I'm a Black Police Officer. Here's How to Change the System.

Yes, defund the police. But then re-fund them, better.

By David Hughes

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NEWPORT NEWS, Va. — When I entered the police force in Virginia in 1987, I was one of the few Black officers in my department. On my first day on patrol, I was paired with an experienced white officer. As we prepared to hit the streets, he went over what he expected from me as a rookie. Then he pulled away from the curb and added, offhandedly: "Oh, if I call someone a nigger tonight, don't get upset. It's not directed at you, it's directed at them."

I was taken aback, but I didn't say anything. It was only my second week on the job. I was young. I remember thinking to myself, "I probably won't have this job long."

That first night set the tone for what was to come. I kept my job and climbed the ranks over three decades in part because I learned how to navigate a racist system.

I have personally heard some of my white colleagues mock Black people, make crude jokes or ridicule the way they speak. White officers crudely disparage high-ranking Black officers behind their backs. A sergeant once asked me if I could read or write. He also told me he didn't think Blacks should be policemen — he said it was like "letting a fox guard the hen house."

When I was made detective, my transfer was mysteriously held up for months. I found out later that this was because I was being investigated for corruption. An officer had falsely accused me of selling drugs, despite my immaculate record in uniform. I wasn't surprised.

Having witnessed a racist police system from the inside, I understand why people are desperate for change. Some are calling for the dissolution of policing altogether. As a Black person, I understand. As a cop, I think that's the wrong answer.

I have seen firsthand how the right kind of policing can serve our communities and make people's lives better. I have seen police officers use their own money to buy food and diapers for domestic violence victims, clean up a needle-filled vacant lot and build a playground on it, or take young people under their wing to give them a stable adult figure in their life.

I have also, of course, seen how police can harm people's lives. The answer to racist policing is not in taking away all the good that policing can do, but rather in changing what it means to police, and who is doing it.

The first part of that change starts with hiring. The majority of police officers do not have four-year college degrees. They don't start their career with a foundational education that will broaden their worldview, make them empathetic to other cultures or understand human psychology.

Police academies must change, too. Police are taught that the enemy is "out there." When they arrive at work with that mind-set, they don't know who wants them in the community, and who wants to kill them. It's no different than troops in Afghanistan or Iraq. We are patrolling the streets of our own cities as an occupying force.

Our training also focuses on worst-case scenarios: how to arrest someone, how to fight, how to use a weapon. Instead, it should emphasize *preventing* escalation. Once you get to the point where you are having to fight, you've already lost. The question after a shooting by the police should not be "Was it legal?" but rather "Was it necessary?"

The length of police academy varies, but here in Virginia, it's about six months, then around three months with a training officer on the job. Nine months is not sufficient preparation to give you the authority to take someone's life or deprive them of their liberty.

The probationary period for police officers should also be increased to a minimum of three years. Currently, once an officer has completed his probationary period, it is almost impossible to fire him. Performance evaluations must focus on more than the number of arrests made or traffic tickets written. They should include the officer's conviction rate, a thorough review of the types of arrests made and the number of complaints received.

We must also address the racism of police departments from the inside. I don't mean through "cultural diversity training." When my department did that training, most showed up because they had to and cracked jokes through the whole thing. Instead, we should hire officers who reflect the communities they serve, by race and gender. About 15 percent of the police officers on my force are Black in a city that is about 43 percent Black. This imbalance is reflective of most police departments in America.

Localities should also have the right to enact police residency requirements and give people a say in who polices their community. The officers involved in George Floyd's death did not have a connection to the community they served. Don't confuse being familiar with the people in the community with having a connection. All officers become acquainted with people on their beats — it's a business relationship. An officer must be able to understand, empathize and feel they are part of the community.

I've worked with hundreds of people as a trainer and patrol officer, investigator, administrator and assessor. When I hear calls to defund the police, I cringe. Not because I am a cop, but because the adage is true: You get what you pay for.

Police salaries are low, making it hard to consistently attract the kind of folks we need on the force. This is not said to demean my fellow police officers. But when you make the job attractive to people who have a college degree and aspire for something more — to create social change, to understand human psychology, to make a difference in people's lives for the better — you get the kind of police force any community would welcome.

So yes, defund the police. But then re-fund them, better. Hire people with a college degree. Pay them more. Reform police academies to include *education* on psychology, cultural sensitivity, communication skills and de-escalation of conflict. Hold people to account.

It's not up to the officers to bring about change. We have to take drastic action to create that change for them. Those who want things to stay the same will have no choice but to go elsewhere, because the world has changed. Policing needs to catch up.

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