

Reimagining Policing Means Challenging Militarism

by Martin Hart-Landsberg

The excessive use of force and killing of unarmed Black Americans by police has fueled a growing national movement for slashing police budgets, reimagining policing, and directing freed funds to community-based programs that provide medical and mental health care, housing, and employment support to those in need.

This is a long overdue development. But it is important that we find ways to broaden this effort into a larger mass movement against militarism more generally, if we hope to remake our cities and achieve significant improvements in majority living and working conditions.

Police are not the answer

Police budgets rose steadily from the 1990s to the 2008 Great Recession and, despite the years of economic stagnation that followed, have remained largely unchanged. For example, inflation adjusted median per capita spending on police in the 150 largest US cities grew from \$359 in 2007 to \$374 in 2017. The contrast with state and local government spending on social programs is dramatic. From 2007 to 2017, inflation adjusted median per capita spending on housing and community development fell from \$217 to \$173, while spending on public welfare programs tumbled from \$70 to \$47.

Thus, as economic developments over the last three decades left working people confronting weak job growth, stagnant wages, and rising rates of mortality, funding priorities meant that the resulting social consequences would increasingly be treated as policing problems. And, in line with other powerful trends that shaped this period — especially globalization and militarization — police departments were encouraged to meet their new responsibilities by transforming themselves into small, heavily equipped armies, whose purpose was to wage war against those they were supposed to protect and serve.

The military-to-police pipeline

The massive, unchecked militarization of the country, and its associated military-to-police pipeline was one of the more powerful factors promoting this transformation. The Pentagon, overflowing with military hardware and eager to justify a further modernization of its weaponry, began its 1033 program in the early 1990s, which allowed it to provide “surplus” military equipment free to law enforcement agencies, including armored vehicles, grenade launchers, and even bayonets. To this point, some \$7 billion in military equipment

has been transferred to more than 8,000 law enforcement agencies in 49 states.

Not surprisingly, outfitting police departments for war has influenced their recruiting and training. On average, police departments now spend 168 hours training recruits on firearms, self-defense, and use of force tactics, and just nine hours on conflict management and mediation.

And this equipment and training has been put to use. As William D. Hartung, director of the Arms and Security Project at the Center for International Policy, points out, “armored vehicles were used at least 29 times in response to Black Lives Matter protests organized since the murder of George Floyd, including in major urban areas like Philadelphia and Cincinnati.”

Sadly, the favoring of militarization over social spending at the local level also takes place at the federal level. Military and national security spending dominate the federal discretionary budget, and their combined share has grown dramatically over the last two decades. Squeezed out is spending on health, education, job training, environmental protection, housing, and transportation.

Militarism fuels racism and police violence against Black, Indigenous and other people of color. Its privileged position in local and federal budgets blocks our ability to seriously address our many social, economic, and ecological problems. The time has come to push for defunding the military as well as the police as part of a process of reimagining national security and policing and using freed funds to meet community needs.

Martin Hart-Landsberg is Professor Emeritus of Economics at Lewis & Clark College, Portland, Oregon. His areas of teaching and research include political economy, economic development, international economics, and the political economy of East Asia. He is the author of seven books on issues related to globalization and the political economy of East Asia, with a focus on China, Japan, and Korea.

It is important that we find ways to broaden this effort into a larger mass movement against militarism more generally if we hope to remake our cities and achieve significant improvements in majority living and working conditions.