

## Group 10

### Police Brutality in an America built by a Slave Economy

#### Executive Summary

This paper re-frames the issue of police brutality within the evolution of slave labor. In the first section, we challenge the reader to re-frame their conceptualization of police murder. We argue against the notion that police brutality is a new development in America by locating the origins of the police force in the slave economy. In the second section, we elaborate on the historical evolution of the slave economy as a necessary basis for understanding how slave labor directly gives rise to police violence. In the third section we turn away from the past and outline our vision for the future. In the final section we operationalize our vision into workable strategies and tactics. Our goal is educate communities of color AND white communities on the issue of police brutality and mobilize folks of every race, age, gender and immigration status to organize with us to the end the brutality that has reverberated across our communities.

#### Re-framing Police Brutality

For centuries, police have terrorized communities of color – from their birth in 1704 as slave catchers in the Carolina Colonies to their role as perpetrators of mass murder in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Waxman, 2017). For the past three years, police have killed nearly 1,000 people per year (Sullivan, Anthony, Tate, Jenkins 2018). In 2014 communities suffered the tragic loss of Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and Eric Garner. In 2015 we lost Freddie Gray and Sandra Bland. In 2016 we lost Philando Castille and Alton Sterling. This year, Stephen Clarke was murdered by police while standing in his grandmother's backyard. They were all black and unarmed. Ineffable pain, anger, heartbreak, hopelessness, and depression has reverberated across communities of color resulting in massive demonstrations and predictable state repression.

This immense trauma has resulted in the making of police murder as the face of police brutality. While it is true that blatant police murder is the most extreme and urgent aspect of police brutality, narrowing our discussions of police brutality to only include murder, and *recent* murders at that, leaves out crucial information. For one, police brutality is not a recent phenomenon. Second, police are not the only people who *police* bodies of color, particularly black bodies e.g. the murder of Trayvon Martin at the hands of George Zimmerman in 2018 (CBS 2018). Yet it is important to note that the state sanction of police violence enforces, supports, and fuels violent policing beyond the badge. Third, police brutality was not born in a socio-political vacuum; police brutality arose directly out of the need to supply cheap slave labor to a historically racist capitalist economy. What this means is that measures that narrowly focus on accountability exclusively within the police force in the form of mandatory body cams, re-training, and termination of excessively violent officers does not address the larger environment that gave birth to the an inherently racist police organization in the first place – leaving us vulnerable to new strands of the same toxic problem.

Ripple effects of police brutality also manifest themselves across entire communities in the form of public health crisis and prison gerrymandering (Cooper and Fullilove 2016, Wagner and Kopf 2015). For example, in neighborhoods coping with excessive police violence, residents are significantly more likely to have high-blood pressure, diabetes, and asthma (Cooper 2016). In addition, black residents of highly patrolled neighborhoods have reported poor local social cohesion/stress as a direct result of constant surveillance (Cooper 2016). The political consequences of building prisons in rural white states has resulted in the civic silencing of thousands of black folks via the disproportionate number of black folks reported within majority white states. This means that “black political clout” is transferred to districts like: Alabama, Arizona, California, Colorado, New York, Texas etc. where blacks have little to not vote (Fullilove 2016).

For these reasons, we believe it is crucial to expand our collective understanding of police brutality beyond individual instances of racist-fueled murder and center our understanding within the evolving political/economic continuum of slave labor. It is within this continuum that we can develop a critical consciousness of the root causes of police brutality. We specifically feel the need to educate communities of color on the enormous profitability of prisons and criminalization (fines, fees, prison slave labor, commissary etc.) that creates the demand for hyper-policing in the first place. Any attempt to end the disproportionate violence and murder on brown and black communities at the hands of police that lacks a critical analysis of the web of racist laws, systems, and institutions that ultimately exist to justify slave labor will fall short.

In the following section, we situate the current issue of police brutality within the historical evolution of slave labor to set the groundwork for our community vision and subsequent organizing strategy. We pay particular attention to the cheap labor demand that resulted from the abolition of slavery and the parallel re-branding of coercion (through Black Codes, Jim Crow etc.) to meet this demand.

## **A History of the Evolution of Slave Labor and Coercion**

Prison labor is the latest evolution of slave labor. Scholars such as Manning Marable (1983), Michele Alexander (2010), and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2016) have argued that the mass explosion of prison labor – via the prison industrial complex- beginning in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century is simply the latest version of a centuries long pattern of maintaining an economic system of slavery in place in everything but name. This latest evolution stems from its predecessors including: chattel slavery, convict leasing, sharecropping, and immigrant farmworker exploitation (Mitchell 2012). Black and Brown bodies have always been at the forefront of this brutalization (Pew Research Center 2018).

The end of chattel slavery in 1865 marked the beginning of the use of coded language and strategies for exploiting Black labor. Convict leasing and sharecropping are hallmarks of this coded language in the post-bellum South’s attempt to cope with a cotton economy that was devastated by the Emancipation Proclamation (Ochilltree 1998). Arguably, convict-leasing was the preferred of the two strategies because it approximated chattel slavery most closely in terms of: free labor, close supervision, and power over prisoner’s bodies. For example, in Texas white-landowning bidders paid an average of \$25,000 a year to the state for complete control over prisoner’s lives that they effectively owned and subjected to hard labor, and physical abuse in

fields such as steel and coal mining (Browne 2010). The extent of this unregulated abuse is evident in the fact that convict death rates reached up to 46% in states like South Carolina (Ochilltree 1998).

For the new systems of convict-leasing and sharecropping to work, land-owners had to re-invent new methods of coercion. This is key to our discussion. Racist social codes such as Black Codes and Jim Crow Laws which included a web of fines, fees, and imprisonment for actions as simple as breaking curfew, travelling to white parts of town, missing work, and reading were implemented to criminalize black folks (Ochilltree 1998, Averick 2010, Browne 2010). By criminalizing black folks for the slightest infractions of a racist social code, Black Codes effectively capitalized on the caveat of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment which allows slavery to exist on the condition that it is used as a “punishment for a crime” (United States Constitution 1865). This is a pattern. In every historical instance that attempts at achieving socio-economic equity for the black community have been made there has been a counter resurgence of newly formulated systems to justify slavery.

Evolving forms of policing and the brutality that comes with that are inescapable parts of our economy. The necessary condition upon which the modern system of prison slave labor exists is the hyper-policing of black and brown communities. Police search, seize, and kill black and brown community members as they coral bodies into cell units. The result is the degradation of these communities via the material and structural realities that fuel crime, gang activity, substance abuse and community trauma. Often, this chaos pits black and brown people against each other both in their own communities and in prisons.

The evolution of chattel slavery to convict-leasing, sharecropping, Black Codes, and Jim Crow Laws is the continuum from which modern-day prison slave labor, racist drug laws and police brutality is born. Immediately following the end of the Civil Rights Era, the U.S economy was faced with the same difficulties that resulted from the end of chattel slavery, namely, a massive Black labor revolt and the need to fill the labor demand, which meant huge cuts to white business owner’s net profits. Again, the U.S. was faced with the same dilemma that the Civil War created: the demand for cheap labor and the absence of methods of coercion to supply that demand via the supreme court decision to ban discrimination on the basis of race.

It is within this continuum that the modern era of hyper-policing and police brutality is born. Following the Civil Rights Era, the state created a slew of laws and therefore justifications for policing and brutalizing brown and black communities. For example, in the 1990’s the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (U.S. Department of Justice 1994), the Anti-Drug Abuse Act (1988), and disparities in crack/cocaine sentencing resulted in the imprisonment of Black bodies at a rate six times higher than their white counterparts (Alexander 2010, Averick 2016). This has a few significant meanings. First, it means that in states like Washington D.C., 3 out of 4 black men could expect to serve time in prison (Alexander 2010). Second, it means that the U.S. has emerged as the world leader in imprisoning its citizens (Alexander 2010, Averick 2016, Taylor 2016). Although the U.S. makes up only 5% of the world population it makes up 25% of the world’s prison population (Alexander 2010, Averick 2016). Third, it means that although Latinx make up only 16% of the total U.S. population, they make up 23% of the prison population – for Black folks those numbers are 12% (total U.S. population) and 33% (prison population) (Pew Research Center 2018). White people make up a whopping 64% of the U.S. population but only 30% of the prison population (Pew Research Center 2018).

The bottom line is: people do not herd themselves into prisons. Brown and Black people do not commit crime at rates higher than whites (Alexander, 2016). This is where police brutality lives. Police violence makes these statistics possible. In fact, the symbiotic relationship between mass incarceration and hyper-policing makes it inevitable.

The millions of bodies that are hyper-policed and herded into the world's most massive prison population translate into billions of dollars for private and public prisons (Averick, 2016 Core Civic 2017). This billion-dollar industry is fueled by prison slave labor. In the U.S., prisoners can expect to earn an average of 86 cents per day for 8-hour work days (Prison Policy Initiative 2017). The highest paying prison jobs are capped off at \$3.45, and in states like Georgia and Alabama there is no minimum daily wage (Prison Policy Initiative 2017). According to the Bureau of Prisons (2018), items like toothpaste and a single bottle of water cost \$3.45 each. Slave wages and exorbitant commissary prices are supported by inmate phone service fees which prisoners and their families have paid as much as \$17 for a 15-minute phone call (Federal Communications Commission 2017). One of the most successful corporations of neo-slavery is Core Civic, formerly known as the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) which banks an annual revenue of \$1.7 billion (Core Civic 2017).

To understand what this billion-dollar industry means for black and Latinx relations, we must analyze the parallel economic strategies used to enslave brown communities. The Bracero Program of 1942 outlined the state-sanctioned strategies used to exploit immigrant farm workers – which affected Latinx communities most heavily. From 1942-1964, 4.5 million Bracero contracts were signed effectively importing Mexican agricultural laborers to harvest crops such as cotton, beets, apples, and lemons for slave wages (Mitchell 2012). These workers had no right to select the farms they worked, were barred from switching jobs if they faced abuses, had no right to strike, and were forced to live in unsanitary shacks – closely in resemblance to slave quarters (Mitchell 2012). The slightest deviation from these strict rules resulted in deportation to Mexico, physical punishment, or imprisonment (Mitchell 2012). The end of the Bracero Program marked the beginning of massive attempts to establish equitable treatment of immigrant farmworkers. Perhaps two of the most notable activists of this era are Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez who founded the National Farmworkers Association (NFWA) in 1962 (Mitchell 2012).

Like their black brothers, brown labor revolts created the need to re-forge new systems of criminalization to capitalize and expropriate profit from the Latinx community. The coincidental timeline of black and brown labor revolts resulted in the absorption of brown folks into the bracket of discriminatory laws used to expropriate prison labor from black folks. This explains the fact that 1 in 5 Brown men are incarcerated on drug charges (Mitchell 2012). It also explains why Latinx men make up 23% of the prison population even though they constitute only 16% of the total U.S. population (Pew Research Center 2018).

The relationship between the continuum of slave labor and modern police brutality is poignantly clear. Though the code names evolve, the patterns of petty criminalization, abuse, and economic exploitation are the permanent foundation of the U.S. capitalist economy. Prison labor is its newest code name. At this moment, there are over 2.5 million people tucked away in prison cells (Pew Research Center 2018). An extremely disproportionate number of those people are black and brown. Their white owners include: Civic Core, Idaho Potatoes, JCPenny, Whole Foods, McDonald's, Microsoft, Exxon Mobile, and Starbucks (Prison Policy Initiative 2017). The radical abolishment of prisons is necessary to break the cycle of slavery and hyper-policing

in real terms. Black and brown coalitions that organize prison strikes, demonstrations, and ultimately cause massive profit losses to white corporations who own prisoners will lead this fight.

## **Vision**

Ultimately, we envision what the 21<sup>st</sup> century deems unimaginable. This is our world: black girls with puffy pigtails and brown boys walk into their schools without having to pass through metal detectors. School police are replaced by counselors, psychologists, and art teachers. Drug addiction is not criminalized – it is treated. The police as an organized branch of government are abolished; we address community conflict with peace builders. The 1,000 potential lights in the lives that are extinguished every year light up our lives – they are doctors, scientists, artists, musicians, mothers, fathers, bakers, and educators.

In our world: gang violence and hate between black and brown brothers and sisters no longer exists. Formerly persecuted undocumented immigrants and ex-gang members form lifelong friendships - they recognize and cultivate the commonality of their roots and culture. Drug trade and robbery are no longer massive issues – because people are not economically cornered into these markets. No one pulls down their black hoody at night for fear of looking menacing. No one's stomach sinks at the sight of red lights in their rear view. The only time someone's cheek touches the pavement is to look under their car for something they've lost.

In our impossible world: Tamir Rice makes it home. Sandra Bland, Alton Sterling, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, and thousands of others make it home to their mothers, grandmothers, sisters, friends, fathers, and lovers.

## **Organizing for the Future**

We can't return the lost ones. But our pain and anger can help us protect those that are still here. Who is that? The millions of brown and black children, adults, and elders who make up our communities. The foundation for our organizing strategy is one that is collective, inclusive (of all marginalized groups including but not limited to: indigenous folks, LGBTQ+ folks, sex workers, convicted felons, prisoners, undocumented folks, etc.) community centered, and coalition based.

Our preliminary organizing strategies include: the creation of monthly prison labor boycotts, drafting a bill which bans private prisons and the creation of additional prisons period, and mass demonstrations to de-fund the murderous LAPD and re-fund schools, and creative programs for children. Our strategies primarily target prison reform because we feel it is a major root of police brutality. De-funding and disrupting a culture of incarceration and exploitation disrupts the demand for coercion. This fundamentally weakens the purpose of police and their place in society.

We plan to utilize diverse platforms to engage people of color – the most important criteria across these platforms will be accessibility. We plan to allow people to bring their talents to the

struggle. Those who have a knack for social media will help run our organization's social media accounts to ensure continuous reach and increase interactions with our feed. We will use Instagram's business tool to track our audience demographics, age, and activity reports to tailor our posts for best results. Those who are into fashion can help us design shirts, and other apparel to fund our projects. Writers can produce blogs, poetry, and coordinate with journalists to increase our exposure nationally.

We feel it is important to figure out a way to fund basic costs of living for our core members – because organizing is a full-time job and effective organizing requires consistent turnout. This is particularly true in the case of our planned prison labor boycott. Prisoners are intentionally among the most disenfranchised group of Americans in the nation and it's going to take massive support in the form of physical bodies demonstrating in prison yards to mobilize them. We plan to sit down with Black Lives Matter and show up with them to weekly Police Commission Meetings to not only demand police accountability but also, to demand de-funding. So, we are not fractioning off but adding together. We plan to repeat this step with immigrant coalitions, LGBTQ coalitions, indigenous coalitions etc. We plan to add and incorporate the masses of brutalized people to “create a movement, not a moment (Abdullah, Police Commission Meeting, 2018).

We will host community teach-ins and train members of heavily policed communities to be peace builders. This will plant the seed of critical consciousness that stops us from calling the police on our own people because ultimately, we must de-criminalize the perception of ourselves and our neighbors before we can ask others to do so. In addition, we will host open forums for public school educators to build alliances and find ways to empower children through real history and radical pedagogy.

We believe our ineffable pain is limitless power. Viva la revolucion!

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**GRADE:** 9/10

**FEEDBACK:** Overall, well-written paper. The context and issue analysis pieces were spot on, but the strategy and tactics could have been stronger. I was looking for more specifics about how you would engage your target audience. You're planning to have monthly boycotts-- how will those work? How will you decide what to boycott? How will you get people to boycott? Why only one month? You want to end all private prisons and stop the development of new prisons-- how are you going to do that? What are your tactics for ensuring that these prisons are not built? Your paper lacks these specific details, which are necessary to make your strategy work. Be sure to address these in your presentation.

Total- 9

Understanding of issue- 2

Use of appropriate terms, concepts, tools- 2

Powerful and logical alignment among sections- 1.5

Clarification and readability- 1.5

Follows required format- 2