

Police of Color: How Recruitment Reform “Re-Forms” Carceral Identities

An easy truth for me to swallow is that the carceral state is both born and reproductive of American white supremacy, dehumanizing black and brown people in continuation of slavery’s lucrative legacy. When I get warmer towards the complexity of that truth, the harder to swallow reality, I recognize that the carceral bar beyond the color line works both ways. I recognize that, as a child of color facing a white supremacist system, I was taught self worth in comparative modes to others dehumanized by the system in ways I had not been. I would shake my head, muttering cheap *benditos*, as I saw their rights being violated on emmy-nominated cop shows. I would listen intently as the deputy on duty, a man of color, informed the television camera in the squad car’s passenger seat about how invaluable it was to have more representation of black and brown on his side of the partition.

The deputy sounds like the men in my family. Shipped from the Carribean to cut their hands on Pennsylvanian steel and breathe in pesticides of the mushrooms fields, many of them were recruited as numbered bodies for the prison-industrial complex. A prouder means of feeding all seven or so mouths at home, their minds were probably too burdened to sit and weigh the ethics of it. In a country where employers would only pay them to work themselves nearer to death, a freshly starched uniform was at least a way to work themselves closer to personhood under the white supremacist system. Such jobs kept them in the states and their kids in catholic schools. It was how they planned to save our souls and make us good citizens, better people of color as people adjacent to white power structures. I hardly remember the time at which my father was a state trooper. He rarely speaks about it now. One of the most prominent memories is an image, of navy blue slippers I convinced mom to buy me off the clearance rack. A cop car decal was stitched near the toes. I remember waiting at the top of our stairs to show dad after his shift that night, anticipating the slow motion crunch as he tried not to jam his key into the front door too loudly. *Look dad, how good it is to be good like you.*

The carceral state finds its success in its pervasion, the generational trick of having taught us to police ourselves. Such policing culture is not just a crisis of injustice, but one of identity. This identity crisis targets persons of color and distorts the navy blue uniform into a perceived identity of color within itself, as can be observed in the rise of “blues lives matter” chants in retaliation against the movement for Black Lives. In a nation where people are defined by their orientation to the carceral bar, change is needed. The urgency of that need is especially tangible in Reading, with a prominent population of color and economic need. For cities like Reading, those deemed as “disproportionately policed” in national conversations, excessive force and authoritarian violence are the only policing. The tension with local law enforcement is too intimately experienced to afford the privilege of a “not all cops” perspective.

The major economies which brought my family here having collapsed, Reading is in a phase of post-industrial recalibration. Local power structures have failed to provide adequate resources during this period of destabilization, but have not neglected to capitalize on such unaddressed cycles of poverty. Under the strategy of John T. Adams, an estimated 9% of the budget for Berks County’s office of the district attorney is sourced through civil asset forfeiture.¹ This practice enables police to collect cash and valuables from persons suspected of or associated with drug-related crime, not necessitating that the individual(s) be convicted or even charged. After an investigative report exposed the Philadelphia district attorney’s office for using seized

funds in such expenses as submachine guns and officers' salaries,² its department agreed to a vague set of limitations that would "reform" abuses of the practice. Berks, however, continues to incentivize the hyper-criminalization of cities like Reading to pursue lucrative "drug busts" for the District Attorney's office.

This hyper-criminalization of Reading is coded in racial and ethnic targeting, also observable in the aggressive policing of the city's Latinx residents in the Trump era of anti-immigrant violence. As recent as 2018, a ProPublica investigation uncovered a minimum of 19 counties throughout Pennsylvania state and municipal police "had formal contracts with ICE to hold migrants; shared jail information; provided jail access to federal agents; supplied times that ICE could pick up a migrant; had the probation office work with ICE; or wished to pursue a stronger relationship with the agency."³ Among these crusades, state trooper Luke C. Macke strategically made routine traffic stops as pretense for interrogating the citizenship status of Latinx motorists.⁴ While abuses like Macke's prompted a reform of state policy regarding immigrant relations in February of this year, these policies merely restrict troopers from contacting ICE during traffic citations. Essentially maintaining the traffic stop as an immigration inquiry but delaying its outcome, the policy has been called a "sensible middle ground."⁴

Beyond demonstrating a need for change, these examples of police abuses demonstrate the risk of trusting the institution's internal reform efforts to achieve such change. While "change" provides room for abolishment of the system and its harmful practices, "reform" is encoded with a maintenance of the oppressive system. Police reform reasons that the marginalized find peace at the middle ground of their dehumanization, working with the system in good faith that it will work out for them. In such matters of good faith, the reform attempted through the Pennsylvania state police's consent decree of 1974 tells an invaluable story.

The Pennsylvania state police evolved from the Coal and Iron Police in Pennsylvania's Northern mining regions, whose power was commissioned "for one dollar each" by local property owners.⁵ From the time of such for-profit policing origins in 1905, no black state troopers were hired until 1956.⁶ When the consent decree's litigation began in 1973, the state police comprised 1.48% minorities- a value of 62 individuals among whom 60 were not promoted beyond the elementary rank of trooper.⁷ During this context of discriminatory hiring and promoting practices, a black trooper named William Bolden III legally challenged his termination issued under the pretense of outstanding personal debts.⁷ Supported by 16 fellow plaintiffs, Bolden's suit became the class action under which the state police entered a mutual agreement to hire minorities at a rate proportionate to the minority population state-wide.

Despite retaliation via departmental delays of hiring and reverse discrimination suits from white troopers, the monumental decree issued by Black jurist Clifford Scott Green bound the state police to a "hiring ratio of one-minority applicant for every two non-minority applicants... until 9.2% of the enlisted complement of the Pennsylvania State Police consist[ed] of minorities."⁸ The quota having been met in 1999, the policy was dissolved and the state police's racial diversity went along with it. The most recent value I could find online for the state police's minority composition was listed on a recruitment campaign for Local News21 of Harrisburg, which cites the presence of minorities and women in 2018 stood at 7%⁹ The person who introduced me to the consent decree, having lived through it as a plaintiff, tells me people of color currently represent less than 3% of the state police.

Major Ben Brooks is the oldest living state trooper able to speak about the consent decree. He was also one of the first Black troopers to enter the state police, prior to the Bolden suit. During our conversations, Major Ben recounted witnessing his white partners engaged in police brutality and being discredited from protest. He described how the consent decree was met with the refusal to promote any troopers for two years after its institution and disciplinary action taken against him for testifying in court. He illustrated how testing standards were given the illusion of change, awarding minorities a placating point “advantage” while raising the qualifying score markedly. He shared transcripts with me of the department’s attorney Ben Lerner reassuring white troopers of the quota’s loop-hole: “if there aren’t enough qualified minorities who apply either because lack of interest or lack of ability to meet the qualifications, then the quota doesn’t mean a damn because you don’t have to make it.”¹⁰ Yet throughout, he insisted that one can either be “bitter or better” when responding to such histories of injustice.

Applying this bitter or better concept to accepting reform’s “middle ground,” I challenge the insistence that vying for a seat at the table is necessary to prove an institution’s oppression hasn’t gotten the best of you. The consent decree merely having rearranged the state police’s operations towards the same carceral ends, I fear that the recruitment of minorities merely redirects the carceral identities already imposed on people of color. I fear such recruitment strategies of rearrangement are rising in Reading.

The Reading High School JROTC program has entrenched over 10,000 local youth into this carceral culture since its establishment in just 1997.¹¹ This phenomenon on a national scale has been described by psychologists Michelle Fine and Jessica Ruglis as “the soft coercive migration of youth of color, especially poor youth of color, out of sites of public education and into militarized and carceral corners of the public sphere.”¹² A slight reform of the policing tactics leveraged against them, this trend does not change the functions of violence and labor which white supremacy has historically ascribed to persons of color. “Ideologies about merit, deservingness, and blame drip feed into the soul, tagging some bodies as worthy and others as damaged.”¹² Oberlin professor of comparative American studies Gina Perez has observed a predominance of Latinx youth in positions of leadership for JROTC programs in Chicago area, analyzing the socioeconomic and civic crises behind youth of color’s search for identity in carceral spheres.¹³ Perez asserts that youth of color “experience a radical transformation by wearing the cadet uniform.”¹⁴

This transformative effect can also quell the person’s aims towards minority advocacy, however, “the power-based identity displacing the racial identity for which recruited officers were purportedly marketed as championing.”¹⁴ A study by researchers Sean and Jill Nicholson-Crotty and Sergio Fernandez at Indiana University suggests that positive effects on police-race relations, with priority to decreasing the police shootings of Black civilians, only manifested in departments where a minimum of 35-40 percent of the force comprised black authorities.¹⁶ While these positive associations are still highly conditional, the researchers describe this positive affect correlated with police of color as a “critical mass” value.¹⁵ If one can even imagine a nation-wide predominance of police of color, one must also imagine how lengthy the recruitment process would be amidst the urgency of police abuses.

Percentages of racial minorities within police forces below the critical mass not only failed to improve negative police-race relations, but were associated with potentially exacerbating them. Sean Nicholson-Crotty asserts this negative consequence of the small

minority represents the minority presence championing the institution's norms in order to "be seen as legitimate."¹⁶ American police apologetics in the name of "legitimacy" is rife, even among individuals who experience community-based trauma with police. This was seen in the acquittal of former East Pittsburgh officer Michael Rosfeld, who was found not guilty for the murder of unarmed black 17-year-old Antwon Rose II by a jury comprising three black civilians.¹⁷ To suggest that increasing the presence of racial minorities within the police will increase advocacy for the civilians of color being policed is not merely a presumptive reduction of complex intra-minority politics; this logic also severely underestimates the degree to which white supremacist power systems corrupt and pressure marginalized individuals into assimilation and complacency. While the campaigns feign inclusivity and the uniforms afford some socioeconomic mobility, the recruitment of more people of color to carceral power structures ultimately expands those structures in number and reach. Recruitment reform only re-choreographs the same tired dance and its rhythm is contagious for people of color too, once we are invited to join in.

I recognize the survivalism of those who have got and kept me here, understanding that the perceived progress of the past is what has afforded me a different perception of progress today. Yet, calling out ethical issues of a carceral society is to draw the agential link between the societal misdirection in question and the ways we have internalized it ourselves. Today, I argue against the insertion of ourselves into the carceral system, under the pretense that we will make space for other people of color's agency and humanity there. Such insertion only uses our physical outlines to expand the boundaries of the carceral oppressor, producing the same generic outcome regardless of the intention's initial authenticity.

I am not advocating for hopelessness by arguing against recruitment as police reform. Considering Nicholson-Crotty's notion of a "critical mass" at which positive change can occur, I advocate that we question the efficacy and efficiency of establishing that critical mass within police departments. Might we not find the critical mass within ourselves as communities of color? Might we not restore that critical mass by abolishing the carceral state, which has absorbed so many black and brown individuals into identities of labor and hurt? Can we not seek empowerment outside of the system that has historically disempowered people of color for far longer than the placating mobility it has afforded a select few? I echo the *Pa'lante* of the elders who came before me, saying with this refrain, we cannot just must move forward. We must move in a new direction, toward dismantling our carceral identities.

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