COMMENTARY

Defunding is refunding: Community investments, not policing, create safety

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> The white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent upon their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness.
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> *W. E. B. Du Bois, 1935*

Dhanani and colleagues (2022) have provided a strategy for I-O psychologists to reduce the crisis of police violence against Black people in the US with the overhaul of recruitment, selection, training, and performance criteria for police officers. We applaud their efforts and wish to expand upon and complement their work with an equity and systems approach, arguing that the abilities of I-O psychologists can be readily applied beyond the policing context to existing community-based organizations that are themselves improving public safety.

Regardless of individual intentions, "every system [or organization] is perfectly designed to get the results it gets" (see IHI Multimedia Team, 2015); for policing, we contend that a predominant result is the use of force. However, different outcomes are needed to address the increasing list of tasks assigned to police officers such as mental illness and addiction crisis response, conflict resolution, and insecure housing. Use of force is clearly misaligned with the needs of these situations. Community-based organizations perform these tasks and many others—without use of force—as first line interventions to either prevent police involvement or deescalate emergency responses, such as when active domestic violence emergency responses are mediated by social workers.

To continue, we provide justification for our arguments and outline an approach for I-O psychologists to contribute to ending excessive use of police force by partnering with and supporting community-based organizations that promote health and safety. We explain and evaluate the predominant systemic outcomes of community-based organizations compared to police forces. We suggest that I-O psychologists provide evidence-based strategies to streamline the many recruitment, selection, training, and management processes that will continue to arise during the ongoing transition of tasks from police forces to more appropriate agents, such as community-based organizations. We conclude that I-O psychologists have capabilities to support diverse community-based organizations as intervention points *outside* the police force that can reduce violence.

Justification

Dhanani et al. cited public opinion to defund the police in response to police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Before continuing, we believe that a framing of *defund the police* and its academic genealogy is appropriate. The movement calls for police abolition, including disarming and disempowering police institutions; indeed, public health authorities had declared policing (Deivanayagam et al., 2021) and police violence (American Public Health Association, 2018; 2020) crises of public health when the movement gained prominence. In line with theories for police abolitionism, it includes often-overlooked calls for agents in systems of public safety that are non-violent and democratic (such as community-based organizations; Branas et al., 2021). Thus, I-O psychologists can answer public calls to both prevent excessive police violence and increase public health and safety by supporting the change agents that are embedded within and informed about the needs of local communities.

An equity and systems approach

We assert that by understanding and evaluating public health and safety from a systems approach, and by considering the use of force as a predominant systemic outcome of policing, we can identify more effective intervention points. Each of the above are complex systems, in that they are "made up of heterogeneous elements [or agents] that interact with one another, have emergent properties that are not explained by understanding the individual elements of the system, persist over time and adapt to changing circumstances" (Luke & Stamatakis, 2012, p. 357). In the case of policing, Dhanani et al. have excellently detailed how prejudice contributes to police violence, but they also note that police officers are overwhelmed by increasingly complex and numerous tasks that stretch the job description of the police officer thin. Police tasks have historically included slavery and Jim Crow segregation enforcement, as Dhanani et al. noted. Today, a predominant outcome of law enforcement tasks is the use of lethal and nonlethal force. However, the expanding list of tasks police are performing often requires not force but soft skills, such as communication, de-escalation, and social support (Maguire & Mastrofski, 2000; Zhao et al., 1999). A systems approach explains that even police with the best intentions and training are actors in this larger system that creates outcomes of inequality for people of color, including irreconcilable disparities of incarceration and police violence, because the use of force falls disproportionately upon people of color, adding to health inequities (Deivanayagam et al., 2021).

In an equity and systems approach to preventing excessive police violence, community-based organizations are agents that are more likely to contribute to systemic outcomes in support of public health and safety. This is due in part to their focus on social welfare concerns including equity and inequality, and their makeup of—and deep connection to—members of their community (see Keisler et al., 2014). Although not typically the subjects of I-O research, these organizations have subject matter experts in counseling, housing systems, physical education, psychological differences, and the sociohistorical contexts of inequality, violence, and injury. Indeed, community-based organizations are important agents in this larger system that perform tasks more likely to result in increased public health and safety with education and after school programs, health care accessibility, and housing interventions, to list a few. To support the equitable development of systems, including those that replace excessive use of force, I-O psychologists can evaluate the criticality of community-based organizations for public health and safety among communities of color and make evidence-based recommendations for their founding, organizational structure/processes, and sustained funding. Thus, we suggest that I-O psychologists can intervene to reduce police violence by partnering with community-based organizations to improve their functioning and legitimacy and enact positive systemic change.

Why community-based organizations?

Community-based organizations are a type of organization in which all aspects are driven by residents of the community. Specifically, community-based organizations are predominantly governed and staffed by local residents and physically operate within the community; additionally, in these organizations residents identify, define, and develop solutions to priority issues and are deeply involved as leaders in program design, implementation, and evaluation (National Community-Based Organization Network, 2004). Importantly, we take an inclusive approach to defining community-based organizations to also include nonprofits that are based in the community or have a substantial local presence, that have a mission to serve the community, and that includes community members within the organization and governance. Community-based organizations are key stakeholders due to their makeup of community members and connection to their community with missions to improve life for the residents of their community. Put simply, we suggest that members of the community know their situations best and thus are most likely to develop the best solutions to the problems they face. Further, community-based organizations also have the capability of producing public safety outcomes (see Washington II, 2021), likely due to their focus on both upstream and downstream interventions. For example, community-based organizations can partner with public agencies to identify needs, influence policy, fill gaps, and connect community members with services. Additionally, they can provide individualized interventions themselves or connect individuals with needs to other partnering organizations. An equity and systems approach explains that community-based organizations can effectively produce systemic outcomes that improve public safety and health. In fact, Branas et al. (2021) found that for every 10 additional nonprofit community-building programs per 100,000 residents, there was a 9% reduction in homicide and 6% reduction in violence. These programs included community-led initiatives such as comprehensive early childhood education, youth development, emergency financial assistance in neighborhoods with many foreclosures, career services, and the arts. Thus, community-based organizations are not only systems of education and assistance but also safety.

However, community-based organizations face a number of challenges. Their workforce is made up of a mixture of staff and volunteers with diverse motivations and skills that may frequently turn over (e.g., Kegeles & Rebchook, 2005). They typically do not have as formal of an organizational structure (see Takahashi & Smutny, 2001), resulting in job roles that may include varied and multiple functions, which could change over time. Further, community-based organizations are often funded through a mixture of donations, fundraising, and grants. As such, their budgets may change year-to-year and/or they may be underfunded, further contributing to instability in their employee base. In addition, building collaborative partnerships with other local institutions and agencies has been identified as a key strategy; however, many community-based organizations lack experience in implementing formal partnerships (Takahashi & Smutny, 2001). Despite these challenges, community-based organizations continue to effectuate systemic outcomes that support initiatives for public safety and health.

We argue that I-O psychologists are uniquely able to support these organizations in the very same domains suggested by Dhanani et al.: recruitment, selection, training, performance management, occupational stress, and cultural change. For example, I-O psychologists could develop recruitment tools to help community-based organizations identify needed talent. Further, we could support the creation of equitable selection systems and compensation structures. We could consult on job crafting to better define and align tasks within job roles. I-O psychologists could provide and codevelop training for leaders, staff, and volunteers to cultivate the talent already engaged with the community-based organization. We could support goal setting and performance appraisal systems that make sense for the community-based organization in the service of maximizing positive outcomes. We could support strategic planning to define long-term goals, which can be leveraged to develop new funding sources (many funders positively view strategic plans

aligned with their efforts). Relatedly, we could leverage our networks to connect community-based organizations with private organizations that may be willing to provide funding or human capital in the form of volunteers with specific, essential skills. Given that many community-based organizations have a mission to solve difficult and/or grand challenges (see Sawyer & Clair, 2022), we realize that there may be higher potential for stress and burnout; we could thus make suggestions to expand well-being resources, develop processes to promote health and safety, and mitigate the impact of occupational stressors encountered. Finally, we could help to align and formalize missions and goals, and support positive, equitable, and healthy organizational cultures.

Importantly, and central to the topic of the focal article, we recognize that these critical community-based organizations are themselves underfunded, which undermines their ability to perform these essential functions. Thus, we also call for a reallocation of public resources away from police forces, which are not suited for addressing many of the issues with which they are tasked, toward funding diverse, community-based organizations that are better trained to provide for the public well-being. Further, I-O psychologists can assist community-based organizations in reducing their reliance on external, unstable sources of income by identifying new streams of revenue, including drawing on models of social enterprises and self-funding through commercial activities (Fruk & Badurina, 2021; Reilly, 2016). The aid of I-O psychologists in these organizations will be ineffectual without proper funding to provide suitable salaries, incentive structures, training interventions, and support structures.

Conclusion

Public opinion and public health experts are increasingly critical of the use of force against people of color and its overall inappropriateness as a primary outcome of systems for public safety. Blair et al. (2021) noted that police community engagement is insufficient to either increase public trust in the police or reduce crime. We thus argue that I-O psychologists can partner with community-based organizations to increase their impact on public health and safety by enhancing the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for critical task performance and conducting research with subject matter experts to develop collaborative, interorganizational models of community safety. Indeed, I-O psychologists are already working with community-based organizations to collaboratively identify challenges, develop solutions, and enact change in occupational health/safety and workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion (e.g., Brockwood et al., 2021; Partners in Diversity, 2021). The time is now for I-O psychological research and practice to support equity for communities of color by foregrounding community-based organizations with the appropriate knowledge, skills, and abilities to develop the best results.

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