

IMAGINE

The Houston Abolitionist Collective

HOUSTON

That Keeps George Floyd at Home, Alive, & Safe

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Photo by Quia Brown

What if Houston never had to protest another life lost to police or incarceration? What if we used public funding on good healthcare, good housing, good food, healthy community spaces, and a healthy environment for Houstonians? What if, instead of a city that punishes, we had a city that cares for everyone's needs?

COVID-19 has worsened the [divide](#)¹ between those who are given access to affordable healthcare, safe schools, and safe jobs, and those who are not. While people have struggled, [corrupt](#)² leaders have destabilized our national government and let [white supremacists](#)³ and [domestic terrorists](#)⁴ run free. The City of Houston [responded](#)⁵ to this threat and the broader crisis by giving the Houston Police Department over \$10 million dollars of CARES Act funds intended to fight COVID-19.

[George Floyd](#)⁶ was born on October 14, 1973, and moved to the Third Ward when he was two years old.

Since then, HPD has [failed](#)⁷ to implement most modern policing reforms. On the other hand, the police department in Minneapolis, where George moved in 2014 to try to improve his life, [implemented](#)⁸ almost every kind of modern policing reform, and still killed him. So what would it take for George to have actually found a place where he could turn his life around? What would it take for him to have remained home, alive, and safe?

The movement for abolition is not only about George Floyd's murder. It is also about his life, and the lives of so many others like him.

At the very least, the [mass expression](#)⁹ of grief, agitation, and pain in June 2020 brought a recognition of the harms of policing, punitive justice, and carceral systems. Some may debate the ways in which we deal with this harm. This guide will lay out a vision for how our story can become a new world of imagination, education, hope, transformation, and the ongoing abolition of systems of harm.

H O U S T O N

Houston is often portrayed as a progressive city because of its diversity, culture, and majority-Democratic leadership. But we know it's a city that leads the country in [racial, economic, and poverty disparities](#)¹⁰; has a [housing crisis](#)¹¹ with the country's [second-highest rate of evictions](#)¹² during the pandemic; and has an [overpowered mayoral](#)¹³ and policing system that caters to the interests of Houston's wealthiest residents and corporations and protects property over life.

Our city leadership responds to Houstonians' everyday issues with heavier policing.

George Floyd's record includes a false police report by [Gerald Goines](#)¹⁴, an ex-narcotics officer who falsely convicted Floyd and [almost 70 others](#)¹⁵. George Floyd's decision to leave Houston was informed by Houston's policing and the disparities among its communities. People growing up in neighborhoods like the Third Ward, where there's a clear need for a greater investment in schools and real community-led safety efforts, are [more likely](#)¹⁶ to struggle in school and be exposed to crime.

Many of Houston's leaders, including Police Chief Art Acevedo and Mayor Sylvester Turner, present themselves as progressive, though their policies and track records say otherwise.

T O N ' S

► T W O ◀ F A C E S

[Chief Acevedo](#)¹⁷ has sold himself as a pro-reform police chief. However, he continues to block and deny bail reform. His officers killed six Houstonians in the months before the killing of George Floyd and he refused to release the body camera footage until his public image began to suffer and forced him to give in. Five of the six were people of color. Finally, Acevedo's department continues to conduct no-knock raids, one of which in 2019 was based on an unlawful warrant.

The city council and Mayor Turner have [accepted](#)¹⁸ large donations from the Houston Police Officers' Union. In exchange, Turner has created "oversight boards" that are designed not to work, and offloaded all policing issues into committees where the public has no view into what is being discussed and what changes are being made. The Mayor's task forces, including the one on policing, produce recommendations that the Mayor can choose to implement or simply disregard, and are even [disbanded if they state opinions disagreeing with the Mayor's own](#)¹⁹.

AN INSUFFICIENT RESPONSE



Photo by Quia Brown

Houston police have responded to an impassioned movement against police brutality²⁰ with more brutality, resulting in uncountable cases of assault and abuse. HPD marched on protesters with riot gear, nearly trampled them with horses, and shot pepper spray into the crowds. The City shelled out \$21 million²¹ in protest overtime pay to officers. As a result of a single night of policing the largest protest on June 2, 2020, HPD incarcerated²² over 200 protesters in a facility with the fourth-largest COVID-19 cluster²³ in the country, Harris County Jail.

After months²⁴ of calls from the community to take meaningful action to address the effects of policing on Black communities, the mayor paid an additional \$4.1 million in COVID-19 relief funds to “saturate”²⁵ six communities with police, on top of HPD’s already \$1 billion budget²⁶.

So, which neighborhoods are being targeted?

The six communities that the Mayor chose to target with more policing are neighborhoods of Houston's very rich and very poor.

Some of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Houston are included in the Mayor's plans to increase police presence. Greater Uptown, Memorial, and University Place²⁷ which are included in the investment have median home prices averaging above \$400,000 and median incomes in the six figures. Demographically these neighborhoods are around 60% White, while Houston as a whole²⁸ is only 25% White. Around 70% of residents of these neighborhoods have Bachelor's degrees, compared to only 32% of all Houston residents. **There have been no publicly documented incidents of police violence or misconduct in these neighborhoods.**

The remaining neighborhoods²⁹ being targeted by increased police presence are on average 47% Hispanic, 27% Black and only 17% White. Houston may claim to value its immigrants and refugees, but undocumented and Latinx communities are targeted by both police departments and ICE. Although Mayor Turner and Chief Acevedo appeared in the media many times to oppose Texas' ban on sanctuary cities, there are still three ICE detention centers³⁰ still freely operating in the greater Houston area alone.

The average median income in targeted neighborhoods is just over \$46,000, lower than the citywide average. Around 25% of residents of these neighborhoods have Bachelor's degrees, while half of residents have a high school diploma or less.

Mayor Turner has made his priorities clear by protecting the very rich, where policing is largely friendly and seen as a support, and targeting the poor. The City has continued to overlook misconduct and violence in policing in Black and Latinx neighborhoods, and instead has invested in improving the Mayor's relationships with Houston's elite.

Dangerous Policing in Black and Latinx Neighborhoods

Neighborhoods being targeted by the Mayor's \$4.1 million investment are the sites of egregious police misconduct and murders. George Floyd's life in the Third Ward may have been affected by the known corruption by infamous HPD officer Gerald Goines³¹, which will be one of the neighborhoods the Mayor will target with increased police presence. Nicolas Chavez³², who was killed by HPD in the middle of a mental health crisis, was shot in Southeast Houston, another target area for increased police presence. Adrian Medearis³³ was killed during a routine speeding stop in the North Belt Policing District, also set to receive increased police presence.

A video that surfaced in 2020 showed HPD officers beating Aundre Howard³⁴ while he was handcuffed during a traffic stop for an expired registration. In a video released by civil rights lawyers, one of the officers can be heard saying "Just f***ing shoot his ass."

WHAT IS ABOLITION?

Since summer 2020, a continuous wave of our communities' protest and civil unrest has captured the nation's attention. We've seen calls to defund or abolish the police.

When we say, "abolish the police," we literally call for an end to policing as it exists now. Policing can appear as literal policing by uniformed officers, policing through surveillance, or even citizens policing or subjugating each other.

For most, the word abolition calls to mind the movement to abolish slavery in the US in the 17th and 18th centuries. Today, abolition seeks a similar goal: to end the practices that dehumanize and cause systemic harm.

On the surface, this idea may seem frightening or extreme. However, abolition does not mean taking away all means of public safety and leaving people to fend for themselves. Abolition is a framework for helping us understand how to disentangle the roots of historic and ongoing violence in our society, and replace them with better alternatives.

The [Third Ward](#)³⁵, George Floyd's former home, is one of Houston's many historically Black communities. [Freedommen's Town](#)³⁶, near what is now Midtown, is another community where residents are fighting to preserve Black history. Over decades, city and federal governments have failed these communities, shutting down schools, closing stores that provide healthy food, and investing public dollars into parks and amenities for wealthy or suburban neighborhoods. In Houston, abolition could mean a renewed investment in these communities, and an end to the school-to-prison pipeline for so many young Black children.

Punitive justice is fundamentally flawed. The method of addressing harm through policing has been passed down to us for generations. Policing doesn't work, can't be reformed, and we must acknowledge, imagine, and implement a better system of justice. We call for an end to policing because in a government by the people, for the people, we demand humane, just mechanisms for keeping our communities safe.

Believing in abolition means expanding your mind to imagine new ways for us to take care of each other, and demanding governments support systems of care that actually help us endure and avoid harm. After all, policing hasn't always existed, and that means a world without policing is possible.

Myths, Fears, and

Myth

Reality

"That's the job"
Policing is worth the necessary evil of police misconduct

The courts³⁷ have³⁸ ruled³⁹ that police have no constitutional duty to protect people from harm. Instead, officers are trained⁴⁰ to escalate⁴¹ violence and shield⁴² themselves from the consequences, even though there is NEVER a situation in which police-initiated violence is the best solution.

"A world without police is chaos"
Laws and police represent justice

The law is NOT the same thing as justice. Whereas justice is a broad ideal of equity and fairness, the law is just a set of rules created by powerful and privileged people in our society. The police act both within the law⁴³ and outside the law⁴⁴ to cause harm in the name of "law and order." Laws have often justified, legalized, and empowered injustice. And when police commit murder, they act as judge, jury, and executioner. That's not justice.

"It's only a few bad apples"
Acts of misconducts are caused by individuals who should simply be punished

Acts of brutality against marginalized groups evolve from the underlying culture of policing. If human rights violations happen everywhere, every year, then the problem is not a few "bad apples," the barrel is rotten. And police officers' often step in to prevent the due process of the law⁴⁵. Police misconduct shows that the system of policing works exactly as intended: military-grade weapons are used against citizens in everyday conflicts, victims of crimes, especially of gender-based violence, are often too intimidated by the system of "law and order" to even report them.

"Policing has always existed"

Policing as we know it is less than a century old⁴⁶. In fact, early America did NOT have police departments at all. In 1704, slave patrols were created in the South with the purpose of maintaining the institution of slavery and terrorizing Black communities into obedience. After the Civil War, slave patrols in the South became police departments. States in the North and South drafted "Black Codes" which were laws written to specifically police Black people or prevent their entry. Our modern laws and policies are built on and evolved from these Black Codes and the later Jim Crow Laws that set up segregation.

Misconceptions About Policing

"Police make people safe"

Police presence deters crime and removing it will make my neighborhood more dangerous

Having more police officers does not make a community safer⁴⁷. Contrary to popular belief, data does not show that police presence alone is an effective deterrent for crime. Socioeconomic factors are more likely to predict public safety, meaning that by addressing economic inequality, we can improve the conditions that generate crimes of necessity. Abolition requires divesting from police and reinvesting in solutions that meet the needs of our communities. Policing is simply not as effective⁴⁸ as addressing the systemic problems which make crime more likely.

"We can't have no one to call"

The belief that abolition means there are no ways to address crime or harm

Abolition will never leave us without options. Although the road to abolition is a long one, we can work together to imagine a future in which survivors of domestic violence and victims of crime can have real justice through an effective and non-traumatic system of care. And the reality is that the police probably would not have helped you, anyway. Nationwide, the police solve fewer than 50% of violent crimes⁴⁹, and only 18% of property crimes. Fewer than 1%⁵⁰ of sexual assaults go to court, and when the perpetrators are the police themselves⁵¹, survivors rarely ever seek or get justice. In almost all cases of non-violent crime or social service needs, you can call other numbers instead of 911 to reach nonprofits or hotlines that serve your community.

"Abolition is impossible"

Many police departments have taken individual steps which align with abolitionist goals. Several countries with effective gun violence legislation have disarmed⁵² their police. Though we do not yet have a precedent for full abolition, individual pieces have already proven successful. Harris County bail reform⁵³ freed people from jail without raising the risk of them reoffending. School districts in Oakland, Minneapolis, Denver, and elsewhere have been successful in removing police from schools. In order to design a new system that serves communities, we need individuals to get engaged in reimaging justice, harm, and safety in our society. Just by reading this, you are already on the path to developing stronger ideas to serve your community and imagination.

Policing Doesn't Work

to grow as a person and lead a safe and healthy life, if someone had only invested in them. Theories like “[broken windows policing](#)⁵⁶” focus more on appearances and living conditions to “predict” crime, rather than focusing on the root causes.

The [first formal police force](#)⁵⁷ in America was founded in 1838 to [protect wealthy business owners' interests](#)⁵⁸. Today, wealthy CEOs and corporations cost the public [billions](#)⁵⁹ of dollars in tax fraud or corruption, and do so [scot free](#)⁶⁰, because they buy the best lawyers and the support of public officials.

Police have always been kind to the rich.

We grow up with [schools](#)⁵⁴ and [media](#)⁵⁵ teaching us that police are here to protect us. But for every victim of crime, there is also a victim of circumstance; someone who may have had a chance

Yet, people simply trying to survive or exist in public spaces, including people without homes, can easily [be seen as criminals](#)⁶¹ in the eyes of police.

American culture prioritizes self-sufficiency over human dignity, and values competition over spending time and resources to extend care to our neighbors. Sometimes the struggle to survive in America means people have to [break laws out of necessity](#)⁶², and the solution our leaders propose when this happens is to send in the police and throw people into jail, instead of simply funding the public resources and services that people need. Laws that criminalize [panhandling](#)⁶³ or [sleeping in public](#)⁶⁴ aren't even intended to reduce harm to citizens. Instead these laws empower police to solidify perceptions about who does and doesn't have a right to public space.

Nationally, police spend [less than five percent of their time responding to violent crime](#)⁶⁵. Instead, they spend the majority of their time on non-criminal calls (~35%), property crime (~13%), and medical calls (~8%). We don't need the police to handle these kinds of problems.

WHAT DO PEOPLE ACTUALLY CALL HPD FOR? ⁶⁶

OFFICER-INITIATED CALL

22.3%

CALL HANDLED OVER PHONE

16.9%

**ON SCENE RESPONSE REQUIRED,
NOT URGENT**

19.5%

URGENT CALLS/THREAT TO HUMAN LIFE

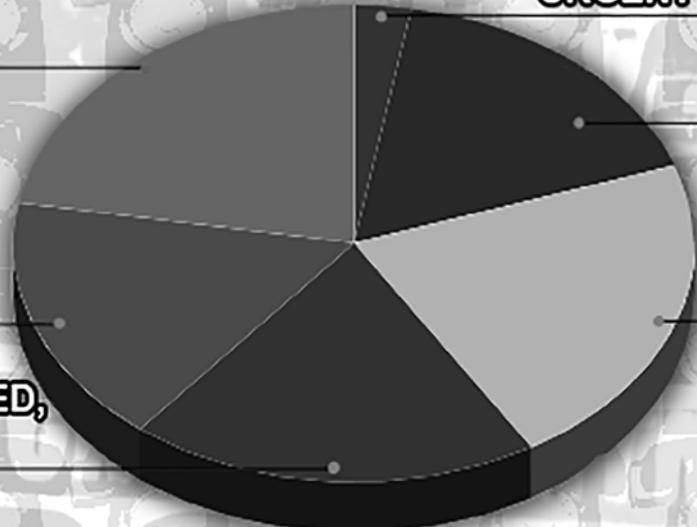
2.7%

THREAT TO HUMAN WELFARE

17.0%

NO KNOWN EMERGENCY

21.6%



The crimes that usually worry people, like threats to human life, make up less than 3% of what the police are called and used for in Houston. When you also count “threats to human welfare,” which include threats to property, that’s still less than 20% of the calls HPD received in 2019.

Even if we do believe that police should protect us from serious injury and theft, then 80% of how they likely spend their time and budget could be invested in communities instead.

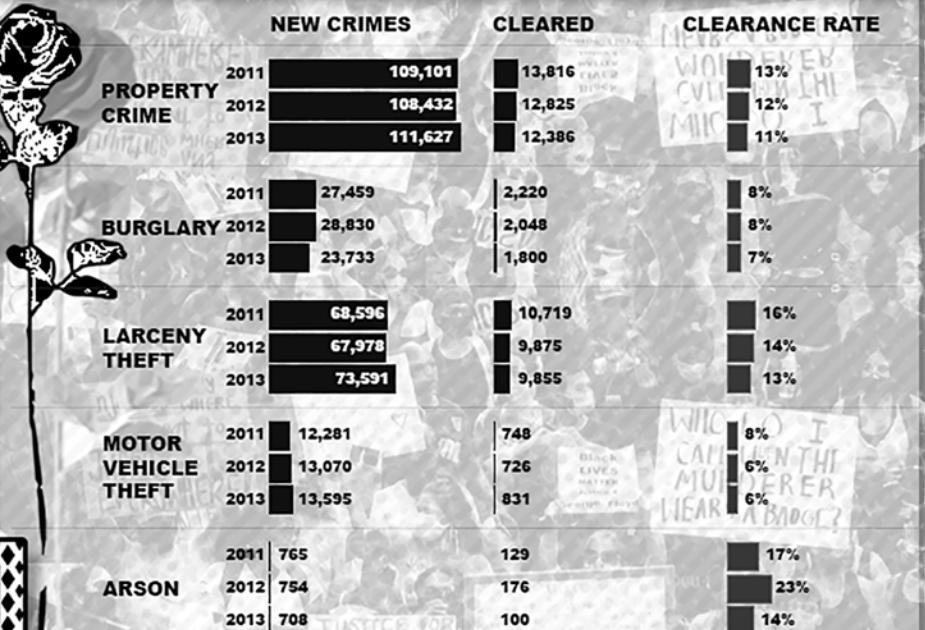
HOUSTON, TX (MUNICIPAL POLICE)

ESTIMATED POPULATION (2013): 2,180,606

POPULATION GROUPING: 1,000,000 AND ABOVE PEOPLE

	NEW CRIMES	CLEARED	CLEARANCE RATE
VIOLENT CRIME	2011 20,778	9,464	46%
	2012 21,538	8,472	39%
	2013 20,902	7,787	37%
MURDER & NON-NEGLECTIVE MANSLAUGHTER	2011 198	178	90%
	2012 217	152	70%
	2013 214	162	76%
ROBBERY	2011 8,054	2,109	28%
	2012 9,385	2,074	22%
	2013 9,891	2,084	21%
AGGRAVATED ASSAULT	2011 11,869	6,853	58%
	2012 11,343	5,974	53%
	2013 10,270	5,311	52%

HPD CRIME SOLVE RATE



When you factor in the average *crime solve rate*⁶⁷ of HPD, even more time and resources are being wasted on not achieving justice or protecting communities from harm in the criminal justice system's own framework.

In Houston, Harris County Jail is likely the *first*⁶⁸ place where people who are struggling will be offered free mental health care or supportive housing. At this point, they are also subject to expensive court fees or traumatic encounters with law enforcement. The system *fails*⁶⁹ at caring for people with mental health problems, drug addictions, or family violence issues, and instead often locks them up.

When we demand to abolish policing, we mean that our society must undo the *pipeline*⁷⁰ from poverty to police to prisons. We mean that right now police are unable to protect our communities from very real threats. We mean that everyone deserves safe, quality housing and welcoming public spaces.

THE LAW ALLOWS POLICE HARM



Police often use sanctioned behaviors to protect themselves and preserve a false ideal of “law and order,” harming people in the process.

Carroll v. Ohio⁷¹ (1925) allowed police to search vehicles without consent or a warrant if there is “probable cause,” the “automobile exception” to the 4th amendment.

Terry v. Ohio⁷² (1968) allowed police to stop-and-frisk if there is “reasonable suspicion.”

Warren v. District of Columbia⁷³ (1981) stated that police do not have a public duty to protect citizens.

City of Los Angeles v. Lyons⁷⁴ (1983) upheld the massive burden of proof on people seeking injunctions against police misconduct.

Tennessee v. Garner⁷⁵ (1985) extended police authority to use deadly force to situations where suspects are fleeing the scene (now it is no longer necessary to prove a tangible threat, only the possibility of a threat).

Malley v. Briggs⁷⁶ (1986) created qualified immunity, which “provides ample protection to all but the plainly incompetent or those who knowingly violate the law.”

Graham v. Connor⁷⁷ (1989) allowed police to use deadly force when “objectively reasonable.”

The Law Enforcement Officers’ Bill of Rights⁷⁸ (1995) gives police officers under investigation rights which are not given to civilians, such as a “cooling off” period (normally 48 hrs) before they have to respond to any questions.

Policing Extends Beyond Police Departments

» Militarized⁷⁹ federal agencies like Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE)⁸⁰ perpetrates much of the same harm as police by using excessive force and inhumane detainment practices to cage people who need and deserve to be treated with care. Policing by federal agents against people of color is an important extension of the same mindset of policing that is applied to keep poor communities and Black communities under the heavy hand of “law and order”⁸¹.

» “Community policing⁸²” is another term that’s used to offload policing behavior to residents and neighbors. This can create distrust and tension in communities, and is often an extension of standard policing in the way it uses community members trusted by the police to shield the police from accountability. Terms like “community policing” also whitewash police behavior by giving them “kudos” for trying something new while glossing over whether the strategies are actually impactful.

» Surveillance⁸³ is a tool that police departments may lean on as they seek to “defund” and yet maintain control over the general population. Doorbell cameras like Ring cameras, drones, automated license plate readers, and other private surveillance devices are sold by tech companies to governments so that police can keep a closer eye on citizens. But early evidence about the algorithms⁸⁴ behind these technologies already shows that they disproportionately misidentify Black faces and may cause an increase in racial profiling and wrongful arrests.

» In Iceland, New Zealand, Norway, the United Kingdom (except Northern Ireland), and the Maldives, the police are unarmed unless the situation is expected to merit it. In America today, the police are socialized into a framework called the “danger imperative⁸⁵. They are unnecessarily militarized⁸⁶ and are trained to always consider themselves in danger, which means that they are ready to escalate everyday situations like traffic stops or low-level calls for assistance into violence. This structure combined with the history of racist policing has resulted in over 1,096 deaths⁸⁷ at the hands of police officers in 2019 alone.

ADMINISTRATIONS
CHANGE
POLICE KILLINGS
DON'T

It doesn't seem to matter who's in charge —nationally or locally—the rate of police violence stays the same.

National Police Killings
Under Trump, 2019: 1,096

National Police Killings
Under Obama, 2013: 1,088

HPD Police Killings
Under Turner, 2017-20: 46

HPD Police Killings
Under Parker, 2013-15: 49

Source: Mapping Police Violence⁸⁷

If Policing Doesn't Work, What Reform Ideas Have Been Proposed for Houston?

The *Justice Can't Wait Campaign*⁸⁸ launched by the Right 2 Justice Coalition has proposed seven recommendations to help resolve issues of policing in Houston. See if you can identify which ones are intended to effectively reduce the scale and scope of policing on the road to abolition.

1. INCREASE TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR MISCONDUCT IN HOUSTON'S POLICE UNION CONTRACT

2. IMPLEMENT A POLICY THAT ELIMINATES DISCRETIONARY ARRESTS FOR CITATION-ELIGIBLE OFFENSES

3. IMPLEMENT A BODY CAMERA RELEASE POLICY THAT MAXIMIZES PUBLIC ACCESS TO BODY CAMERA FOOTAGE OF CRITICAL INCIDENTS

4. REDIRECT BUDGET ALLOCATIONS FROM THE HOUSTON POLICE DEPARTMENT TO SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES BETTER SUITED TO CERTAIN EMERGENCY FIRST RESPONSE

5. REDIRECT BUDGET ALLOCATIONS FROM THE HOUSTON POLICE DEPARTMENT TO SERVICES THAT PREVENT CRIME AND PROMOTE STABILITY IN HOUSTONIANS' LIVES

6. IMPROVE FAIRNESS IN HOUSTON'S MUNICIPAL COURTS

7. END DANGEROUS NO-KNOCK WARRANTS

Are They Abolitionist?

1. INCREASE TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR MISCONDUCT IN HOUSTON'S POLICE UNION CONTRACT

Targeting individual police officers' "bad behaviors" takes the blame off of the system of policing and puts it onto individuals. This is not an effective way to dismantle the pipeline of policing and incarceration. No police officer can be "good" in an inherently corrupt system.

2. IMPLEMENT A POLICY THAT ELIMINATES DISCRETIONARY ARRESTS FOR CITATION-ELIGIBLE OFFENSES

Cite and release policies may decrease the number of people cycling through courts and prisons, but it does this by imposing financial burdens on those who are more likely to be stopped and cited by police. This simply offsets the effects of racist policing practices into financial stress, rather than actually reducing policing.

3. IMPLEMENT A BODY CAMERA RELEASE POLICY THAT MAXIMIZES PUBLIC ACCESS TO BODY CAMERA FOOTAGE OF CRITICAL INCIDENTS

Body-worn cameras (BWCs) have been proven ineffective in reducing police violence. Technology alone can't create transparency. If police are corrupt, they will find a way to use any tools they have to their advantage. For example, despite the existing transparency laws that mandate access to BWC footage, it is still regularly withheld and released only when there's public outrage. Installing BWCs simply sanitizes the image of police departments while doing nothing for real accountability.

4. REDIRECT BUDGET ALLOCATIONS FROM THE HOUSTON POLICE DEPARTMENT TO SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES BETTER SUITED TO CERTAIN EMERGENCY FIRST RESPONSE

This recommendation is in line with the #8toabolition framework's requirement to defund the police and reinvest into communities. Taking away funds that are available to police officers ensures that communities that struggle with social and economic issues will get the care they need in advance instead of only receiving help once engaged with the criminal justice system.

5. REDIRECT BUDGET ALLOCATIONS FROM THE HOUSTON POLICE DEPARTMENT TO SERVICES THAT PREVENT CRIME AND PROMOTE STABILITY IN HOUSTONIANS' LIVES

This recommendation is also in line with the abolitionist framework to defund the police and fund alternatives.

6. IMPROVE FAIRNESS IN HOUSTON'S MUNICIPAL COURTS

Fair public defenders are essential to limiting the number of people who are funneled from police encounters into the courts and prisons. As abolitionists, we must ensure "fairness" as a blanket demand is not used to expand the power of the existing criminal justice system. Abolition means working toward a society that has evolved past carceral justice and toward transformative justice. That is true fairness.

7. END DANGEROUS NO-KNOCK WARRANTS

The more we can eliminate the tools or strategies available to police, the better. Fewer dangerous techniques available to police mean less opportunities for the system of policing to create harm on the path to abolition.

The [ACLUTX Houston Police Reform Progress Report](#)⁸⁹ shows the City's progress on recommendations from the Mayor's Transition Committee on Criminal Justice in 2016, many of which mirror the reformist suggestions above. Even for these moderate reforms, the City has failed on every count.

Why Doesn't Reform Work?

There are many factors in the criminal justice system that make police reform nearly **impossible**.

Prosecutors and police officers are expected to trust each other and work together as a professional requirement, such that accountability for harm committed by police officers is extremely rare unless evidence for harm is exceedingly incontrovertible. Police officers and prosecutors speak the same legalese and often work together to frame the officer's account of an incident to satisfy a jury.

Law enforcement has a “[Thin Blue Line](#)⁹⁰” culture, which bands officers together to defend one another even if it means disregarding citizens’ rights. Anyone who breaks this social code can expect ostracism, termination, harassment, or worse.

Sweeping universal reforms in law enforcement are extremely difficult because there are so many local police departments across the country. Almost all police departments work without community oversight, so figuring out what they’re doing, comparing different departments’ rules, and parsing out how to improve could be a full-time job.

On top of that, it’s almost impossible to analyze nationwide evidence on the effect or impact of policing strategies. Only around 130 law enforcement agencies out of 15,000 submit public data on their practices to the [Police Data Initiative](#)⁹¹ run by the Department of Justice.

Where there is evidence, it doesn’t support reform.

- » Not a [single de-escalation program out of 64](#)⁹² with convincing evidence of resulting officer behavior change.
- » There is [no statistically significant support](#)⁹³ for the use of body-worn cameras to decrease or deter police violence.
- » Around 40 randomized controlled trials have tested whether policing “hot spots” actually reduces violent crime, but results have been biased and incomplete.
- » About [50%](#)⁹⁴ of violent crime is never reported to the police in the first place.
- » A CBS News [survey](#)⁹⁵ found that ~70% of the 155 departments surveyed had implicit bias training, but ~60% had no way to measure their success or failure.

The short answer to why police reform can’t create safer communities is because reform does not limit the power, funding, or function of the police, who are ineffective and dangerous at best. The even shorter answer is that *reform doesn’t work because policing itself is inherently harmful*.

During the June 10, 2020 city council budget hearing, over 100 Houstonians called in to criticize the system of policing in Houston, a majority of whom demanded defunding, disbanding, demilitarizing, and otherwise abolishing the police. Nearly 100 more wrote in with similar criticisms. These recommendations made it into the [Public Safety Committee’s report](#)⁹⁶ to the mayor, but were not implemented in the City’s 2020 budget cycle. Instead, the police budget was increased to nearly one billion dollars, and the public was ignored.

THE ONLY WAY TO SOLVE THE ISSUES AND HARM CAUSED BY POLICING IS TO ABOLISH, NOT REFORM, THE POLICE, ALONG WITH ALL CARCERAL AND PUNITIVE SYSTEMS THAT USE POLICING.

HOW
COULD
ABO-
LITION
HAPPEN
?

MAYOR TURNER'S FY 2021 BUDGET PRIORITIES

CRIMINALIZATION VS. COMMUNITY SAFETY

FOR EVERY
DOLLAR THAT
GOES TO HPD.

OTHER
AGENCIES
GET...

1¢ LIBRARIES

1¢ NEIGHBORHOODS, PLANNING, & DEV

10¢ HEALTH DEPARTMENT

1¢ YOUTH & FAMILY SERVICES, ANTI-GANG



Abolition is a long-term fight, but it starts with divesting from policing and carceral systems and investing in community institutions. While we rebuild our communities, we can begin imagining material ways to transform our justice system from punitive to caring.

Organizers around the country are already building the infrastructure of community systems of support that will allow cities to invest in health, housing, and education instead of policing. In Houston, we have a long way to go. Libraries, neighborhood development, public health, and family services are severely underfunded⁹⁷ while the police budget increases.

At the same time, community organizations need help from energized and activated community members to start building the programs that will allow us to decrease our reliance on policing. When we strengthen our neighborly bonds and build networks of mutual aid and trust, we handle the problems in our communities better than police ever could.

The safest communities are not the ones with the most cops; they're the ones with the most resources, the ones who can care for themselves. When we take care of one another, we keep the police from hurting our communities.

We make policing obsolete.

HOW COULD ABO LITION HAPPEN ?
So what about the 2.7% of calls to police⁹⁸ that are serious threats to human life? What about the violent friend or family member you know for certain would harm again if not in prison?

Abolitionists believe⁹⁹ that violence and abuse stem directly from the way we address harm in society, and therefore by addressing harm and finding justice without more harm, so too people stem away from violence to each other in their communities. Instead of asking, "What do we do with serial killers in a world without police and prisons?" we ask "What if a society that provides abundantly and equally to all its people eliminates the existence of murderers?" and "How do we deal with harm in that society?"

We need a better collective understanding of the difference between harm and crime so that as a community we can address the harm that people inflict on one another. We might not know exactly what that future world looks like, but know that we must reduce the scale and scope of policing which presently adds a great deal to the harm that we're trying to undo.

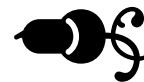
ALTERNATIVES TO POLICING IN PRACTICE

» *Oakland Power Projects*¹⁰⁰ offers workshops given by community organizers and healthcare workers to help people accurately identify health needs, reduce dependence on emergency services that draw unwanted police presence, and ensure that necessary care is provided with dignity. Community members are trained to respond to situations like drug overdoses and car crashes directly while deciding whether law enforcement will help or harm.



» In San Antonio, Baton Rouge, and across the country, organizations have created *Alternative Accompaniment Programs*¹⁰¹ to provide legal support, housing, transportation, and cash to immigrant families who need help or support dealing with ICE. They provide an alternative for intensive monitoring, surprise visits, and ankle monitors, and instead give immigrants the resources they need to fight their case fairly and without harmful detention or policing.

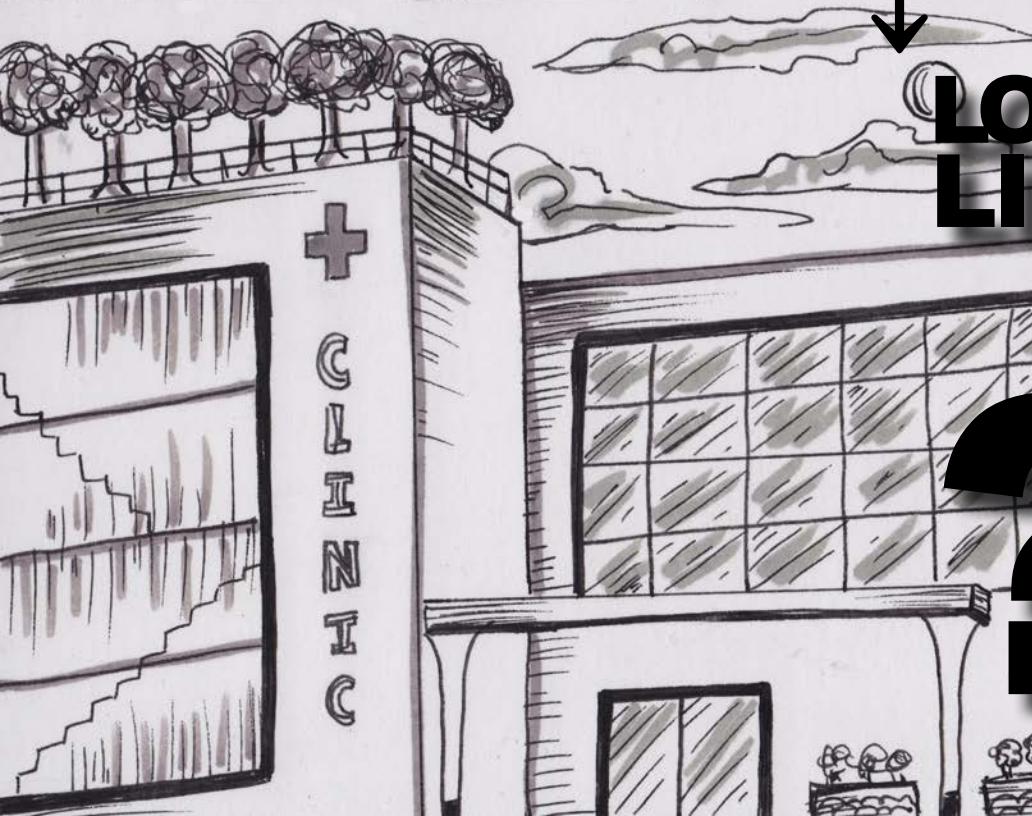
» Dual power, or the process of building solutions outside of systems in which problems manifest, is a guiding ideal for how abolition could happen. Transformative justice, which is based upon care and transformation of harm into healing, is already being built by national organizations like *INCITE!*¹⁰² and *Young Women's Empowerment Project*¹⁰³, and here in Houston through workshops led by *The People's Liberation Front*¹⁰⁴.



» Many schools have implemented effective “restorative” justice practices to replace zero-tolerance policies, which excessively and disproportionately funnel students from marginalized communities into the carceral system. Research has already shown the effectiveness of restorative practice in not only decreasing harmful behavior but also improving academic and personal outcomes.

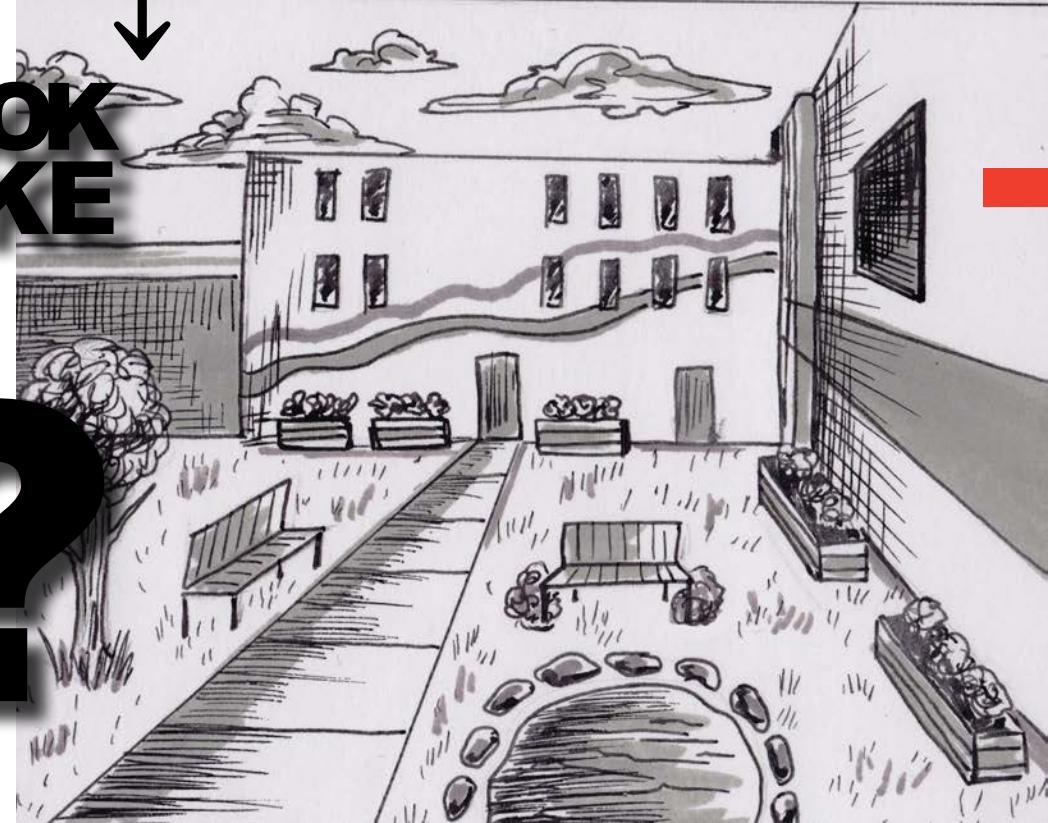


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What Can I Do Now?

How do we create a Houston where we no longer rely on HPD to solve our problems? One of the most important steps you can take right now is to stop calling the cops. It may sound scary at first, but it's important to remember that calling HPD can itself put people in danger. Police often escalate situations by bringing guns and weapons into unarmed conflicts.

The suggestions below were adapted from the zine "[12 Things To Do Instead of Calling the Cops](#)" by May Day Collective & Washtenaw Solidarity & Defense¹⁰⁵.

What do I do if I see vandalism?

Don't feel obligated to defend property—especially corporate “private” property. Before confronting someone or contacting the police, ask yourself if anyone is being hurt or endangered by property “theft” or damage. If the answer is “no,” then let it be.

What do I do if my stuff is stolen?

If you need to file a report for insurance or other purposes, consider going to the police station instead of bringing cops into your community. You may inadvertently be putting someone in your neighborhood at risk.

What do I do if I see someone behaving strangely?

If you observe someone exhibiting behavior that seems “odd” to you, don't assume that they are publicly intoxicated. A traumatic brain injury or a similar medical episode may be occurring. Ask if they are OK, if they have a medical condition, and if they need assistance.

What do I do if someone has car trouble?

Stop and ask if they need help or if you can call a tow truck for them. If the police are introduced to such a situation, they may give punitive and unnecessary tickets to people with car issues, target those without papers, or worse.

What do I do if I see someone in a mental health crisis?

Keep a contact list of community resources like suicide hotlines. You can also ask the person if there's a friend or family member you can call for them. HPD is not equipped to intervene in such situations. Statistically, people with mental illness are 16 times more likely to be killed by cops than those without mental health challenges.

Stop Calling the Police



What do I do if someone seems suspicious?

Check your impulse to call the police on someone you believe looks or is acting “suspicious.” Is their race, gender, ethnicity, class, or housing situation influencing your choice? Such calls can be death sentences for many people or an introduction to the cycle of abuse of the court system and incarceration.

What do I do if my neighbor is partying too loudly?

Go over and talk to them! Getting to know your neighbors with community events like monthly block parties is a good way to make asking them to quiet down a little less uncomfortable, or to find another neighbor who is willing to do so. Police may intimidate or degrade people in your community and can't ultimately affect change in this situation.

What do I do if I see someone urinating in public?

If you see someone peeing in public, look away and have some compassion. Remember, for example, that many unhoused people do not have reliable access to bathrooms.

What do I do if I see someone creating graffiti?

Street art is beautiful! Don't report graffiti and other street artists. If you see work that includes fascistic or hate speech, paint over it yourself or with friends.

What do I do if I hear my neighbors are fighting?

Remember that police can escalate domestic violence situations. Moreover, many survivors do not choose to involve the police for many reasons. They might be undocumented, they may fear the police will harm their partner, or they may fear being arrested themselves. They may be financially reliant on their partner, they may not want to separate their family, etc. The best way to support domestic violence survivors is to talk to them directly and ask what they need. You can support those who are being victimized by abusers by offering them a place to stay, a ride to a safe location, or to watch their children. Utilize community resources like safe houses and hotlines, such as the Houston Area Women's Shelter (713-528-2121).

Who Can I Call Instead of the Police in Houston?

If you need a helpline to handle an emergency in your community, there are many established non-policing solutions you can use. You can save some or all of these numbers on your phone for easy access.

*We recognize that some of these numbers are for institutions or services that represent the same state power that upholds policing, however, they are unarmed alternatives to calling 911. Be wary, for example, of calling representatives of the child welfare system and systems of government-mandated institutionalization as they have a history of harm similar to the police, though on a different scale. These numbers will be indicated with an asterisk **

HOUSING The 211 Texas/United Way Helpline (24/7): 211
SEARCH Mobile Outreach Program (24/7): 713-739-7752
The Beacon: 713-220-9737
Gulf Coast Community Services Organization: 713-393-4700
HTX Mutual Aid Coalition: 409-999-3823
U.S. Veterans Outreach Center: 832-683-6954
The Women's Home: 713-521-3150

MENTAL HEALTH

Behavioral Health Connections, Inc (24/7): 713-779-2424
Crisis Intervention of Houston (24/7): 832-416-1177
The Harris Center for Mental Health and IDD (24/7): 713-970-7000
Texana Center (24/7): 1-800-633-5686

DRUG ABUSE Houston Recovery Center: 713-236-7800

LGBTQI+ The Montrose Center Helpline (24/7): 713-529-0037

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE & SEXUAL ASSAULT

Houston Area Women's Center Hotlines (24/7)

- Domestic Violence: 713-528-2121
- Rape Crisis: 713-528-7273

Fort Bend Women's Center Helpline (24/7): 281-342-4357

YOUTH Crisis Intervention of Houston (24/7)

- Call: 832-416-1199
- Text: 281-201-4430

Teen Crisis Hotline (24/7): 713-529-8336

Texas Youth Helpline * (24/7)

- Call: 1 (800) 989-6884
- Text: (512) 872-5777

ELDERS

Texas Department of Family Protective Services * Abuse Hotline (24/7): 1 (800) 252-5400

VETERANS U.S. Veterans Outreach Center: 832-683-6954

POVERTY Lonestar Legal Aid Houston: 713-652-0077

DON'T KNOW WHO TO CALL?

The 211 Texas/United Way Helpline (24/7): 211

Addressing Harm by

Change begins in our own communities. Rather than turning to police and prisons, communities can build on what they already know about preventing harm and create solutions to match their specific needs.

The punitive criminal justice system asks questions like “What law was broken? Who should be punished? How should they be punished?”

Better questions to ask would be “Who was harmed? What do they need? How can the community support them? How can the person who harmed make amends? How can we prevent this harm from ever happening again without inflicting more harm, trauma, or alienation?

What does real justice look like?”

Beyond working to abolish oppressive systems of harm, real justice looks like involving the

community to support, care for, and protect people who survive harm as well as holding perpetrators of harm accountable to care for their needs as well and help them make amends.

For example, a community accountability process could seek to make sure that people who cause harm understand their actions and the impact they had on the survivors and the community. Rather than being policed, traumatized, tortured, locked up, or executed, people who commit harm have opportunities to apologize, repair the damage caused by their actions. We could train community members to address harm before it happens, intervene when it does, and provide aftercare for those involved.

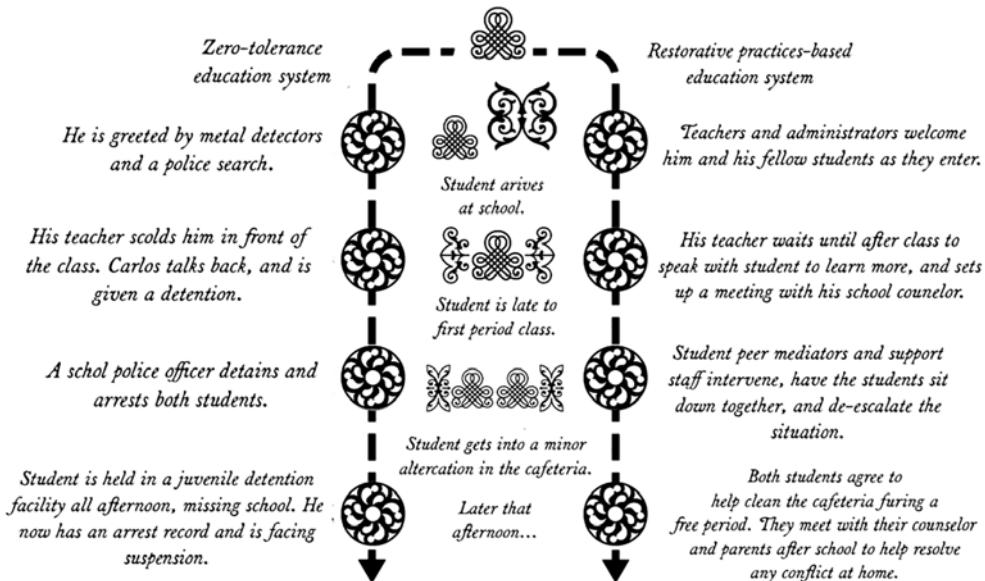
Those who do cause harm should receive the healthcare, therapy, housing, or community care they need, not from the inside of a prison. Most importantly, they should have the opportunity to work to change their behavior to prevent similar harm in the future.

Transforming Justice

While transformative and restorative justice are sometimes used interchangeably, the important distinction is that transformative justice requires abolition. Restorative justice may overlook the root causes of harm, and could perpetuate punishment as a necessary evil. Consider the restorative justice example below.

A Tale of Two Schools ¹⁰⁶

A student had a heated argument with his parents before leaving for school, so he's running late. Let's see the difference that restorative policies and practices can make.



In both restorative and zero-tolerance systems, students can expect to be punished for issues at home and in their social environments that could stem from stress, depression, abuse, pressure, and the tension caused by the economic and social conditions abolitionists seek to remedy. Restorative justice is not enough. Instead, transformative justice addresses the problems at the root. Schools with transformative justice policies might divest from police, train counselors in transformative justice and set expectations that close the school-to-prison pipeline. Students in schools that prioritize transformative justice could learn and grow, free from the threat of violent policing.

RESTORATIVE & TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE CENTERS IN HOUSTON

[Restorative Justice Collaborative of Houston¹⁰⁷](#)

[Restorative Empowerment for Youth¹⁰⁸](#)

[Houston CATJ Friends \(Community Accountability + Transformative Justice\)¹⁰⁹](#)

Learn More About Organizing and Advocating

As well as choosing not to call the police, you may want to join existing efforts for abolition and transformative justice. No matter your past experience with organizing or advocacy, or amount of free time, there are tangible steps you can take right now.

Advocacy

Read and pass on this zine.

Read more online by exploring the zine's *Digital Footnotes and Sources*.

Have a conversation with someone about what you've learned.

Share and reshare social media for local abolitionist actions and information.

Support local transformative justice work and try to practice it in your daily life with friends and family.

Pledge not to call the police by signing at the end of this zine.

Engagement

Reach out to the Houston Abolition Collective at LiberateHTX@protonmail.com to get involved or visit LiberateHTX.com

Become a member of a local organization¹¹⁰⁻¹²³ that supports abolition.

[Age of Change](#)

[Democratic Socialists of America](#)

[Extinction Rebellion](#)

[Houston Tenants Union](#)

[Mutual Aid Houston](#)

[National Lawyers Guild](#)

[Party for Socialism and Liberation](#)

[People's United Renaissance Party](#)

[Restoring Justice](#)

[Say Her Name HTX](#)

[Sunrise Movement](#)

[The People's Liberation Front](#)

[Unite for Reproductive and Gender Equity](#)

[West Street Recovery](#)

Vote for local representatives and legislation that support the disempowerment, disbanding, and demilitarization of policing and the end of prisons.

Participate in local actions that empower the most policed and harmed groups and individuals in society.

Learn about and scrutinize the *city's police budget*¹²⁴ and budget procedures.

Organizing

Organize a community that you belong to and make an explicit commitment to abolition.

Train others and create workshops on organizing, transformative justice, abolition, *de-escalation*¹²⁵, community defense, etc.

Canvass communities most affected by policing and incarceration to learn what these communities need and provide political education on abolition.

Work towards creating abolitionist community spaces of mutual aid, cooperation, networking, and care, free of policing and punitive justice.

Help grow the movement for abolition by helping those who are harmed and neglected by our justice system organize their communities.

About This Zine

This zine was created by the Houston Abolitionist Collective, a group of organizers committed to building power and a movement around abolition in Houston through political education, mutual aid, transformative justice, and community organizing to end policing, punitive justice, and harm.



If you have any corrections to this zine, please email us at the address below.

LiberateHTX@protonmail.com

LiberateHTX.com

Pledge to Seek Alternatives to Policing

In my own communities, I will seek every possible alternative to resolve conflicts before calling emergency responders. Whenever possible, I will call an unarmed service provider, not the police.

I understand that calling the police into conflicts in my community can expose myself or others to harm.

I understand that policing and the criminal legal system cause harm and that we should work towards replacing them with something better.

Rather than accepting the current system of violence and retribution, I will join efforts towards healing, accountability, resilience, and safety for all.

I pledge to support and engage with people, organizations, and public servants who will reduce the harm and scope of policing and incarceration in my community.

Signed,

Sign the [pledge](#) online at LiberateHTX.com or email us a pic of your signed pledge to LiberateHTX@protonmail.com to subscribe to future updates from Houston Abolitionist Collective.

G L O S S

ABOLITION - The act of ending a system, practice, or institution. In this context, referring to the termination of policing and the prison industrial complex.

BAIL - The temporary release of a person awaiting trial on the condition money be paid to guarantee their appearance in court.

CARCERAL STATE - Policies, practices, and institutions that target and scrutinize individuals and communities using formal institutions of confinement like local jails, youth detentions, immigration detention centers, federal and state prisons, psychiatric hospitals.

DE-ESCALATION - Reduction of the intensity of a conflict or potentially violent situation.

DEFUND - To withdraw financial support from.

DIVESTING - Deprive or dispossess (someone) of power, authority, or title. Referring to divesting from police.

DUAL POWER - Strategy, rather than a policy, that could plausibly be used to advance social change. A version being grassroots dual power, the bottom-up transformation and replacement of the mechanisms of society.

IMMIGRATION AND CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT (ICE) - A federal law enforcement agency under the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

POLICING - A social relationship based on supervision and the enforcement of rules by force, and in the name of “law or order”; rules and enforcement can come from anyone.

S A R Y

PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX (PIC) - A term used to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems.

RE-INVESTING - Put or expend money back. Re-investing in community imagines using the current budget given to police and the military into community programs and public spaces.

REFORM - Make changes in order to improve it. We have seen reform of policy and practice of policing throughout the years, shapeshifting the stripping of rights and what we consider humane treatment.

REINTEGRATE - Restore to a position of being a part of a larger whole. In this case, reintegrating people released from carceral institutions back into society with community help.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE - A theory of justice that seeks to involve, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs and obligations, in order to heal and put things as right as possible.

TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE - The opposite of retributive justice (the criminal justice system we now have in the U.S.); a political framework for the community to work together to address the root causes of harm without relying on alienation, punishment, or systematic violence, including incarceration or policing.