

The Case for abolishing the police (2): The Futile Cycle of Police Reform

[The Bethlehem Gadfly](#) [George Floyd killing](#) October 16, 2020

🌀 Latest in a series of posts in the wake of the George Floyd murder 🌀

The 2020 NCC Peace and Social Justice Conference

Police-Free Future panel, October 15, 2020
video



We're looking at how the case is made for abolition of the police department at the NCC "Police-Free Future" panel.

Peter VanKoughnett's chart is the key representation of the need for abolition, of the need for a new structure of policing in Minneapolis.

PV and his group are actively working toward a new structure for the Minneapolis police department. His group formed in 2017 — interesting that this movement to abolish the existing police structure in

Minneapolis began well before George Floyd. PV's experience, his motivation, his research is site-specific to Minneapolis.

PV studied the 150-year history of policing in Minneapolis. He finds it rather sordid. It began in town patrols with an anti-Union function and which harassed working people, the native population, and people of color. These groups gradually became incorporated into the city structure, rough and undisciplined at first but becoming more professional as time went on — but their function remained basically the same.

Especially since the 1960s, his research shows this “Futile Cycle of Police Reform” — the most important finding of his historical research.

- The police do something obviously bad, some act of brutality, maybe a murder.
- The public reacts with outrage and protest for change, for reform.
- Some kind of reform happens, for instance, new training, new techniques, new equipment, a review board, etc., sometimes increasing the size of the department — but never touching the core issues that lead to violence.
- There follows a period of stagnation and backsliding.
- Then every 5-10 years there is another outrageous occurrence.
- And the cycle starts again.
- So abolition is a way to break the cycle.

PV: “It’s really humbling,” when we see the same things happening over and over again. . . . “It doesn’t feel like we’ve gotten anywhere.” . . . Abolition is a way to break that cycle. . . . “The cycle isn’t working for us. It’s just perpetuating violence.”

Listen to PV for 2 minutes:

Audio Player not available in this archive

Ashley Strange sees the cycle in our neighborhood. After the Floyd murder, there was a clamor for police departments to reform by adopting the well known “**8 Can’t Wait**” principles. Departments like Allentown

(and Bethlehem too) claimed that they were already using “8 Can’t Wait,” and yet, says AS, Allentown quickly saw the incident at Sacred Heart Hospital where the officer had a knee on a guy’s neck. So, she would claim, where did that reform get us? For her, Allentown just witnessed the cycle PV was talking about.

Listen to AS for 2 minutes:

Audio Player not available in this archive

Are you with Gadfly so far?

The basic premise for abolition seems to be that reform is demonstrably futile, clearly pointing to the need for a new structure altogether. Not reform but replacement.

Gadfly, as usual, will wait to critique till he has laid out the rest of the case to be made for abolition.

But he invites your responses along the way.

to be continued . . .