the first sense of Policing, maintaining that Police departments ought to have fewer roles and responsibilities than they currently do. Adopting the formal, institutional definition of Policing is required to render the familiar components of the proposal intelligible—e.g., “We shouldn’t have Police enforcing traffic regulations.” Correspondingly, if we employ the informal definition of policing, we cannot intelligibly claim that we should reallocate “police powers and responsibilities,” given that policing, informally defined, is capacious and not confined to a discrete set of actors; we cannot reallocate a social practice. Moreover, the various actors who take up the roles currently assigned to Police will “police” in the broad, informal sense. Jake Monaghan makes this point, claiming that unbundling-style alternatives constitute policing as they are “still an expression of a claim of social control.”³³

The unbundling proposal is consistent with and even fundamentally based on the scholarship on policing (discussed above) that shows that Police do far more than what is specified by their formal, institutional duties; crime fighting and law enforcement comprise only a small part of the job. Proponents of unbundling agree with the important *descriptive* claim that the Police currently fulfill these roles beyond their narrow official mandate, but they resist the *normative* claim that this ought to be the case, arguing instead that we should carve off some of the roles and responsibilities currently aggregated within the social peacekeeper model of policing.

This normative claim seems to be in tension with some existing accounts of the distinctive normative capacities of policing. For instance, Brandon del Pozo argues that policing involves three central normative powers: impartial protection and rescue; arrest for the purposes of adjudication; and brokering and enforcing social cooperation.³⁴ Eric Miller argues that the police are “the agency authorized to act upon the state’s duty to govern in response to public emergencies,” and so one of their core powers is making “authoritative determinations about how to respond” to threats to public order.³⁵ What del Pozo’s and Miller’s pictures of policing share is that they extend the normative mandate of

33 Monaghan, *Just Policing*, 22.

34 Del Pozo, *The Police and the State*.

35 Miller, “The Concept of the Police,” 573. Importantly, Miller also alludes to the appeal of proposals like unbundling, suggesting that “where other public officials or social institutions or individuals are better able to enforce the law, then the police should defer to those officials, institutions, or individuals and use their authority to support these others in their efforts to govern effectively. To the extent that the state has the resources to create differently skilled specialized agencies capable of deploying non-violent responses, the state itself fails in its governance obligations if it tasks organizations that are primarily trained and outfitted to respond with violence to fulfill these roles” (575). The latter point in particular speaks to my argument about minimally violent capacities in section 2.1 below. Though his goal is

policing well beyond its law enforcement function. However, both accounts begin with the Bittner-esque descriptive claim about police as generalist first responders and then proceed to ask what unifies (or constitutes “the political essence”) of police work in light of this descriptive fact.³⁶ In other words, their analyses consider the catchall order-maintenance function of Policing to be fixed and then proceed to ask the normative question of how that function should be justified within a political system. As unbundling involves *reimagining* the current role of Policing, it is no surprise that these normative accounts are ill fitting.

What is the value of theorizing about the role of the Police in this formal, institutional sense? One of the oldest questions in political philosophy is how best to structure states and their social and political institutions. We are concerned about the scope of roles and responsibilities of many diverse actors within the criminal legal system, including prosecutors, judges, detectives, probation officers, and Police. Thinking about the limits of Policing roles is especially important given, as Monaghan helpfully describes, that policing is integrated into a complex and “coupled” criminal legal system with multilevel unfairness and failures.³⁷ In a system where “legislatures pass unjust laws, the trial system dolls out too much punishment, and background injustices make it more likely that certain groups get caught up in the criminal legal system,” the actions of Police, like choosing to make an arrest, can have deeply concerning effects downstream.³⁸ One way to confront the problem of coupling is to question and reimagine formal Policing roles and responsibilities, in particular, to mitigate the extent to which order maintenance is coupled with the rest of the criminal legal system.

2. UNBUNDLING AND PRINCIPLES OF INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN

I will now attempt to convince you that we should unbundle policing by working through a series of arguments. Crucially, the case for unbundling is strongest if we take the arguments in tandem.

defining and explaining the core normative powers of policing as it stands, Miller views the current role of policing as a contingent social arrangement.

36 Del Pozo, *The Police and the State*, 10–25; and Miller, “The Concept of the Police,” 580. See also Bittner, “The Police on Skid Row.”

37 Monaghan, *Just Policing*, ch. 2.

38 Monaghan, *Just Policing*, 27.

2.1. Unbundling and Minimizing Violent Capacities

We all agree that police should use force only as a last resort, exhausting all nonviolent means of intervention first. In general, morality demands minimal use of state-sanctioned violence, reserving force against citizens only when all other options are exhausted. An analogous principle applies at another normative level: that of institutional design. In particular, we should distribute roles, responsibilities, and mandates between institutions so that institutions have violent capacities only as a last resort. Correspondingly, institutions endowed with violent capacities should have narrow mandates that are distinctly focused on interventions that require force, thus limiting their intervention in affairs that do not require violence.

This proposal already has broad institutional and public support: nobody wants SWAT teams to conduct health and safety inspections or to collect taxes. The military should not be tasked with enforcing school conduct codes. Why is this? First, echoing principles about self-defense, institutions should have violent capacities only when *necessary* to fulfill their ends: SWAT teams are not needed for health and safety inspections. Furthermore, the degree and capacity of violence should be *proportional* to the degree of harm (or risk of harm) it aims to prevent. If only armed military officials could effectively enforce school conduct codes, deploying them may still be impermissible given the menial harm of violating conduct codes.³⁹

But why are unnecessary and disproportionate violent *capacities* objectionable? One reason is that the capacity for violence heightens the risk of harmful and deadly outcomes in the context of inevitable human error; thus, it is morally imperative that we distribute institutional labor to reduce the risk of these outcomes. Mistakes are more critical when they involve a gun as opposed to a baton or, better yet, a notebook for issuing citations. If we want to minimize the risk of unjustified deployments of violence and harm, we should minimize the scope and impact of institutions with violent capacities. In the case of policing,

39 An anonymous reviewer has rightly pointed out that I have not specified the types of cases where the capacity for violence is unnecessary or disproportionate; instead, I have focused on relatively uncontroversial examples to argue for unbundling. The reviewer has also noted that context matters; for example, traffic policing may require more forceful interventions if armed groups frequently take over intersections. In countries with widespread gun ownership, like the United States, more conflicts unfortunately demand interventions from violence responders (SVRS). Reducing gun prevalence is crucial because guns escalate the need for state-sanctioned violence. Additionally, rural areas may require higher per capita rates of SVRS due to the need for prompt emergency response.

reducing the scope and mandate of people wielding lethal force would reduce the number of people who are unjustifiably harmed by it.⁴⁰

Indeed, police killings often occur in contexts where violent capacities are unnecessary and/or disproportionate. Traffic stops offer a clear example: Philando Castile, a thirty-two-year-old school cafeteria worker, was killed during a routine traffic stop in the Minneapolis–Saint Paul area in 2016.⁴¹ His girlfriend and her four-year-old daughter were present. These sorts of cases are far too common: in the United States, police killed nearly six hundred people during traffic stops from 2017 to 2022.⁴² Getting armed officials out of the business of traffic enforcement and other forms of routine order maintenance offers a straightforward path to curtailing violent escalations.

The broader issue is that the police are the repositories of coercive violence, but many order maintenance roles do not require violent capacities. The narrow class of situations that do require (potentially) violent interventions could be tasked to a specialized class of violence responders (SVRs) who are more narrowly equipped and training to intervene effectively. Furthermore, we should be attentive to how the intellectual, technological, and cultural baggage of one mandate impacts the capacity of institutions to effectively carry out other mandates; violent capacities engender norms and dispositions that undercut the ability of police to safely and effectively perform routine order maintenance.

2.2. *Unbundling and Distributing Epistemic Labor*

Many instances of police incompetence and misconduct stem from their lack of expertise. Cops are not trained to be social workers, conflict mediators, mental health crisis interventionists, homelessness outreach service providers, or school counselors, though they are tasked with responding to the complex social problems that fall within the purview of these areas of expertise. It is understandable that allocating this bundle of responsibilities—and the epistemic burdens that accompany them—to the police yields disastrous results.

40 This concern can also be framed in terms of risks to police legitimacy, meaning the risk that the political power of the police will be exercised improperly. According to Monaghan, the more burdensome a police tactic, the greater the risk of its illegitimate use, as more severe tactics require stronger justification. Reducing the use of violent tactics lowers the legitimacy risk. Monaghan argues that criminal patrols, which combine law enforcement and order maintenance, pose high legitimacy risk, and he recommends separating these functions within police agencies to create two distinct divisions. See Monaghan, *Just Policing* chs. 3–5, 8. I agree with the thrust of this proposal but argue that we should go a step further by removing police from the business of order maintenance all together.

41 See Cooper, “Philando Castile Shooting (2016).”

42 Levin, “US Police Have Killed Nearly 600 People in Traffic Stops Since 2017, Data Shows.”

The social peacekeeping model is epistemically overdemanding, and there are instrumental epistemic benefits to the unbundling proposal.

Let us step back from the case of policing to think about this issue more broadly. In designing political institutions, we should allocate roles and responsibilities to those with the most relevant expertise and be sensitive to the relative epistemic burdens of roles. Designing educational curricula should be left to those trained to do so, and we should not require experts in pedagogy to mint currency or engineer transportation systems. Expecting them to fulfill these additional roles (without adequate training) would be epistemically overburdensome and would predictably result in shoddy currency or transportation systems. Moreover, training them to do *all* of these tasks is not a feasible solution, as the aggregate burden for knowledge and training is too high. In general, narrower and rigorously defined roles limit relative epistemic burdens, foster expertise, and drive better outcomes. The same principles apply to policing. We should not train police to be experts in all arenas of social peacekeeping but rather reallocate many of these responsibilities and their corresponding epistemic burdens to those with narrower and more relevant expertise. Friedman makes this point in defending an unbundling-esque proposal, arguing that “no single human being” can be at the same time a “forceful crime-fighter, empathetic interviewer and assistant of victims, collaborator with communities and social service agencies, [and] solver of crimes.”⁴³

The problem is not only that police lack relevant knowledge to fulfill social peacekeeping roles but also that the expertise, tactics, and norms distinctive to crime fighting are inappropriate and even dangerous in other domains. Framed otherwise, policing expertise interacts with and often undercuts the knowledge and dispositions required for other forms of order maintenance. The consequences of spillover from the crime fighter role to other functions of policing are especially pronounced in the case of mental health crises. Police are trained to assert control through commanding voices, intimidating postures, and readiness to use force. When people do not comply, officers escalate by closing in and raising their voices. These tactics directly conflict with the principles of effective mental health crisis intervention used by social workers: de-escalation through calm communication, maintaining physical distance, and fostering a sense of safety rather than control. Using forceful approaches in such situations often exacerbates the crisis; unsurprisingly, an alarming number of people experiencing serious mental illness have been injured or killed by police.⁴⁴ The

43 Friedman, “Disaggregating the Police Function,” 981.

44 See Fuller et al., *Overlooked in the Undercounted*.

fact that many mentally ill people have been directly or indirectly involved in traumatizing encounters with the police only exacerbates this tension.

To summarize: much of the work currently assigned to police requires expertise and training that is well beyond the purview of the core functions of policing. Instead of increasing police officers' epistemic burdens, we ought to allocate many social peacekeeping responsibilities to those who are better trained, equipped, and experienced.

2.3. *The Downsides of Consolidation*

It is worth considering the potential downsides of consolidating violent capacities: If there were an institution specifically focused on violent interventions, would it have a problematic institutional ethos? Broadly, when an institution is given tools x and y , the members of the institution tend to become especially invested in x and y and may come to think that x and y are the solution to everything. (If you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail.) Would consolidating violent capacities and violence-relevant expertise within a single institution lead to an overzealous deployment of violence—the very thing that the unbundling proposal is meant to avoid in the first place? These are serious concerns and, ironically, reflect the critiques of currently bundled police institutions. Narrowly focusing the mandate of SVRS to potentially violent situations addresses some of these issues. As opposed to status quo order-maintenance policing, SVRS would be deployed only when the threat of violent escalation is high. We may still worry about the conduct of SVRS when they *are* deployed. Human error will inevitably result in SVRS being sent to situations where violent interventions are not strictly necessary.

What is a viable solution, then? In my view, this problem is ripe for the familiar use-of-force and training reforms proposed in philosophy and elsewhere. Even if violent situations comprise the mandate of SVRS, official training and procedures should emphasize minimalism in use of force, aiming first to resolve violent situations without gunfire. Official policy should require officers to encourage armed and dangerous people to surrender peacefully and, when force is necessary, to use low levels of physical force or nonlethal weapons (Tasers, etc.). These changes to use-of-force policies and practices should be accompanied by oversight tactics—for instance, requiring SVRS to wear body cameras, otherwise holding bad actors accountable, etc. We should also be attentive to the psychological profiles of candidates when making SVR hiring decisions and disqualify those who are predisposed to use violence. One upshot of implementing these widely proposed reforms in the context of unbundling is that they can be more narrowly focused on a smaller and specialized group of actors and thus more feasibly achieved than attempting to reform policing writ large.

3. INJUSTICE AND UNBUNDLING

Unlike the preceding arguments, which appealed to general principles of institutional design, I will now defend an approach to unbundling that focuses on how policing institutions function in unjust and unequal social contexts. The notion that we ought to restructure policing because the institution is inherently racist and/or unfair is familiar in popular discourse and underwrites the organization of social movements. My goal in this section is to lay out a path from (1) policing's unjust functions to (2) the unbundling proposal. Though the sentiments that motivate the argument stem from critical policing activism, its structure is novel and applies to other justice-undermining institutions. Let us start by specifying the justice-undermining effects of policing institutions. In my view, injustice in policing results from the interaction of the following phenomena.⁴⁵

Disadvantage Selection: People who are marginalized around socially salient dimensions (race, class, addiction status, etc.) are disproportionately likely to have encounters with police.⁴⁶

Policing Harm: Encounters with police are (1) harmful, (2) risk harmful escalation, and/or (3) involve people in a harm-causing criminal legal system.⁴⁷

Explicit and Implicit Bias: Police have deep-rooted implicit and explicit biases against members of marginalized groups, which heightens the risk of harmful interactions between police and members of those groups.⁴⁸

45 The outcome-focused account presented here differs from the view that racism in policing is rooted in racist attitudes or beliefs. It is also more capacious than Joseph Heath's suggestion that the problem with race and policing stems from how minority groups are "subject to coercive enforcement of social norms and standards of respectability that reflect parochial aspects of majority culture" ("The Challenge of Policing Minorities in a Liberal Society," 3).

46 There is a vast body of empirical work supporting this. For recent and historical data, see the databases of Mapping Police Violence and the *Washington Post*. Books on the topic include Davis, *Policing the Black Man*; Butler, *Chokehold*; and Zimring, *When Police Kill*. Note that gender is an exception to disadvantage selection, as women, though marginalized, tend to be arrested and incarcerated at lower rates than men.

47 That policing encounters are harmful or risk harmful escalation is supported by data on lethal and nonlethal police violence. See the databases of Mapping Police Violence and the *Washington Post*. On the harms of involvement with the criminal legal system, see Western, "The Impact of Incarceration of Wage Mobility and Inequality"; and Kirk and Wakefield, "Collateral Consequences of Incarceration."

48 An extensive body of data shows that police (as well as the general public) are more likely to view Black men as dangerous and act on those biases. See, e.g., Correll et al., "The Police

Disadvantage selection manifests in context-specific ways and results from a variety of factors.⁴⁹ Patterns of criminalization—such as criminalizing behaviors linked to addiction and homelessness—mean that membership in some marginalized groups overlaps with the content of the criminal law. Social strain, a result of systemic injustice, also leads marginalized people to engage in some criminalized behaviors at higher rates.⁵⁰ Additionally, even when there are similar rates for offenses across groups, marginalized people are disproportionately stopped, searched, and arrested due in part to the concentration of police in minority neighborhoods and biased assumptions about guilt and dangerousness. In the United States and elsewhere, this process is clearly racialized, with Black people overrepresented across all categories of policing interactions from routine stops to violence escalations, both now and historically.⁵¹

The interaction of disadvantage selection and policing harm means that policing disproportionately burdens those who are already marginalized, thus perpetuating and exacerbating endemic inequalities. Stated plainly, if members of marginalized groups are more likely to have encounters with police, and those interactions are (1) harmful, (2) risk harmful escalation, or (3) involve people in a harmful criminal legal system, then members of marginalized groups will be disproportionately harmed by policing. The risk of harm increases for those against whom police hold implicit or explicit biases.

Such entrenched endemic injustice means that marginalized people bear the burdens of harmful police interactions and violent escalations. Policing plausibly operates as a form of structural injustice, which occurs “when social processes put large groups of persons under systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities,” as Iris Marion Young describes.⁵² Like other forms of structural injustice, injustice in policing is not reducible to intentional actions but arises from the very constitution of our social structure, from the interface between background conditions and core features of our existing institutions. This aspect of policing may

Officer’s Dilemma.”

- 49 Context determines what categories are socially salient. Some groups that may be overrepresented in police interactions include religious and linguistic minorities, racial minorities, people with disabilities, people with HIV, recent immigrants, queer people, Indigenous people, and people who are low income and poor (among others).
- 50 For instance, people are more likely to participate in the illicit economy if their employment prospects are limited. For an overview of strain theory, see Agnew, *Pressured into Crime*.
- 51 For a helpful overview on the evidence of racial disparities in police practices, see Ghandnoosh and Barry, “One in Five.”
- 52 Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, 54.

go unnoticed if we adopt certain ideal theoretical assumptions—for instance, if we theorize on the basis of equal background conditions or assume that social institutions function only as intended.⁵³ By rooting our analysis in the realities of our unequal and complex social world, we subvert this normative picture in favor of a more complex but pragmatic understanding of policing and its impact on social structure.

At the beginning of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls claims that “laws and institutions, no matter how well-arranged and efficient they are, must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust.”⁵⁴ Engaging with Rawls on policing, Jake Monaghan rightly argues that police agencies are entitled to the status of major institutions in the basic structure of society.⁵⁵ As such, we should consider the extent to which they promote or undermine social justice and, in particular, how they impact the well-being of the most marginalized.⁵⁶ If policing—or any major social institution—has equality-undermining effects, we should do something about it.

Determining how to mitigate injustice in institutions raises highly context-sensitive questions at the intersection of philosophy and public policy. Broadly, we can specify two varieties of remedies to institutional injustice. The first variety is *intra-institutional*. Intra-institutional measures address injustice by installing changes *within* existing institutions while keeping their basic structure and mandate in place. Some familiar intra-institutional remedies include changes to formal rules and policy, training, the distribution of labor, and decision-making procedures, as well as the elimination of bad actors. These strategies may be accompanied by others focused on changing informal norms

53 I am thinking of Charles Mills’s helpful schema of problematic idealizations in Mills, “Ideal Theory as Ideology.”

54 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 3.

55 Monaghan, “Idealizations and Ideal Policing.”

56 Rawls focuses on the justice of the basic structure, which is constituted by many social institutions. My approach differs because I focus on a specific institution (policing) and ask if it tends to exacerbate injustice. One may wonder whether policing, assessed alone, compounds injustice but is part of a broader system that is just, or if police would have any role to play in an ideal society. (For discussion of these issues, see Fryer, “Idealizing Abolition”; and Monaghan, “Idealizations and Ideal Policing.”) I do not address either of these questions here as my interest is in the more focused, nonidealized issue of how we can move towards a *rough* outline of justice on the basis of reasonable and noncontroversial assumptions—in other words, which changes would result in a more fair and equal world (holding fixed some considerations about background injustice, human psychology, and so on). I thank an anonymous reviewer for helping me to refine this methodological orientation.

and culture.⁵⁷ The second family of remedies is *extra-institutional*, meaning that they attempt to combat institutional injustice by reimagining the structure of an institution as it relates to others within a wider institutional system. Some familiar measures of this variety include oversight by other organizations, a redistribution of institutional powers and responsibilities, and the abolition of institutions all together.

I now advance two normative principles about these forms of remedy. First, when intra-institutional measures fail to mitigate injustice in institution *X*, we ought to experiment with extra-institutional measures to reallocate the power, roles, and responsibilities assigned to *X* (the *experimentation requirement*). Second, if an alternative institution (or set of institutions) *A* can adequately fulfill the roles and responsibilities currently assigned to *X* and avoid the justice-undermining effects of *X*, we should reallocate roles and responsibilities to *A* (the *reallocation requirement*). Both principles apply to policing and ground the injustice-based case for unbundling.

The rationale for the experimentation requirement is straightforward: if we have two paths to mitigate a pressing problem, and one proves inadequate, we should explore the other. In this case, when piecemeal reforms fail to combat injustice, we should experiment with broader transformative solutions.⁵⁸ Experimentation sometimes involves creating *new* institutional forms aimed at fulfilling socially valuable functions. For example, if our aim is to ensure that everyone has a basic minimum level of economic security, and we find that means-tested welfare systems often fail to reach those who need assistance due to administrative inefficiency, we may turn to experimenting with an entirely new system to foster the basic minimum (a universal basic income scheme, for instance).

Let us apply the experimentation requirement to policing. The first question to consider is whether the problems with policing are immune to incremental reform, as activists often claim.⁵⁹ As framed here, the meat of the critique is that

57 Addressing culture is important given how in cases of structural injustice, “informal social norms and institutional rules generally work in tandem. They continuously interact, each begetting, reshaping, sustaining, or undermining the other. . . . Adherence to informal norms sometimes continues after formal rules governing the relevant conduct are abandoned” (Powers and Faden, *Structural Injustice*, 100).

58 We should attempt piecemeal, intra-institutional reforms first because of (1) inevitable transition costs and (2) feasibility concerns associated with broader inter-institutional measures. While this may provoke concerns of status quo bias, the thrust of the argument still applies if we hold this critique: we may say we should try both intra- and inter-institutional measures (versus prioritizing one over the other), but if intra-institutional measures fail, we should focus on inter-institutional ones.

59 Kaba, “Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police”; and Vitale, *The End of Policing*.

we cannot eliminate injustice in policing through intra-institutional measures. To support this, critics often appeal to how substantial reforms have been implemented in places where egregious policing practices continue. The city of Atlanta, for instance, implemented a range of police reforms over decades; despite these reforms, police-initiated killings continued.⁶⁰ However, it is difficult to draw a general conclusion from this piecemeal evidence, especially because there is such a broad range of intra-institutional reforms to policing on the table: examples include changing the laws and policies that govern police tactics, holding bad actors accountable, rethinking and expanding police training, and so on. To claim that all of these efforts fall short in mitigating injustice is a difficult empirical and philosophical project.

A more persuasive way of showing that policing is uniquely immune to reform appeals to how injustice is sustained in policing. The problem with intra-institutional reforms is that they do not address the interaction between disadvantage selection, policing harm, and implicit and explicit bias identified above. More specifically, solutions internal to policing do not undercut disadvantage selection or explicit and implicit biases, since they result from broader features of the social structure that are well beyond the scope of policing behaviors and practices.⁶¹ Reforms to policing do not mitigate the inequality and social strain that drive disparities in policing, nor the endemic biases that sustain it. Moreover, reforms aimed at curtailing the harms of policing are always limited, given the ways that police are (in the formal, institutional sense here) repositories for state-sanctioned violence. Simply eliminating their capacity to harm runs contrary to their design function and fundamental social role as a coercive institution in the context of a criminal punishment system that *aims* to harm those who break the law.⁶² Without disrupting police culture or changing its basic technologies, structure, and institutional mandate, we cannot hope to prevent or mitigate the harm that police cause to the people they interact with.

Because of this underlying mechanism, injustice in policing is immune to intra-institutional measures, and so we should experiment with extra-institutional means, per the experimentation requirement. In particular, we should try

60 Herskind and Roberts, “The Failure of Police Reform.”

61 One may hope that implicit and explicit bias training could remediate biased behaviors, but evidence of this is lacking. See Lai and Lisnek, “The Impact of Implicit-Bias-Oriented Diversity Training on Police Officers’ Beliefs, Motivations, and Actions.” Moreover, eliminating biases would not disrupt the interface between disadvantage selection and policing harm that sustains injustice.

62 Furthermore, if we were to “change” policing so as to be noncoercive, decoupling it from use of force and the broader criminal legal system, it would cease to be policing (in the formal, institutional sense).

to create new institutional forms aimed at fulfilling the socially valuable functions of policing. Unseating the status quo and envisioning radical alternatives in the way the requirement suggests are key tenets of abolitionist social thought.

Beyond experimenting with transformative alternatives, the reallocation requirement provides a positive case for unbundling now. Recall that the requirement states that if an alternative institution (or set of institutions) *A* can adequately fulfill the roles and responsibilities currently assigned to *X* yet avoid the justice-undermining effects in *X*, we should reallocate roles and responsibilities to *A*.⁶³ The requirement is based on a simple Pareto superiority-style principle: if there are two potential institutional design proposals (that both offer to fulfill some valuable functions), and one has a flaw that the other avoids, we should install the latter.

In order for the principle to motivate unbundling, two premises must hold true. The first is that alternative institutions *can* adequately fulfill some of the socially valuable functions at which policing aims; that reallocation is theoretically and practically possible.⁶⁴ This condition is met in the case of unbundling because many of the roles and responsibilities that unbundlers propose for reallocation are already the business of other institutions and tangential to the distinctive crime-fighting mandate of police. On one hand, we can envision expanding the mandates of existing institutions; on the other, we can draw on models implemented elsewhere to create new ones. The second premise holds that unbundling reduces the justice-undermining effects of policing—i.e., by unbundling, we mitigate injustice.⁶⁵ This premise is more contentious but plausible given the injustice-sustaining mechanism identified. Because unbundling

63 The principle holds if you substitute other negative attributes for justice-undermining effects. For instance, if an alternative institution (or set of institutions) *A* can adequately fulfill the roles and responsibilities currently assigned to *X* yet avoid the disutility in *X*, we should reallocate roles and responsibilities to *A*.

64 Reallocating the powers of arrest from police to other institutions (for instance) is not *theoretically* possible because the new institutions would still be police (by the formal, institutional definition employed here). Relatedly, we may say that reallocating criminal investigation from police to other institutions is not *practically* possible given that investigations require access to confidential data, forensic analysis, and coordination with courts—expertise and legal authority that civilian agencies simply do not possess. However, practical limitations are often the product of laws and extant institutional structures that we may also aim to change.

65 As I discuss with respect to the replication problem below, alternative nonpolice responses may still be harmful, albeit to a significantly lesser extent. An anonymous reviewer has helpfully pointed out that because of this, the constraint amounts to a defense of *minimizing* injustice-promoting harms versus eliminating them altogether. So the “avoid the unjust effects” clause of the constraint can be read in terms of avoiding *the degree of* unjust effects (i.e., significantly reducing them).

separates violent capacities and criminal punishment from social peacekeeping, it undercuts policing harm. This is because if we unbundle, fewer social problems would be handled by those authorized to use force. Instead, the governing norms of intervention would be care and support, thus limiting the *immediate* harm of police interactions. Unbundling disrupts the longer-term harms of policing by breaking the link between social peacekeeping and the criminal legal system's downstream effects.

The overarching point is that if we are serious about curtailing the unjust effects of policing, we ought to reduce the size and scope of policing institutions altogether. A metaphor illustrates the thrust of the arguments here: when a machine is broken (in the sense that fulfilling its intended aims has worrisome, unwelcome consequences), we ought to consider creating another machine. If there are other machines to which we can reallocate some of the broken machine's jobs and avoid those consequences, we should do that in the meantime.

4. OBJECTIONS TO UNBUNDLING

I will now work through three lines of objection to unbundling. The objections reflect concerns raised in divisive public debates about policing and, in particular, responses to the ideas that we should defund or abolish the police—demands closely related to unbundling, as previously discussed.

4.1. *Will Unbundling Lead to Increased Crime?*

Some skeptics of unbundling claim that policing is a necessary evil. While they acknowledge the many problems with our current policing system, they believe that police (in their order-maintenance role) are essential to keep crime at a manageable level. A similar argument arises in discussions about jails and prisons, with critics fearing that decreased incarceration would lead to unacceptably high crime rates.⁶⁶ There is also an egalitarian concern in this view, as higher crime rates may disproportionately harm marginalized people because they are more likely to be victims.⁶⁷

This objection is a reasonable response to some understandings of police abolitionism; if there were *no police*, potential offenders may not be deterred from engaging in crime (knowing they would not be caught), and so crime would drastically increase. As I am not arguing for abolitionism here, the

66 The issues of necessity, crime prevention, and prison abolitionism are discussed at length in Boonin, *The Problem of Punishment*, ch. 5.

67 The disproportionately burdensome effects of increased crime must be balanced with the disproportionately beneficial effects of reduced police violence.

objection to my proposals is more nuanced: if we were to reallocate many order-maintenance powers and responsibilities from police to other institutions, crime rates would reach an unsustainable level—and thus, we should not unbundle policing. I think this claim is empirically and normatively suspect.

One may think that because unbundling reduces the size, scope, and impact of policing, there will be fewer police and thus more crime; however, this claim constitutes a vast oversimplification of the extensive literature on crime deterrence and policing. What police are *doing* matters immensely. Studies of police deterrence often evaluate the relative efficacy of three sorts of police practices: random patrol, rapid response, and reactive investigation. The deterrent effects of random patrol are most relevant to evaluating unbundling.⁶⁸ Reviewing the literature on police deterrence, Daniel Nagin, Robert Solow, and Cynthia Lum claim that “there are good reasons for skepticism about the efficiency and effectiveness of random patrol.”⁶⁹ In addition to the lack of evidence indicating a negative correlation between crime rates and the number of officers on patrol, they appeal to the psychology of deterrence, claiming that police deter crime primarily by reducing the perception of would-be offenders that crimes can be committed successfully without them being apprehended.⁷⁰ Given that it is unlikely that police on patrol would be in the right place at the right time so as to increase a would-be offender’s assessment of risk, randomness is significantly less effective than targeted strategies like hot-spot policing and “focused deterrence.”⁷¹ Thus, the idea that fewer cops on the beat engaging in order-maintenance activities leads to more crime is empirically suspect.

68 The role of police in criminal investigations raises important questions. Currently, investigations are often ineffective—especially in cases of gender-based and sexual violence—and employ controversial interrogation tactics (Venema, “Police Officer Schema of Sexual Assault Reports”; Du Mont et al., “The Role of ‘Real Rape’ and ‘Real Victim’ Stereotypes in the Police Reporting Practices of Sexually Assaulted Women”; and Hunt, *Police Deception and Dishonesty*). Police departments and organizations also frequently fail to adequately respond to officer misconduct (Armacost, “Organizational Culture and Police Misconduct”). This has led to the establishment of alternative investigative bodies like the Civilian Complaint Review Board in New York City. We might consider reallocating the responsibility of crime investigation from police to an independent specialized entity because of these concerns, though doing so would require significant changes to existing laws and policies.

69 Nagin et al., “Deterrence, Criminal Opportunities, and Police,” 77.

70 Nagin et al., “Deterrence, Criminal Opportunities, and Police,” 77–78.

71 See Braga et al., “Hot Spots Policing and Crime Reduction.” Thinking about hot-spot policing and focused deterrence through the lens of unbundling raises a number of interesting issues. A major concern with hot-spot policing is that it disproportionately targets low-income communities of color, which can lead to overpolicing, police violence, and an increased sense of surveillance, ultimately eroding police-community relations. Hot-spot

The assumption that fewer police leads to more crime also overlooks the relevance of confounding variables. Decades of criminology and sociology show that crime rates are shaped by social, economic, and environmental factors beyond policing. This complicates the calculation of the deterrent effect of increased police presence but also highlights other ways to reduce crime. For example, crime rates tend to decline with the rise of community nonprofits.⁷² Since crime often stems from a lack of resources, investing in support and care upstream significantly impacts crime rates. Unbundling is not only a negative proposal aimed at dismantling police but also a proactive approach to crime prevention, including, in particular, installing targeted interventions for mental health, homelessness, and addiction and supporting community-led violence prevention efforts. Thus, in evaluating whether unbundling would lead to increased crime, we should consider not only the effects of decreased police presence but also the preventive effects of its positive vision.

Finally, even if unbundling were to lead to increased crime, we need not dismiss the proposal on that basis. This is because normatively, our goal is not to maximize crime reduction but rather to balance it with other morally valuable ends. We could ensure that there was very little crime by forcing everyone to stay in their homes or by recording their every move. We could preemptively incarcerate people without due process. Despite their potential efficacy for crime reduction, these strategies undercut our rights at grave moral costs, and so installing them is impermissible. Analogously, if crime were to increase as a result of unbundling, this is not sufficient ground for dismissing the proposal; rather, we need to balance the (unclear) degree of crime prevention with other ends. Given the gravity of the problems with catchall order-maintenance policing described, unbundling may still be the right path forward, despite leading to some level of increased crime.

4.2. Will Unbundled Institutions Replicate the Problems with Policing?

Another objection to unbundling is that it will not solve the problems with policing that motivate us to restructure the institution in the first place because

policing and similar strategies have also proven to be effective in reducing violent crime. It is important to note, however, that some of the most effective hot-spot policing initiatives, such as Chicago's Ceasefire and Cure Violence, leverage community violence interruption by employing community members as street-level interventionists. Interventionists mediate conflicts, provide cash assistance, and support victims in hospital settings. These efforts exemplify the type of trained civilian de-escalation advocated here. At the same time, they are frequently accompanied by police presence and the looming threat of severe sanctions to deter retaliation. Is crime reduced because of community violence interruption or by greater police presence?

72 Sharkey, "Community and the Crime Decline."

the alternative, nonpolice institutions (that will take on the roles and responsibilities currently allocated to the police) will be subject to similar critiques.⁷³ As described by Monaghan, order maintenance always involves policing (in the broad, informal sense), and “the risk of unjust policing is therefore always with us.”⁷⁴ This issue often arises within the police abolitionist movement. Mariame Kaba and Andrea J. Ritchie warn us of “the authority figures who make up the ‘soft police’—including medical professionals, social workers, and government bureaucrats” who “engage in policing in their own right, and are often entangled with traditional law enforcement.”⁷⁵ Correspondingly, they critique slogans such as “counselors not cops,” “caseworkers not cops,” and “treatment not punishment” because a police-free world should not involve the one-to-one replacement of police with other coercive public institutions.

Many existing social service institutions are fundamentally flawed; for instance, systems of mental health care routinely confine people against their will in brutal institutions with unfair and nontransparent procedures, often without access to legal counsel.⁷⁶ Liat Ben-Moshe characterizes psychiatric hospitals as medicalized carceral spaces and argues that they ought to be abolished.⁷⁷ Drug treatment institutions are subject to similar critiques.⁷⁸ Bernardo Zacka points to one cause of these failures, arguing that bureaucrats involved in the provision of public services, like social workers, teachers, and police officers, operate in adverse institutional conditions that tend to erode their moral sensibilities and “truncate their understanding of their role and responsibilities.”⁷⁹ These concerns caution us against silver-bullet thinking about alternatives to police.

I agree with Kaba and Ritchie’s ultimate contention that we need to respond to the replication critique with careful institutional design that is cognizant of how nonpolice institutions can engage in policing-adjacent practices that give

73 This objection is closely related to the question of whether unbundling will reduce injustice in policing (discussed in section 3 above).

74 Monaghan, *Just Policing*, 17.

75 Kaba and Ritchie, “No More Police.” Note that these agencies do not count as police in the formal, institutional sense.

76 Objectionably, in many states, there is not a right to counsel in cases of family law, involuntary commitment, and medical treatment. See Brito, “The Right to Civil Counsel.”

77 Ben-Moshe, *Decarcerating Disability*.

78 See McCorkel, “The Second Coming.”

79 Zacka, *When the State Meets the Streets*. In particular, Zacka argues, the everyday demands of their work predispose public servants to adopt reductive dispositions (specifically those of indifference, enforcement, and caregiving) that cause them to lose touch with the plurality of demands relevant to moral decision-making. However, Zacka argues, this is an understandable response to the psychological pressures of the direct public service in which they are engaged.

rise to the problems canvassed before. I mentioned earlier that my goal is not to offer a complete package of institutions that should take up the powers and responsibilities currently tasked to police, so responding to the charge that the new institutions will replicate injustice is dialectically challenging. Nevertheless, in reimagining our institutional landscape, we should aim not only to *reform* our existing institutions but also to question and reconfigure their basic structure, being attentive to how they graft onto complex and unjust social landscapes.

But just because we need to be careful in crafting alternatives does not mean we should abandon the unbundling proposal altogether. Importantly, the unbundling proposal clearly assuages two of the central issues with policing: (1) unjustified use of violence and force and (2) inappropriate responses to social issues such as addiction, homelessness, and mental health crises. So it is a mistake to say that unbundling replicates the problems with policing in that the problems are either identical or equally grave. The deprivation of *benefits* resulting from injustice in social services is clearly objectionable; however, I think it would be a moral mistake to equate these harms with those of policing. Normatively, the unjust use of state-sanctioned violence is more objectionable than the deprivation of social benefits; more broadly, burdens and benefits are not on par in this way.⁸⁰

Nonetheless, support-based interventions are at times harmful and perpetuate inequality. My pessimistic view is that in unequal societies, social problems sometimes require coercive treatment that inevitably risks harming the most vulnerable. What morality demands we do about this unfortunate fact is structure our institutions so as to minimize those unfair burdens. I will now sketch a few principles aimed at minimizing harm and the unfairness it engenders.

First, social service interventions should be *minimally coercive*, with restrictions on individual liberty—such as confinement, surveillance, and forced treatment—used only as a last resort in cases where people are imminently dangerous to themselves or others. The principles of proportionality and necessity that govern the use of force should also guide these more moderate interventions, and noncoercive, consensual forms of care and support should be the default. Moreover, we should implement procedural measures that foster *transparency* and *community governance*. Transparency requires well-defined

80 Various normative ideas underwrite this. On one hand, we may think there is something especially egregious about police-initiated violence. As Monaghan argues, police may have special moral obligations that make violence initiated by them worse than that initiated by private citizens (“The Special Moral Obligations of Law Enforcement”). Beyond this, there are important moral differences between harming and not aiding—and in this case, state-sanctioned violence is a harm, while state agencies failing to provide benefits constitutes failure to aid.

protocols for navigating systems of support. People should also have access to representatives to advocate for them as they work through public systems, such as legal counsel in cases of mandated treatment or confinement. Community governance structures empower those who are most impacted by social policies to have a stake in designing and administering them, and as a rule, we ought to prefer local, community-based responses to large state bureaucracies. There are a variety of ways to install self-governance structures. Some possibilities include sortition-selected decision-making bodies or citizen advisory committees composed of people with direct experience navigating public service systems.⁸¹

Finally, as Kaba and Ritchie argue, designing fair institutions requires that we question our ideas and, in particular, our tendencies to “continue to control currently criminalized people and populations by placing them ‘Somewhere Else,’” which requires “Someone Else—if not police—to put them there.”⁸² The suggestion here is to critically examine exclusionary ways of thinking about social problems, challenging assumptions about what and who is considered “normal” and rethinking which situations warrant intervention at all. Monaghan makes a similar point in arguing that police should not intervene in many circumstances where there is a disagreement about what constitutes acceptable use of public space.⁸³ Working to address the upstream factors driving social disorder while also questioning our ideas of what is disruptive and normal will help prevent unbundling institutions from replicating the problems with our present policing regimes.

4.3. *Will Unbundling Work in Places with High Rates of Gun Ownership and Gun Violence?*

High rates of gun ownership, especially in the United States, may pose a challenge to the unbundling approach. In critiquing reallocative policing (a similar proposal), Luke Hunt refers to this as the “socio-scientific problem.”⁸⁴ Hunt cites the facts that there are more civilian-owned firearms (393 million) than people (326 million) in the United States, and people choose to use these guns far too often (for example, in response to others playing music loudly in a car or failing to turn off their phone in a movie theater).⁸⁵ People regularly carry

81 For more on sortition and citizen advisors, see Guerrero, “Against Elections”; and Landemore, *Democratic Reason*.

82 Kaba and Ritchie, *No More Police*, 148.

83 Monaghan, *Just Policing*, ch. 6.

84 Hunt, “The Limits of Reallocative and Algorithmic Policing.”

85 Hunt, “The Limits of Reallocative and Algorithmic Policing,” 9.

firearms in public, and there is an alarmingly high incidence of mass shootings.⁸⁶ Do high rates of gun ownership undermine the appeal of unbundling?

Let us break down this objection more clearly. There are three possible concerns: (1) unbundling policing would lead to an increase in gun violence; (2) responses to gun violence would become inadequate; and/or (3) those taking on roles currently assigned to police—like social workers or traffic patrolers—would be at risk due to the prevalence of guns. The first concern about increased gun violence mirrors the crime increase objection already addressed above, so I will focus here on 2 and 3.

Let us begin with responding to gun violence. As Hunt rightly notes, police are “rarely spatiotemporally present at the scene of crime to stop assailants in the act”; rather, they are usually called to the scene.⁸⁷ Unfortunately, police responses to gun violence are often inadequate, particularly in the case of mass shootings. Critics of the response to the 2018 Parkland school shooting highlight how communication issues, coordination problems, and the lack of an immediate response plan led to preventable fatalities.⁸⁸ Effectively responding to these high-stakes crises requires training, expertise, and practice. A key component of unbundling is the establishment of a specialized class of violence responders who can more effectively intervene in dangerous situations—so plausibly, responses to gun violence would improve if we unbundled policing.

One important idea emanating from this objection is that the size and prevalence of SVR institutions should depend on contingent social factors, in particular, rates of gun ownership and gun violence. Rates of gun *violence* are particularly relevant for SVR allocation, as some places with high rates of gun ownership like Vermont and Switzerland nevertheless have low rates of gun violence.⁸⁹ A quick and efficient response is crucial for effectively addressing gun violence, which should inform decisions about the number of SVRs and their deployment. In rural areas, a higher ratio of SVRs per capita may be necessary to ensure timely responses.⁹⁰

86 See the statistics at the Gun Violence Archive (GVA), <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org>.

87 Hunt, “The Limits of Reallocation and Algorithmic Policing,” 9–10.

88 Thompson, “To Stop a Shooter.”

89 See Stroebe et al., “Gun Ownership and Gun Violence”; World Population Review, “Gun Ownership by State”; and National Center for Health Statistics, “Firearm Mortality by State, 2022.”

90 I mentioned above that in one view, unbundling carves off many of the powers and responsibilities of policing, reducing its size and scope overall but leaving police departments intact specifically to serve SVR functions. The alternative view is that we should create SVRs from the ground up given the objectionable features of police culture. Regardless of the view you adopt, we may go further to say that existing police department locations should

Let us turn to the concern about the safety of social workers, traffic patrolers, and mediators who will take on roles currently assigned to police. As a baseline, police are often unsafe—the fact that they have guns and powers to arrest does not always protect them. One of the many unfortunate facts about high rates of gun ownership is that people tasked with responding to crises can be victims of gun violence in the process. The worry with unbundling is that more people will be at higher risk if we restructure institutional responsibilities. It is true that to some degree, unbundling may involve shifting the risk of experiencing violent interactions from police officers to other actors. Indeed, street outreach conducted by social workers does involve some level of physical danger.⁹¹ However, shifting the risk in this way is not necessarily bad. Moreover, to minimize risk, SVRS should accompany other responders in situations where there is known to be a high risk of violence. Furthermore, dispatching nonpolice actors may lead to lower rates of violent interactions, as they will not employ the coercive tactics that often escalate conflicts. For instance, traffic enforcers could avoid high-speed chases for minor infractions by opting instead for lower-risk approaches like sending tickets by mail. Tactics that minimize the risk of escalation are essential for protecting anyone involved in potentially dangerous situations.

The prevalence of guns contributes to a barrage of social problems and makes managing them more hazardous. Instead of assuming gun prevalence is fixed and designing our social institutions around it, we should also (obviously) focus on reducing the number of guns. Doing so would enable us to create fairer, safer, and more effective institutions.

5. CONCLUSION

I hope to have left the reader with a clear sense of what the unbundling proposal involves and to have distilled the most persuasive rationales for realizing it. Again, the case for unbundling is strongest when we consider the arguments for it in tandem. One broad insight emanating from this discussion is that the moral questions of policing extend well beyond the scope of individual interpersonal ethics, implicating broad political philosophical issues about what sorts of institutions we should install to deal with complex social problems in our messy and unequal world. The consistent failures of extant institutions encourage us to imagine alternative institutional forms. In jurisdictions around the

remain in place, and there should be far more SVRS than may plausibly be deployed at any time.

91 See Spencer and Munch, “Client Violence Toward Social Workers.”

world, efforts to unbundle are currently underway; the experiment is happening! These efforts will offer further insight about how to promote public safety without police. Beyond the case of policing, reimagining our present criminal legal institutions is both necessary and urgent. Together, we can build safe communities and create/recreate institutions grounded in justice and compassion.⁹²

University of California, Santa Cruz
lyons@ucsc.edu

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