THE C WORD

WHAT IS CRIME, AND HOW DOES IT RELATE TO THE POLICE, PRISONS, AND ABOLITION?

REIMAGINING JUSTICE IN THE CHICAGO POLICE TORTURE CASES

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From this definition, we can see that it is the law that draws the distinctions between what is and what is not crime.

The law has been long propagated to American citizens to be “equal,” accounting for and serving all. However, the law was not written by and to the advantage of marginalized groups, such as BIPOC. Racism and inequality are inherently rooted in the law.

What is crime?

"CRIME" IS SIMPLY DEFINED AS:

"An action or omission which constitutes an offence and is punishable by law."

The law maintains racism and inequality, forcing people who cannot survive within its restrictive bounds to break it, or commit "crime."

Further, though the law defines the bounds of crime, police officers enforce it, using their own discretion (that is often tainted with bias and racism) when deciding to arrest someone or not.
First, let's look at the type of crimes that are committed. CPD splits up crime into two categories: violent and property crime. In 2019, property crime made up 76.06% of total crime. In the category of property crime (burglary, theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson), theft is the most common, making up 76.5% of total property crime. In fact, theft made up 58.2% of total crime in Chicago that year.

Why is there so much theft? Mark Clements, a torture survivor, gets to the root of the motivations behind theft, saying,

“What we see now is a world that is heavily tangled with the punitive measures towards dealing with issues that affect the community, or affect people that are, I would say, injured because of poverty, a lack of jobs, a lack of mental health, or lack of opportunity in general. A lot of people don't understand how this all ties in. But if you're begging for bread, and you see your next door neighbors with some bread, that makes your next door neighbor a target. So you hit your next door neighbor upside their head, and you robbed them out of their bread. And that's the system that they were always trying to implement against us as a people.”

The cause of theft, as Mark said, is poverty, unemployment, no access to healthcare, and a lack of opportunity in general. This can be applied to crimes beyond just theft. Thus,
People commit crimes when their needs aren’t met.

Q: Everybody has choices. Why don’t people just chose to stay away from crime?
A: Not everybody is afforded the same choices. Some people’s choices include getting a degree, getting a job, and supporting themselves and their family through that job. For others, Death Row 10 member Ronnie Kitchen puts it best: “For those who came up short, turning to crime was often the only logical choice to put food on the table and make ends meet. Welfare checks didn’t cover rent. To feed a family, a person might steal some food from the grocery store, only to find themselves arrested. The prisons grew while every avenue of help was cut off.”

Q: I understand that some people commit crimes to stay afloat, but why can’t they just get a job? Is the job market really that volatile?
A: Devah Pager’s 2003 study establishes the difficulty of getting a job interview while black, and the near impossibility of getting a callback while black and with a criminal record. Pager found that 34% of the time, white people without criminal records received callbacks, and 17% of the time, white people with criminal records received callbacks. Black people without criminal records got callbacks 14% of the time. With a criminal record, only 5% got callbacks.

Q: What about murderers and sex offenders? Do they murder and rape out of necessity?
A: In cases talking about murderers and rapists, it’s important to remember that people who commit violent crimes are often the victims of violence themselves. By looking past this victim-offender binary, we can more accurately find (and prevent) reasons for individuals committing violent crime.

Q: Does putting people in prison reduce crime?
A: Sending an individual to prison for any time (but particularly longer sentences) is unlikely to reduce crime. In fact, time spent in prison may actually increase the chance of that individual committing more crime for various reasons, from being exposed to “effective crime strategies” while incarcerated to experiencing the difficulties of reintegrating into society after serving.

Q: So how do we reduce crime?
A: Because prisons (and police, discussed in the next section) do not reduce crime, the only way to reduce crime is to meet the needs of the people committing the crimes. In other words, addressing the root of the issue is the only way to effectively resolve crime. The rest of the zine will get at this question and expand on the aforementioned points.
For our entire lives, we have been taught that the police control and prevent crime. However, now that we know that people commit crimes when their needs are not met, we also know that the relationship between crime and the police is not nearly as connected as society may think.*

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To understand more of the nuances of the relationship between crime and the police, let’s look at the counterargument:

In an Office of Community Oriented Policing Services report, they write that “it is clear that some level of police presence is necessary in order to maintain order” after citing a 2004 article which finds that an increase in law enforcement officers between 1991 and 2001 resulted in a 5-6% reduction in crime rates nationally.

As the study shows, in some instances, the suffocating surveillance that policing imposes on a community does suppress crime, and when that presence is gone or decreased, crime might increase. In this case, surveillance may suppress crime, but it still leaves the root of the problem, that people commit crime out of necessity, unaddressed.

“The perception was that the police have a direct relationship with crime, so the more police ... the lower the rate of crime, we thought. But that has not been the case for some time. There are other factors that are at play that affect that relationship beyond simply just the police's presence.”

- Dr. Howard Henderson, founding director of the Texas Southern University Center for Justice Research.

“Increases in other factors – such as social welfare, access to health care, employment and other social services – have also been shown to decrease crime rates.”

- Thomas and Jin for Politico

**DOES POLICING ACTUALLY REDUCE CRIME?**

“Black people are under protected while being overpoliced.”

**“Police and prisons do not exist to prevent violence, stop violence, or seek justice for violence. [They] have always existed to protect capital, private property, white supremacy, gender violence, and other forms of oppression.”**

- EMERGE

“Increases in other factors – such as social welfare, access to health care, employment and other social services – have also been shown to decrease crime rates.”

- Thomas and Jin for Politico

“If cities focused on the root causes of crime, like poverty, substance abuse and disparities in criminal justice, there wouldn't be as much need for police.”

- Scottie Andrew for CNN

“Police and prisons do not exist to prevent violence, stop violence, or seek justice for violence. [They] have always existed to protect capital, private property, white supremacy, gender violence, and other forms of oppression.”

- EMERGE
Abolition is the way to start addressing crime at its roots. Contrary to what a lot of people think, abolition isn’t just about tearing down prisons and police forces – it’s also about building.

This explanation of abolition is helpful in understanding how it is a vision in reimagining a world that gives us everything we need to thrive:

“Abolition is and was a practice, an analytical method, a present-tense visioning, an infrastructure in the making, a creative project, a performance, a counterwar, an ideological struggle, a pedagogy and curriculum, an alleged impossibility that is furtively present.”

- Dylan Rodríguez

So, where do we start?

By restructuring and reorganizing what is prioritized in society, abolition calls for a redistribution of resources. This can look like using funds from defunded police forces and redistributing it to communities in need, but also an increase in social welfare, access to healthcare, and other social services.

Beyond demanding monetary funds and more governmental support in place of surveillance and incarceration, abolition serves as a guide for how communities can control their own safety and support. Community accountability is one critical way that communities can and already do reclaim agency over their safety, rejecting the popular mindset that the police and prisons provide public safety.

None of this can work without changing “everything.” As abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore says, “Abolition requires that we change one thing, which is everything.” All oppressive systems are connected with each other, sharing the punitive agenda. If we want to see change in one, we must demand change in all others as well.


HOW DO YOU DEFINE “CRIME”? WHO DOES IT HURT?