

Cunneen, C. (2023). *Defund the Police: An International Insurrection*. Bristol University Press. 274 pp. GBP 19.99 (pbk), GBP 85.99 (hbk). ISBN: 978-1447361671.

*John W Buttle*<sup>1</sup>

Historically, public police are legitimised by law to be the coercive arm of the ruling class, a notion embedded in the public imagination. Indeed, few people can imagine their world without some kind of centralised police organisation. More recently, with the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, the idea of law enforcement organisations being essential to society has been challenged with calls to defund the police. Cunneen's *Defund the Police: An International Insurrection* uses examples from numerous countries to situate Black Lives Matter as a global phenomenon and provides academic evidence to support defunding the police. Defunding the police is a controversial idea that is in many ways ahead of its time, but paradoxically, much of the evidence that supports the argument has been available for some time.

Cunneen sets the scene by describing the influence that the deaths of George Floyd and Trayvon Martin had on the Black Lives Matter movement. Examples of excessive uses of force in other jurisdictions within Africa and Asia are used to demonstrate that police violence is not confined to the US. Indeed, this work focuses on police violence as an international problem, with defunding the police an appropriate answer. Cunneen acknowledges that defunding the police is an abolitionist perspective, which for many would seem an unachievable, utopian idea. However, the abolition of the police was not the goal but rather the restriction of an organisation that is pervasive throughout society.

---

<sup>1</sup> Auckland University of Technology, Aotearoa New Zealand

Reforms often centre around community policing to re-establish legitimacy by building relationship with citizens. However, this is often another means of public surveillance, especially of Indigenous peoples or other groups that the state considers inconvenient. Cunneen provides a wide analysis of numerous police histories to demonstrate how the seeds of racism were planted and how the weed of repression spread across the world.

The work examines the emergence of the new police established in London at the centre of the British Empire by Sir Robert Peel in 1829. The Metropolitan police and the other constabularies that later followed throughout England and Wales were based on the notion of policing by consent. They were to maintain order through institutional legitimacy based on the acceptance and support of the citizenry. However, this was not the case for the colonial policing model first trialled in Ireland and developed in countries colonised by the British Empire. Colonial policing developed a noticeably oppressive and militaristic approach to social control, with racism inherent in policing from the very inception of modern law enforcement organisations. Cunneen also supports this notion by explaining how policing in the US emerged from a vigilante tradition focused on the control of slaves.

Police legitimacy is dependent on the perception that the police are effective in fulfilling their social role. Cunneen notes that most police portray themselves as organisations that bravely keep people safe by upholding the law. For this and similar claims to be legitimate, there is an assumption that enforcing the law is dangerous and that the police are effective at upholding the law. However, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the police are not effective law enforcers, with low reporting rates and embarrassingly small resolution rates for certain crimes. In fact, the only crime where the police can truly claim to be efficient is in the solving of homicides, a crime that is relatively easy to resolve due to the fact it is mostly committed by someone close to the victim. The notion that policing is dangerous is also challenged by the fact that the occurrences of assaults and officer fatalities are rare. Cunneen argues that policing is a relatively safe but ineffective means of upholding the law and providing public safety. This provides a strong justification for defunding the police.

The book then shifts to how dangerous the police are to citizens, especially to poor, marginalised communities and groups. Protest movements



that have arisen to challenge police violence are examined, and incidents of police racism that often spark protest movements are brought into focus. Consideration is given to the history of protest that influenced the Black Lives Matter movement in the US. Police violence against ethnic minorities in the United Kingdom (UK) were examined as far back as the 1970s to the Macpherson inquiry into the death of Steven Lawrence. In Australia, the focus is on the injustice of Aboriginal deaths in custody, which resulted in numerous inquiries. From this, it is noted that resistance to police violence by ethnic minorities is not just a contemporary issue in most jurisdictions but an ongoing matter.

Attention is then focused on the pervasiveness of police violence, which includes lethal use of force, deaths in custody, and maiming during arrest. While police violence can be considered at a local level, it is a phenomenon that seems to appear wherever there is a police force. Victims of police violence are mostly from marginalised communities. Cunneen moves away from just an analysis of Western democracies to describe the extrajudicial killings in Brazil and the Philippines, a characteristic of the war on drugs, as well as extrajudicial killings, torture, and enforced disappearances in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. Racial profiling and police use of violence to control of protest are also discussed. Understanding the extent and scope of police violence supports the importance of defunding the police as a means of moving towards abolition.

There are victim support advocates and organisations that consider harsher policing measures as being appropriate. Interestingly, Cunneen spends some time discussing the reasons why this need not be the case. Much of the justification for a police force is based on its ability to offer public protection, especially for female citizens. However, the evidence indicates that the police are not particularly good at dealing with issues that are pertinent to females, such as domestic and sexual violence. Cunneen recognises the fact that the police are often the first port of call when it comes to dealing with issues of mental and physical health. These are two aspects of policing that officers are woefully ill-equipped to provide a caring and competent service. Therefore, the police promise of protecting the public is often not kept, especially where marginalised groups are concerned.

Cunneen states that the police have historically tackled claims of racism with cultural sensitivity courses and recruitment through affirmative action.

These attempts at reform have uniformly failed regardless of jurisdiction. Another reform strategy for addressing racism in disenfranchised areas is community policing, where the intent is to create a police presence that aims to interact with the public in a friendly and constructive way to repair the image of the police in the eyes of the community. However, the reality of community policing is that it gives officers greater opportunity to observe the locality and further criminalise residents. Reform also involves matters to do with police accountability. Numerous attempts to provide independent complaints processes have been resisted by law enforcement, which has amplified calls to defund the police in many jurisdictions. High levels of impunity afforded to officers by criminal justice systems have left defunding the police as the only sensible way forward.

The answer, in Cunneen's words, "... is about presence, not absence" (p. 168), with the idea to reduce police involvement in society and reinvest funding into impoverished communities. This involves building alliances between community groups that will advocate for and implement ways of dealing with social problems that do not involve the police. Citizen and community action is needed to progress the defunding of the police. This includes building community interventions to replace numerous police functions and ensuring that police administration is organised in a way that does not promote misconduct. Steps should be taken to demilitarise and disarm the police and to remove legislation that unnecessarily criminalises citizens while allowing for Indigenous self-determination.

Cunneen's work is timely and important to the policing and abolitionist literature. The book gathers various findings that are amalgamated into an evidence-based justification for defunding the police. A major strength of this work is its international perspective, which draws attention to the fact that police racism and misconduct are ingrained regardless of jurisdiction. This book is one of the best contributions to the criminological literature in quite some time. It provides a considered justification for defunding the police. It is work that lays a foundation for further research in this area and undoubtedly will be cited on numerous occasions.