

SSJ Statement on Police Violence and Universities

Just over a week ago George Floyd was executed by Officer Derek Chauvin as three other police officers passively and actively took part in his murder. As the world was made aware of this lynching through videos and news reports, individuals, communities and organizations took to the streets to protest not only the murder of Mr. Floyd, but the devastation visited upon Black communities historically and presently through the structures of white supremacy and anti-blackness. Many people across the country are coming to realize what Black people have always known, namely that the culture and routine practice of police fundamentally threatens the safety of many in Black communities. Less examined are the other institutions complicit in the reproduction of white supremacy and the expansion of harmful policing. Colleges and universities are in fact critical institutions in this larger matrix.

Let's be clear, these sites of knowledge production and teaching will be quick to issue statements of concern and solidarity in the wake of the killing of George Floyd, but few of those statements will mention that many universities have their own police forces. Universities have themselves expanded the role of private campus police during the same period that the United States experienced an unprecedented expansion of policing and incarceration. As of 2012, 92% of universities and colleges now have sworn and armed police officers who engage in racial profiling and excessive force. Black students, staff and members of the community are most likely to experience harassment and violence at the hands of campus police. In 2015, a University of Cincinnati police officer was indicted for murder for shooting an unarmed man in a traffic stop off campus. In 2018, University of Chicago Police shot a student while he was experiencing a mental health crisis. Campus police have also reacted violently to campus protests across the country. During Occupy Wall Street protests in 2011, a University of California, Davis officer pepper sprayed students engaged in a peaceful sit in.

It is unlikely that the solidarity statement issued by a dean, provost or president will mention the academy's role in generating and legitimizing many of the policing tactics used to terrorize black communities. For example, social science research contributed in important ways to justifying the exponential increase of police presence in working class communities of color. "Broken windows" policing, as it came to be known by policymakers and practitioners, had roots in social science research that framed structural poverty and inequality as pathologies to be remedied by force.

In this moment of national reckoning with police violence, universities and colleges cannot simply retreat behind vague commitments to diversity and inclusion. Instead, administrators, faculty, students and staff must collectively act to diminish the harms of police violence. This work must not focus on policing, but the provision of safety and opportunity. The safety of living-wage jobs for the community that surrounds the university. The safety that comes from financial investment in but control by those surrounding communities. The safety that comes from access to quality education and health care. The safety that comes from supporting public universities and their students. The safety that comes from knowing that cuts to budgets in response to COVID-19 won't come through cut-backs in student financial aid or furloughs of staff or the growth and exploitation of adjunct faculty. At this moment of reckoning in our country, universities and colleges must acknowledge that too often their relations with Black, Indigenous, and poor communities has been defined by the extraction of land, labor and resources. It is time to demand that universities and colleges engage in investment not divestment of their surrounding communities.

Thus, we stand with students, faculty, community members, university workers and all those who call on colleges and universities to release a plan that address the following three areas.

Divest from and Abolish the Police

Universities should end contracts with city police as the University of Minnesota has done in the case of the Minneapolis police. But they must reduce and gradually eliminate their own private police and security apparatuses by first disarming these forces. The Universities can partner with surrounding neighborhoods to direct their research capacities toward developing and modeling alternatives to policing like decriminalization and decarceration. Additionally, universities can follow the lead of their students who have drawn attention to the ways that universities financially benefit from investments in private prison. Universities should divest holdings from all private prisons, which tend to be the most egregious in violating the rights of incarcerated people.

Invest in Communities

University presence often promotes hyper-policing in surrounding neighborhoods in the name of protecting students, faculty and staff. Surrounding communities bear the brunt of this police presence. These communities are also simultaneously sources of cheap labor for the university and subject to displacement by university expansion. Safety for these communities does not come with greater police presence, but instead with access to living wage jobs, quality education, and affordable housing. Through Community Benefits Agreements, universities can prioritize hiring local residents in jobs that pay a living wage and enable collective bargaining, investing in affordable housing for staff, and providing leadership and financial support for neighborhood improvements, including public spaces and schools, or community access to university spaces at no cost. This community building creates a network of security more than armed enforcers. Additionally, in recognition of the historical theft and dispossession in which institutions have benefitted from, we call for a rigorous examination and development of a reparations framework to restore communities victimized by the most craven fixtures of U.S. wars on indigenous populations, slavery, colonialism, and gentrification.

Expand Access to Education to Those Incarcerated or Formerly Incarcerated

Black communities have been devastated by the system of mass incarceration. It is now time for universities to address those harms and extend access to higher education to those incarcerated and to the formerly incarcerated. Rather than haphazard course offerings, prison education programs must be tailored toward the aims of allowing students to receive degrees. Models of this kind include the Bard and NYU prison education programs or broader programs such as Northeastern Illinois University's University Without Walls program. Universities should also offer job placement opportunities for those who leave prison and have completed their coursework. Moreover, universities can also help reintegrate those formerly incarcerated, by ensuring equal access in the admissions process and providing adequate financial support that take into account their exclusion from Federal Pell grants.