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CONTENTS

Preface · ix

Introduction 1

PART I MINNESOTA GODDAMN 19

CHAPTER 1 The Shame of Minneapolis 21

CHAPTER 2 How Minneapolis Activists Fought to Make Black Lives Matter 45

CHAPTER 3 The Residents Left Out 73
(with Amber Joy Powell and Christopher E. Robertson)

PART II IN THE WAKE OF REBELLION 101

CHAPTER 4 George Floyd Is Still Dead 103

CHAPTER 5 Seeking Justice: Accountability for "Killer Cops" 142

CHAPTER 6 Safety without Police? 173

Conclusion 201

Author's Note: Everything Is Data · 215
Acronyms and Key Events Timeline · 225
Acknowledgments · 227
Notes · 231
Index · 277

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Introduction

BEFORE SUMMER 2020, few might have predicted that Minneapolis would become the epicenter of a fierce rebellion against police violence. Unlike Ferguson, Missouri, where "Black Lives Matter" (BLM) transformed from a eulogy into a national movement against police violence, Minneapolis is a majority white city; less than 20 percent of its 430,000 residents in 2020 identified as Black or African American.[1] Yet the city is also a hotspot for left-leaning politics, with a long history of racial justice organizing, including a robust set of activist groups challenging racialized police violence. As a result, going all the way back to the 1940s, the Minneapolis Police Department (MPD) has been a test case for both the possibilities and limits of liberal police reform.

That Minneapolis had been the site of *generations* of police reform made the murder of George Floyd all the more galling. As abolitionists declared, the MPD was a "poster child" for reform, yet Officer Derek Chauvin still pressed his knee into the neck and back of a restrained Black man, prone in the street, for over nine minutes in front of a crowd of witnesses. If police could show such wanton disregard for life here, then it could happen anywhere. Conversely, if change could happen anywhere in the startling heat of summer 2020, it should have been in Minneapolis. As city council members pledged to "end" the MPD, the story of Minneapolis became inextricably intertwined with policing in America and calls to "defund the police." Yet by the close of 2021, with the "no" vote on the charter amendment to end the MPD, the moment to transform public safety seemed to snap closed, locking in the status quo that had so shocked the world. The same national media headlines that blared Minneapolis was set to "abolish" the police in 2020 were equally declarative about its failure in 2021.

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The Minneapolis Reckoning goes past the headlines, asking how and why Minneapolis became a city on fire—and what, if anything, changed as the smoke cleared. As someone who had been researching policing, police violence, and anti-police-violence activism in the city for several years before Floyd's murder, I was struck by how rarely the headlines conveyed the nuance I was seeing on the ground. For example, the charter amendment to replace the MPD with a new department did not emerge out of thin air in summer 2020, but instead was the result of years (even decades) of organizing efforts. So too would activists ultimately run up against a familiar set of barriers, including a powerful officers union and state laws built by their political allies to enshrine police power.

But it was not simply officers' resistance, or the expected opposition from more conservative quarters, that blocked the charter amendment in Minneapolis. Nor was it just about white residents' voting patterns. As you will see, before and after the uprisings of 2020, the Black community in Minneapolis rarely spoke in one voice on police and safety.[2] Even residents all too familiar with the dangers of police violence often described wanting *more* (and *better*) policing in their neighborhoods. This complex set of attitudes, and how they were deployed by a diverse cast of city leaders, would form the most contentious core of debates over the charter amendment.

But I also knew that the "no" vote on Question 2 in 2021 was not the end of the struggle. Working inside and outside the bounds of city governance, new visions of public safety were just starting to take root. Rather than crown a victor, this book shows that both ardent supporters of the Minneapolis police and those seeking to radically transform public safety won some battles and lost others. The result was, as ever, a complex mix of policies and practices that continues to reshape the city as I write today. As shouts of "Justice for George!" were converted into political struggles, the results often strayed from the initial visions of the activists in the street. Nevertheless, these fights led to meaningful changes to policing policy and practice.[3]

For instance, the 2021 charter amendment never amounted to a wholesale reorientation of city governance; it would not have abolished the MPD, obviated policing in the city, or even mandated police defunding. Had it passed, it might have resulted in little but an administrative restructuring of city agencies (a new name for the same old department), depending on who held power in city hall. And despite the charter amendment's failure on the ballot, public safety policies in the city did change in important ways—Minneapolis created an Office of Community Safety and expanded alternatives to police. Further, though the MPD was never

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substantially defunded in the city budget, the size of its armed force stands significantly smaller today than in 2020.

To understand this more complex, but truer, version of the Minneapolis reckoning, we have to go back in time, unearthing the origins of the police in the city and across the country, especially the contested role police play in Black communities. In the early days of America's democracy, law enforcement and their proxies were mobilized to defend the power and privileges of white slave owners. In parts of the South, these slave patrols often transitioned into the police we now know.[4] Because of this history, visions of true liberation for some Black theorists and organizers, or what historian Robin Kelley describes as *freedom dreams*,[5] have demanded the abolition of police. At the same time, other voices in Minneapolis and elsewhere draw on different strands of radical Black thought, arguing that any vision of freedom must include state protection from both white vigilante *and* intra-community violence, in part through the form of the police.[6] Just because the roots of policing were racist did not, for these dreamers, mean that its future had to be racist too.

This book wrestles with these questions, tracing how mass mobilization for transforming policing crashed into the local politics of race, inequality, and violence in Minneapolis and, in the process, examining why attempts to end police violence have proved so elusive. In short, I argue that this cycle of outrage and reform is driven by the two competing visions of police—one that sees police as providing *the promise of state protection* and another that sees the police as representing *the threat of state violence*. It is not simply that police protect some by threatening others, but that the people and places most in desperate need of stronger state protection are also those facing the greatest risk of police violence.[7] These contradictions create the contested politics of policing described in this book, which in turn erect the barriers to more radical shifts in public safety even in left-leaning cities where elected officials declare that they are "listening to Black voices." Ultimately, it is this dilemma that we must resolve to create lasting changes: solving police violence, in other words, will require that we change much more than policing.[8]

Heroes or Murderers: Police in America

There are two stories about the police, depending on who you ask. The story that has been told in policing textbooks and many classrooms across the country is the valorous version: police departments emerged from more informal community watch groups as urbanization and migration

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patterns produced larger, less socially interconnected cities. Taking cues from Sir Robert Peel's innovations with the London Metropolitan Police, new city forces in the rapidly growing Northeast emerged to better prevent and manage crime and disorder.[9] Policing, in this account, was developed as a redistributive public good, using tax dollars to protect those at the greatest risk of victimization (and least able to pay for private security).

Indeed, early police officers often provided a range of governmental services, from the order maintenance roles we now see as essential to policing to welfare services like finding lost children, running soup kitchens, and providing employment assistance.[10] As police professionalized in the mid-twentieth century, their work came to focus more directly on crime prevention and response in efforts to "serve and protect" an increasingly diverse public.[11]

The other story, of course, is that police departments descend from institutions devoted to upholding chattel slavery and represent a throughline of anti-Black racism across US history. Long before the first police forces were formally established in the Northeast, places like Charleston, South Carolina, were organizing slave patrols—teams of white men who terrorized enslaved people and free Black Americans alike. Only through the Civil War was slavery abolished in 1865. Yet violence against Black Americans persisted, both extra-legal and that sanctioned by law. After the failure of Reconstruction, white legislatures across the South created new laws like the "Black codes" and "Pig laws" that criminalized Black Americans' survival and made them vulnerable to capture, servitude, and disenfranchisement. Police became the new enforcers of this racist legal order, funneling Black Americans into Southern courts to reproduce the bondages of slavery.[12]

While "freedom" ostensibly reigned according to the letter of the law in the post–Civil War North, in practice, police played a key role in maintaining racial domination there, too. Perhaps most importantly, police enforced *spatial* boundaries, as white police forces corralled newly enfranchised Black Americans, increasingly journeying to the North, into neighborhoods of concentrated poverty (which became today's "ghettos"). Rising ethnoracial tensions hit a breaking point in the race riots of 1919, or the "Red Summer," which saw mass white violence against Black Americans across the Northeast and Midwest. Put to the test, police either looked the other way, failing to protect Black residents, or joined the white rioters (who were often, like officers, first- and second-generation immigrants from Europe).[13]

Nearly half a century later, police remained central to the story of racism in America. While many of the pivotal civil rights struggles targeted institutions like public transportation and education, it was police who

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reestablished "order" on the streets, often by meting out brutal beatings to protesters—perhaps most emblematically at the 1965 "Bloody Sunday" attack in Selma, Alabama.[14] Not only was police violence the headline from that day's protest, but the killing of a Black civil rights activist (Jimmie Lee Jackson) at the hands of a white state trooper was the spark that set off the march.

Thus, many carceral historians argue, policing has always been a tool not for some neutral vision of "order" or the protection of society (much less its most vulnerable), but instead of racial domination and white supremacy.[15] There has never been a golden moment in our country's history, in other words, when policing *worked* for Black Americans.[16]

These two stories are not simply different interpretations of the historical record but also powerful heuristics for understanding the role of police today. Are police brutal enforcers of an anti-Black racial order? Or are they the physical embodiment of the state's obligation to serve and protect the public? One of the main contentions of *The Minneapolis Reckoning* is that to understand the politics of policing, we have to see both stories simultaneously, understanding the police as representing both the *promise* of state protection and the *threat* of state violence. And this duality of the police means that no matter the context, calls to reduce the size of the police are perceived by many Americans as a threat to their own safety, not only by white Americans buffered from the worst victimization rates, but also by many Black Americans. As a result, waves of anti-police-violence protests have often led to reforms that increased, rather than reduced, police power.[17]

Statistical evidence supports this complex story about race, policing, and violence. In numbers now grimly familiar to many Americans, Black people represent just 14 percent of the US population, but 27 percent of the roughly one thousand people shot and killed by police in recent years.[18] Estimates suggest that over the life course, one in every one thousand Black boys and men will be killed by police.[19] Black victims of police killings are less likely than white victims to be armed, adding evidence that the threshold for officers' perception of dangerousness is tainted by racial bias.[20] More quotidian negative encounters with police are also starkly unequal across race. Among the roughly 10 percent of Americans who will have a police-initiated contact with officers in any given year (most commonly a traffic stop),[21] Black Americans face a heightened risk of intrusive investigatory stops, demeaning language by police officers, vehicle and person searches, and non-lethal use of force, compared to white Americans, even when controlling for the person's behavior.[22] As a result, policing in poor communities of color is often defined not by the

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motto of "protect and serve" but by police maltreatment, including verbal harassment, racial profiling, slow responses to 911 calls, and violence.[23]

The other side of the coin is that these same communities face persistently high rates of intra-community violence, despite the seemingly pervasive presence of police.[24] This disparity is particularly clear when we look at lethal interpersonal violence; among the roughly fourteen thousand victims of homicide in 2019, for example, just over *half* were Black or African American.[25] And among Black boys and young men, homicide is the *leading* cause of death.[26]

With few state resources to call on to manage the crises of precarity, people in communities beset by high rates of disorder and violent conflict turn to the police, calling 911 to summon help.[27] High rates of victimization also fuel broader political mobilization in *support* of the police. Even amid the painful summer of 2020, for example, four in five Americans identifying as Black or African American told pollsters that they wanted the same or more police time spent in their area.[28] As I show in these pages, we cannot interpret this fact as a sign that Black America uncritically endorses the police. It is instead a result of deeply constrained choices and a beleaguered pragmatism that police are one of the few resources consistently available on demand. If there is a "Black silent majority" as some argue,[29] they are not *pro-police*, but instead deeply *ambivalent*, torn between competing desires for safety.

Why Cities Are "Cheap on Crime"

This state of affairs in poor communities of color, or what Jill Leovy's best-seller *Ghettoside* describes as *over-policing and under-policing*, is often framed as a paradox.[30] The answer, she argues, is to *recalibrate* the kinds of policing in such places, reducing police harassment over low-level offenses and increasing effective police responses to serious crimes, especially homicide. More recently, a new generation of scholars and activists has insisted that poor communities of color are not *under-policed*, but *under-protected*, deprived of the kinds of holistic support that prevents violence in thriving communities.[31] Rather than a "paradox," unjust and inadequate policing are thus better understood as two sides of the same coin—both extensions of the failures of the state to take the safety concerns of its most vulnerable residents seriously.[32]

As criminologist Elliot Currie writes, since the work of visionary Black sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois, scholars have understood why poor communities of color are continually beset by horrifically high rates of violence.[33]

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Concentrated poverty, racism and exclusion, and meager social welfare programs make a uniquely lethal combination. That's why while the rate of lethal violence has ebbed and flowed over the generations—driven by socio-economic forces, trends in drug markets, and more—the broad story of racial disparities in violence has remained stubbornly persistent. It is also why most Black men are murdered not by white Americans, but by people who look like them—so-called "Black-on-Black" crime.[34] And though it is perhaps easier to see racism at work when a white police officer kills an unarmed Black man, it is no less a fundamental cause when young Black men kill each other. This violence is fueled by the racial injustices produced by the long afterlife of slavery, alongside America's love affair with guns, which has made it easy to lay hands on both legal and illicit weapons, from beat-up old pistols to "military-style" assault rifles.[35]

Real redress for Black America's vastly unequal exposure to premature death would require substantial state and federal investments in housing, education, employment, health care, and more. Yet as political scientist Lisa Miller documents, the people closest to the problem of violence—local residents in hard-hit urban cores—are often least represented in the federal policy arena, where there are the most resources.[36] Indeed, since the 1960s federal aid to cities and states for nonmedical services has shrunk, even as Washington's players incentivized more aggressive policing and tougher punishment. As local tax bases felt the impact of white elites fleeing city limits,[37] cities were left to manage racial and economic inequality (and the crime it produced) on their own.[38] And so city leaders turned to policing to manage high rates of interpersonal violence, one of the few tools at their disposal. Policing is also, relatively speaking, *cheap*. What cities pay in tax dollars to provide for policing services pales in comparison to the dollars needed for real economic redistribution, full and dignified employment, safe and affordable housing, responsive health care, and equitable education for all.[39]

Yet police are, at best, a last-stop measure against crime, disorder, and victimization. Police can *deter* (through their physical presence or the threat of apprehension), they can *remove individuals* (at least temporarily), and they can *deploy violence*. As policing scholar Egon Bittner argues, violence is not incidental to policing—it is its core. Police are called because they are the ones who can compel someone to leave an apartment or a corner, using either the threat or application of force, from handcuffs and arrest to lethal violence.[40] Finally, police can *solve crimes*, potentially preventing retaliatory violence that might have ensued otherwise. (Though, in practice, most police departments solve less than *half* of homicides, a rate that has been declining rather than improving over time.[41])

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But police can't change any of the social conditions that beget endemic violence, nor are they typically very effective as managers of the myriad consequences of mental illness, homelessness, substance use disorders, and intergenerational trauma. And for each of the potential benefits of police intervention, there are tremendous social harms, including harassment and surveillance, the costs of arrests and conviction (including incarceration), and the persistent risk of violence perpetrated by officers.[42] As sociologist Patrick Sharkey concludes, police can at best maintain an *uneasy peace*, fueled by repression and control rather than community thriving.[43]

Black America's Demands for Safety

Communities of color are intimately aware of the limits of the police. Indeed, Black America's champions have long argued that they would be better protected not only by *more* and *better* policing but also through broader social investments in the community. Legal scholar James Forman Jr. traces this process in the context of Washington, DC, during the prison boom in his Pulitzer Prize–winning book *Locking Up Our Own*.[44] Over the decades, Black community leaders, elected officials, and justice system actors alike called for deep investments in communities to address crime and disorder, including more policing and punishment.[45] Yet, critically, they also demanded investments outside of the criminal justice system—like full employment and dignified housing. But instead of getting "all of the above," communities largely got aggressive policing and mass incarceration, a form of *selective listening* by city, state, and federal officials.[46] And, in a perverse civil rights victory, in the District of Columbia this punishment was now meted out by an increasing number of Black cops, prosecutors, and judges as racial segregation loosened its hold on the middle class.[47]

By the 1990s these choices came to haunt the country, with low-income Black communities beleaguered by pervasive surveillance, police enforcement, and punishment. The next generation of Black changemakers across the country critiqued the constrained choices of the past, calling for political leaders to reckon with the brutal system of mass incarceration it produced.[48] By the mid-2010s these critiques of mass incarceration had gained traction. In the context of historically low crime rates, mass incarceration began to seem like a policy *problem* rather than a *solution*.[49] Propelled forward by scholar-advocates like Michelle Alexander, left-leaning organizations began to articulate a critique of the criminal (in)justice

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system as racialized punishment or, in Alexander's words, *The New Jim Crow*.[50]

Before 2014 the police, however, were not subject to the same scrutiny as our country's prisons, either in public discourses or socio-legal scholarship—despite periodic unrest related to police violence. Indeed, even the Black Lives Matter slogan initially emerged not in response to police violence but to vigilante violence, coined by three Black organizers (Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi) in 2013 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the killing of teenager Trayvon Martin. The following year, after the police killing of Michael Brown and non-indictment of former officer Darren Wilson, BLM exploded into a national movement centered on racialized police violence. What was *new*, however, was not police violence, or police violence targeting Black Americans, or even filming of police violence, all of which were continuations with the past.[51] (Think: Selma in 1965. Or, more proximally, the beating of Rodney King by the Los Angeles Police Department in 1991, caught on video by a bystander. Or Amadou Diallo, an unarmed twenty-three-year-old West African student shot and killed by officers with the New York City Police Department in 1999.) Instead of the previous generation's call for *equal rights*, as political scientist Deva Woodly writes, these new organizers made a more fundamental yet radical demand: make Black lives *matter*.[52]

Organizers in Ferguson—and, soon, across the country—drew on local networks and earlier radical movements for inspiration. Explicitly turning to women, queer, and transgender organizers to lead the movement, organizers deployed the new tools of social media to spread the word.[53] In the years that followed, BLM protests emerged across the country, often precipitated by local police killings.[54] And as protests grew into a movement, "Black Lives Matter" came to reference the national Black Lives Matter Movement (BLMM) group, including chapters of the Black Lives Matter Global Network, the broader Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) coalition, any anti-police-violence protests that drew on BLM slogans, and hashtag activism under #BlackLivesMatter and #BLM on social media.[55] Pushing forward public discourse, BLM protests increased the public salience of both specific instances of police violence and the ravages of racism and capitalism more broadly.[56] The protests also propelled local, state, and federal governments to consider police reform as a legislative priority.[57]

Yet, as you'll see in this book, increased consensus on the *problem* of illegitimate police violence has not meant agreement on its *solution*. Some BLM activists would come to fight for *police reform* as a form of harm reduction, pushing to transform the policies and practices of police departments.

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For example, Campaign Zero, a public advocacy and policy initiative, was unveiled in 2015 by a team of organizers who had been on the ground in Ferguson. They demanded the country reduce the number of police killings to *zero*. Rather than the more moderate reform provisions enshrined in the 2015 "President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing" report commissioned under President Barack H. Obama and led by law enforcement themselves, these reforms were designed to be transformational, or more meaningful shifts toward just policing, including ending "broken windows" practices like stop-and-frisk, for-profit policing, and militarization, as well as implementing more powerful community oversight, stronger policies and accountability for use of force, and fairer police union contracts.[58]

Others would look outside policing, calling for money to be pulled away from policing and punishment and invested in "root cause" solutions—or *police defunding*. For example, when the M4BL released its first "Vision for Black Lives" in 2016, the coalition extended the Black Panther Party's demand to "End the War on Black People" by calling for divesting money from police budgets and investing in Black communities through reparations, health care, economic justice, and community control of government budgets.[59] This invest-divest strategy would become, by 2020, the call to #DefundThePolice, bolstered not only as a means to transfer public dollars but also as a pathway to *police abolition*, or the end of policing as we knew it. Reform, for abolitionists, was a dead-end, positioned only to entrench police power. Instead, the path forward, they argued, was "nonreformist reforms," or changes that would shrink the power, size, and legitimacy of the police.[60] And by 2020 this clash between police reform and abolition would explode, centered in Minneapolis.

Policing the City of Lakes

Minneapolis was not an early mover in urbanization or policing, nor is it an unusually large police department. By the close of 2019, the Midwestern city employed roughly 880 sworn officers for a ratio of 2 officers per 1,000 residents. (While this is an average rate for midsize cities, in the country's mega-cities, police forces can number ten thousand or more, with staffing ratios of more than 4 officers per 1,000 residents.[61])

Despite its unremarkable development and scale, however, Minneapolis has been a secret bellwether city for understanding race and policing in America. In the 1940s, for example, the city was among the first to require that police complete "race relations" training, an initiative led by Mayor Hubert Humphrey, who would go on to serve as a US senator and one

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of the architects of the landmark federal civil rights legislation. Minneapolis was also one of the many cities that erupted in protest during the "Long Hot Summer" of 1967, ushering in both a brief flourishing of radical experiments in community-led safety and a longer era of conservative policy-making. City residents, in fact, elected the head of the police officers association as mayor, cheering as he promised to "take the handcuffs off the police."[62] By the 1980s Minneapolis was firmly back under Democratic leadership, as a series of mayors (white and Black alike) promised to bring more safety to the city—including through police militarization and the War on Drugs. By 2015 Minneapolis was an early BLM protest site and adopter of the "21st Century Policing" model for reform.

And after the murder of George Floyd, the city came to represent the failures of generations of police reform. In 2021, voters would elect the first Black Socialist to serve on city council, Robin Wonsley (then Robin Wonsley Worlobah), whose central ward straddles the Mississippi and includes the University of Minnesota's young voters. A prominent voice for abolition, she would declare in 2022 that the MPD was "one of the worst-performing police departments in the country."[63] Yet while the city's police force was responsible for one of the most distressing police killings caught on video in our lifetimes, in other respects the MPD is worryingly average. It does not, for example, stand out among either peer departments or others in the state when it comes to the rate of lethal killings of civilians.[64]

What is perhaps most unusual about Minneapolis, in the end, is not that police violence happens, but that it happens *here*, in a place defined by its left-leaning politics and explicit commitment to racial equality. That reputation was not simply a façade; indeed, it is what built the strong networks of activists in Minneapolis and laid the foundation for a movement to end the MPD. Those networks meant Minneapolis would become national, not just local, news when its police force committed an egregious harm. And it is why many voters in the city understand themselves not as *liberals*, but *progressives*, positioned to the left of today's mainstream Democrats in their policy preferences, which made the debates over the charter amendment possible. But none of that, in the end, would prove enough to end the MPD.

Race, Space, and Place

Another way Minneapolis reveals the limits of liberal politics is through the legacies and present-day realities of racial segregation, which deeply shape policing. Indeed, as even a cursory glance at a map of Minneapolis

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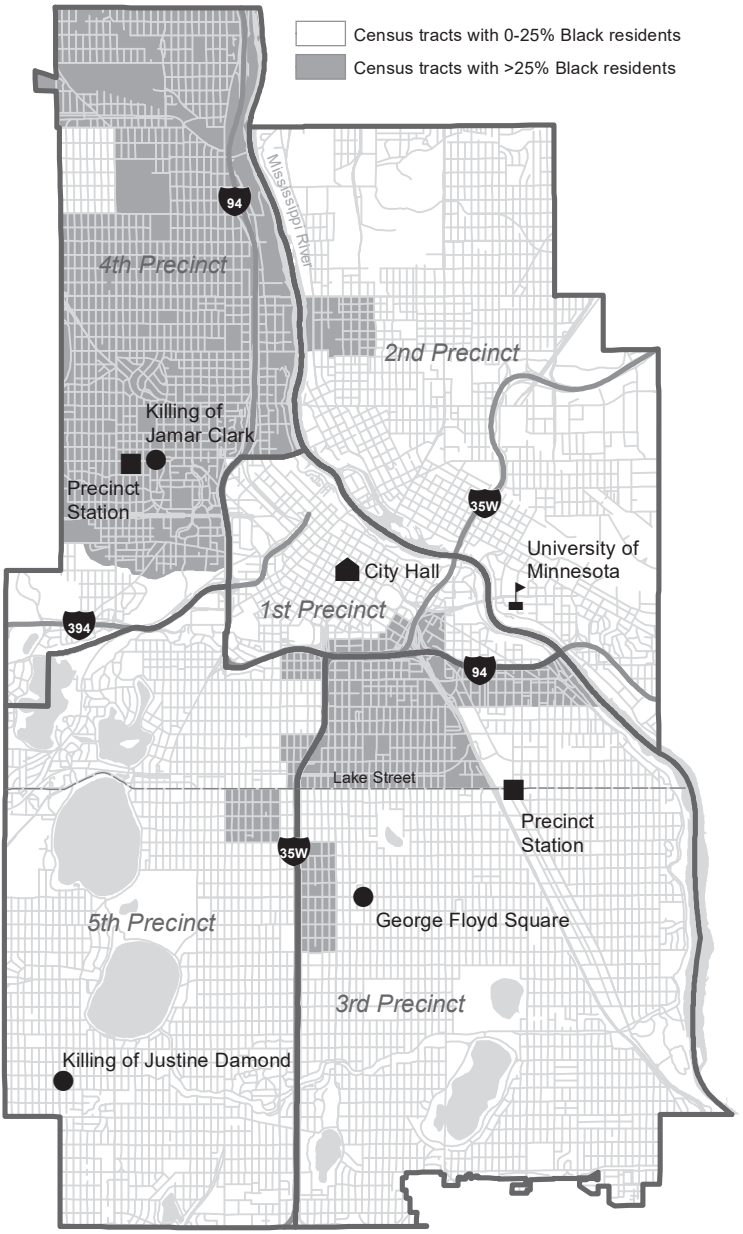

FIGURE I.1. Map of Minneapolis with police precinct boundaries, key protest sites, and racial demographics
Source: US Census Bureau. 2020 Census Redistricting Data (P.L. 94-171) - Table P1, Race. Washington, DC: US Department of Commerce.

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illustrates, each of the city's five police precincts "protect and serve" notably different communities.[65] As shown in figure I.1, in the southwest corner of the city sit the wealthiest zip codes, dotted around the "chain of lakes" and policed by the 5th Precinct. It is these neighborhoods that have historically housed Minneapolis's white elite (and where Justine Damond was shot and killed by police in 2017). By 2021 this precinct would represent the staunchest opponents of the charter amendment to end the MPD.

On the other side of the city, just north of downtown and to the west of the Mississippi River, is North Minneapolis, or Northside, home to more than a third of the city's nearly eighty thousand Black or African American residents.[66] Policed by the MPD's 4th Precinct, North Minneapolis experiences a distressingly high and persistent rate of violence, with street corners peppered by memorials to the slain. In 2020, for example, *nearly half* of the city's homicides were reported in the 4th Precinct alone, representing a rate of death nearly three times the city's overall average.[67] North Minneapolis has also been the site of several police killings of Black men in recent years. In response to the 2015 shooting of Jamar Clark, activists staged an eighteen-day occupation outside the doors of the 4th Precinct station, a precursor to the torching of the 3rd Precinct. As the neighborhood most directly bearing the brunt of both police and community violence, North Minneapolis loomed large in the 2021 ballot initiative.

In between these two extremes are downtown and the more racially diverse neighborhoods of Central Minneapolis. In the heart of the city, right along the Mississippi, sits downtown, policed by the 1st Precinct; this is the city's cultural and artistic hub as well as its business center. Just south of downtown is Lake Street, a connecting throughway from east to west. It is home to many newer city arrivals, especially from Latin America and Africa, including a neighborhood known as "Little Mogadishu" for its high number of Somali immigrants, as well as a housing complex for the city's Native residents. The northeastern corner of the city is composed of a set of post-industrial neighborhoods now dotted by trendy condominiums along the river, policed by the 2nd Precinct. In the south end of this precinct sits the University of Minnesota.

Finally, just east of the massive I-35W highway in South Minneapolis sits the MPD's 3rd Precinct, with a territory stretching from the wealthier and whiter neighborhoods down near Lake Nokomis, into the mixed-income and multiracial neighborhoods around 38th and Chicago, an early site of Black settlement in the city that would later become memorialized as George Floyd Square. It was also where the charter amendment would find its strongest support.

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The Politics of Policing

I began this project in 2016, trying to make sense of Black Lives Matter protests and how they might reshape policing in America. At the time, I was finishing a book entitled *Breaking the Pendulum*, in which Philip Goodman, Joshua Page, and I argue that if we want to understand how and why punishment changes over time, we must examine the actors and institutions that made penal history by fighting for change at the local, state, and federal levels.[68] So who, I wondered, was shaping policing—and how did they define the problem(s) facing the institution and their solutions? And what kinds of power did they wield to make change?

The question of who controls the police is surprisingly fraught. One line of thought says that police have increasingly co-opted systems designed to regulate their actions—for example, police unions growing their political influence over mayors and legislatures, ginning up fear of crime to promote the institution as essential, and protecting against outside influence or oversight from the public through the veneer of professionalization.[69] At the same time, during the early BLM protest years in Minneapolis, policing became the crux of mayoral races in the city, with candidates vying to see who was more "on the outs" with the police union and proving to the public that they would be the ones to rein in the police. And activists increasingly turned to city hall for change—demanding action and believing that elected officials could make a difference. Were these elections and campaigns a mirage, or could organizers effectively cajole local (and state, or national) elected officials to represent the interests of their constituents? And how should we understand the demands of "the people" when it comes to policing?

It is this set of people, institutions, and their interactions that I refer to as the *politics of policing*, as diagrammed in figure I.2.[70] And it is through these politics, I argue, that policing does (or does not) change. The politics of policing include the traditional political structure of the mayor and city council, who ostensibly direct and set police budgets, respectively. But it also includes the voters, who decide which campaigns to support and who to elect, how to vote on ballot questions, and whether and how to agitate for change. That means that a key player in these politics are people *outside* of city hall, including activists and social movement organizations who seek to change how we understand police violence and what to do about it. Policing, in other words, is not simply a top-down process of city officials and police leadership imposing their will; it's also bottom-up.

These political contests take place across many venues, including the voting booth as well as letters and calls to council members, direct actions

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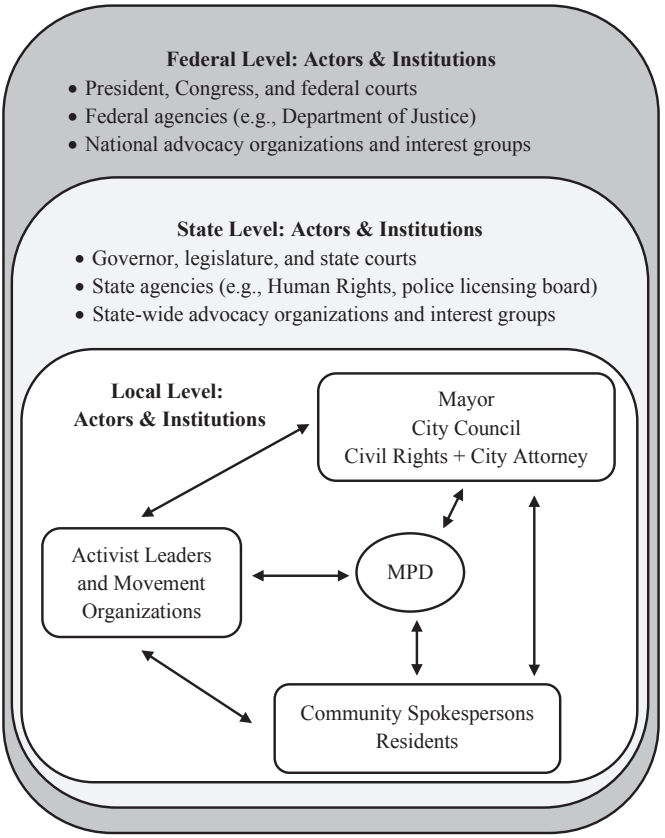

FIGURE I.2. The politics of policing in Minneapolis

like protests, and public debates and community forums. They also splay across the front pages of local papers, sometimes reaching national news outlets.[71] While news media have traditionally deferred to police narratives in shaping stories about violence, one of the goals of the BLMM has been to disrupt this coverage, using communications teams and protest mobilization to shift attention to the problem of *police* violence and spotlighting the concerns of protesters.[72] And, as we'll see throughout the book, residents, activists, the police, and city leaders all took to social media platforms (most prominently Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) to shape the public narrative on the MPD. Though not all contenders had equal power, resources, or influence, they all played a role in the politics of policing.

Seeing this dynamic contestation over policing requires a local perspective—looking keenly at the history of a single place and institution and all of the policy battles and personality clashes. But local political struggles do not happen in a vacuum; instead, they are shaped

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by the broader political, social, economic, and cultural context of the city, state, and country. This includes state and federal laws, regulations, and policies—including requirements about police training and oversight, state and federal investigations into officers and departments, and protections for officers' discretionary use of force written into law. These statutes, regulations, and processes both constrain and enable local activists and city leaders in fighting for change. Zooming out further still, the politics of policing also includes the policies and practices, historic and contemporary, that create and maintain racialized patterns of poverty and violence (e.g., education, economic redistribution, health care, and housing).

To understand this dense set of relationships and structures, I couldn't just research a single group, issue, or moment in time. Instead, the research behind *The Minneapolis Reckoning* draws from an emergent case study of the politics of policing in Minneapolis from 2017 to 2023.[73] Readers will hear from the key organizers of Minneapolis's activist coalitions, elected officials, and everyday residents in their own words. While many of the stories in the first half of the book are drawn from interviews I conducted in 2017–2019 with a team of students, the second half of the book traces the political struggle in Minneapolis after George Floyd's murder, drawing primarily on digital observations of public meetings, investigatory reports, media coverage, and more.[74] And, finally, I turned to the historical record to go back in time, tracing how the MPD expanded alongside the city.

Throughout the research process, I was myself a resident of Minneapolis. I entered this racially laden space as a white woman, often asked by organizers, colleagues, and students to explain my own positionality (or the ways *who* I was affected my work). As the study went on, I increasingly became a participant in the struggle to define the problem in Minneapolis, answering reporters' calls after each case of police violence that went viral. In my personal life too, I experienced this cyclical interest in the MPD after each case. Friends, neighbors, and my kids' daycare teachers asked me how to make sense of the violence and what it would take to make it stop. This book is my attempt to answer their questions.

Plan of the Book

The Minneapolis Reckoning tells the story of the politics of policing in Minneapolis in two parts. Part 1, "Minnesota Goddamn,"[75] begins to explain why the state became the site of such wrenching anti-Black state violence and how both local activists and everyday residents made sense of this history. We begin in the past, unraveling the history of Minneapolis and its

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troubled police department in chapter 1. It is the legacies of residential segregation, the rise of the police officers union, and the failures to ameliorate racial inequalities inside and outside of policing that set the stage for BLM activism. Chapter 2 shows how the city's left-leaning politics fueled a network of grassroots activist groups contesting police violence, which exploded in 2015 following the MPD shooting of Jamar Clark. By 2017 the growing dissatisfaction with the limited gains of early efforts toward police reform would prompt the splintering of groups committed to police defunding and abolition—activists who would take center stage in summer 2020. I then turn to the voices of residents in North Minneapolis, the site of Clark's killing, in chapter 3. Long before George Floyd was murdered and activists nearly ended the MPD, Black residents in North Minneapolis told my team that they felt caught between police violence and community violence, wanting elected officials to do more to address both crises. Meanwhile, although white residents told us they were increasingly concerned about police violence against their Black neighbors, they debated how much really had to change in policing.

This ambivalence would reverberate in public attitudes after the murder of George Floyd, where Part 2, "In the Wake of Rebellion," picks up. Would a new Department of Public Safety make Black lives matter in Minneapolis? As homicides spiked in the city alongside a historic drop in the number of officers on the city's streets, attention turned from police violence to community violence. Chapter 4 shows how an unlikely coalition of white business interests and elites, Black community leaders, and even some BLM activists helped to defeat the ballot initiative to end the MPD, convincing enough voters that protecting Black lives *had* to involve robust police protection. This same political stalemate largely produced failure in local, state, and federal attempts to push forward "Justice for George" beyond the criminal cases against the officers, as I show in chapter 5. However, in the shadow of this perceived failure, a series of new alternatives to the police began to take root in Minneapolis. In chapter 6, I argue that while these new models face many of the same challenges as the police, they hold the potential to loosen the MPD's stranglehold on city politics—opening up more space for radical imagination.

The conclusion of the book meditates on the lessons learned from Minneapolis. Instead of picking one vision of the police in society, I ask what we might learn from taking seriously the police's role as both heroes and murderers. In a world rife with persistent racial segregation, economic inequality, and neighborhoods with high rates of interpersonal violence, the all-too-predictable result is under-protection and over-policing of poor

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communities of color. So too is the inevitable tug-of-war between public attention paid to police violence and community violence. This dynamic in turn fuels political stagnation, as city leaders inevitably turn away from the task of reform and toward bolstering police power to create "safety," sometimes just months after horrific police violence. The path forward for real and sustainable changes, I came to believe, therefore requires reckoning with violence inside and outside of policing in America.

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INDEX

Adams, Eric, 207
Agape Movement, 173, 177–178, 184–185, 187, 198
Alexander, Cedric, 169, 198
All Cops Are Bastards (ACAB), 174
Allen, Aniya, 130
American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Minnesota, 161
American Indian Movement (AIM), 35
Americans with Disabilities Act, 170
Ames, Albert Alonzo "Doc," 23–24
Ames, Fred W., 24
A Mother's Love Initiative, 176–177, 179
Arbery, Ahmaud, 105
Arradondo, Medaria, xii, 40–41, 64, 111, 120–122, 124, 130–133, 135, 146, 154, 156–157, 161, 168, 184
Austin, Jeanelle, 185
autonomous zone, 182

Battle of Deputies Run, 26, 225. *See also* Bloody Friday
Behavioral Crisis Response (BCR), 189–194, 198–199, 206
behavioral health crisis response teams, 153–154, 164, 170, 172, 174, 187, 189, 190–193, 199. *See also* Behavioral Crisis Response (BCR); CAHOOTS; Canopy Roots
Bell, Derrick, 90
Bell, Monica C., 77
Belton, Sharon Sayles, 40
Belton, Steven, 124
Bender, Elizabeth Peterson "Lisa," 66, 116, 121, 153
Benjamin, Mario Philip, 57–58, 192
Biden, Joseph, 117, 143, 165–166
Bittner, Egon, 7, 188
Black Lives Matter (BLM), x, 1, 9, 45–47, 49–55, 62–63, 67–68
—counter-protest to, 52
—protest for, 45, 51–53, 70, 103, 210, 215; occupation of the 4th precinct, 13, 45, 51–52, 64, 66, 72–73, 225; siege of the 3rd precinct, ix, xiv, 13, 32, 109–110, 140, 147, 160, 205, 222, 226
Black Lives Matter Global Network, 9, 67, 124
Black Lives Matter Movement (BLMM), 9, 15
Black-on-Black crime, 7, 93, 202
Black Panther Party, 10, 48–49, 53, 124, 178, 232n6
Black silent majority, 6, 204
Black Visions, 68–70, 72, 115–116, 127, 150
Blackwell, Jerry, 147
Blevins, Thurman, Jr., xiii, 46, 55, 57–58, 192
Bloody Friday, 26, 225
Blue Lives Matter, 50
Boogaloo Bois, 110, 112
Bourdieu, Pierre, 275n2
Bouza, Anthony, 36, 38, 40
Bowie, Marquis, 187
Boyles, Andrea, 74
BREATHE Act, 165
bridging and buffering, 176–178
Brooks, Rosa, 203
Brown, Michael, x, 49, 51
Bullock, D. A., 167

CAHOOTS (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets), 189
Campaign Zero, 10, 162
Cano, Alondra, 66, 116
Canopy Mental Health and Consulting, 189, 198. *See also* Canopy Roots
Canopy Roots, 189–190. *See also* Canopy Mental Health and Consulting
Castile, Philando, 53–56, 62, 68, 95–96, 98
Cerra, Abigail, 161
Chauvin, Derek, ix, 1, 106–107, 110, 112, 142, 146–147, 159, 164; the punishment of, 148–150, 184–185, 226
Choi, John, 56
Chudy, Jennifer, 95
City Heat, 62

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civil asset forfeiture, 41
Civilian Police Accountability Council (CPAC), 53, 55, 71, 74
civil rights era, 4–5, 9, 11, 22, 27–35, 48, 75, 113–114, 194, 232n6
Clark, Jamar, xii-xiii, 17, 45, 53–55, 57–58, 60, 65, 67, 74, 76, 82–83, 87, 94–96, 188, 192, 216–217, 225
Clegg, John, 34
Clemons, Lisa, 176–177, 220
collective efficacy, 194
Communities United Against Police Brutality (CUAPB), 51–52, 55, 64, 69, 124, 167, 181, 247n45
Community Commission on Police Oversight (CCPO), 161
consent decree, 167–171, 206, 226
Cooper, Christian, 105
copaganda, 199
Cop City, 208
Cotton, Sasha, 178–179
COVID-19, ix, 103, 105, 108, 115, 129, 146, 152, 209, 216, 222
Cramer, Steve, 121
credible messengers, 59
critical race theory, 213, 260n1
Crump, Benjamin, 149
Cunningham, Phillipe, 66, 70, 116, 120, 130–131, 133, 136, 178, 186, 260n98
Cure Violence, 179–180
Currie, Elliott, 6, 212

Damond, Justine Ruszczyk, xiii, 43, 54–58, 60–61, 64–65, 76, 95, 152, 159, 188, 192, 217–218, 225
Davis, W. Harry, 35
Dayton, Mark, 56
Dehn, Raymond, 65–66
Delmonico, John, 41
Democratic Socialists of America, 137
Department of Community Safety and Violence Prevention, x, 119
Department of Justice (DOJ), 46, 143–144, 156, 166–167, 169–170, 172, 193, 198, 226, 247n54
Department of Neighborhood Safety, 205
Department of Public Safety, 127, 132–134, 136, 138, 167, 173
Diallo, Amadou, 9, 83
Du Bois, W.E.B., 6, 224, 232n6

Elliott, Mike, 147
Ellison, Jeremiah, 66, 73–74, 93, 109, 116, 119, 130–131, 135–136, 219
Ellison, Keith, 41, 66, 142
extended case method, 276n3

Fairbanks, Ashley, 69
Ferguson protests, x, 1, 9, 43, 49, 51, 59, 108, 175
Fletcher, Steve, 135
Floyd, George Perry, Jr., ix, xii-xiv, 103–112
Forman, James, Jr., 8, 241n66
Foss-Yarbrough, Arabella, 201–202
Fourth Amendment, 268n25
Franklin, Terrance "Mookie," 43
Fraser, Donald, 36, 40
Frazier, Darnella, 107
freedom dreams, 3, 50
Freeman, Michael, 46, 55, 57, 112, 142, 183
Frey, Jacob, x, 64–66, 70–71, 109–112, 116, 121–122, 124, 127, 130–138, 140, 152–159, 161, 166, 169, 184, 198, 201, 205, 222

Gabel, Joan, 115
Garrett, Ladavionne, Jr., 130
George Floyd Global Memorial, 146
George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, 165
Graham v. Connor, 149
Gross, Michelle, 52

Haaf, Jerome, 38–39, 225
Hanson, Candace, 190–191, 198–199
Harriday, Signe, 194–195, 197
Harteau, Janeé, 42–43, 56, 59–60, 64
Hinton, Elizabeth, 32, 114
Hoch, Tom, 65
Hodges, Betsy, 43–44, 61, 63–65
Hofstede, Alfred, 35
Howard, Marcia, 184–185
Humphrey, Hubert, 10, 22, 27–28, 30, 33, 35, 114, 127

Idd, Dolal, 156
intersectionality, 50

Jackson, Cynthia, 161
Jenkins, Andrea, 66, 116, 118, 136, 184
Johannes, Michael, 26
Johnson, Barbara, 66
Johnson, Brandon, 208
Johnson, Lyndon, 32–33

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Jones, Kimberly Latrice, 103, 109
Jones, Nikki, 176
Jones, Selwyn, 149
Jordan, Travis, xiii, 46, 57–58, 164, 193
Justice for Justine, 54–55, 64, 69, 71, 124

Kaba, Mariame, 117
Kelley, Robin D. G., 3, 50
Kerner Commission, 32–33
Knight, Art, 160–161
Knuth, Kate, 134, 136
Kroll, Robert "Bob," 41, 62–63, 65, 112, 121–122, 157
Kueng, J. Alexander, 106, 142, 148, 223
Ku Klux Klan, 240n42

Lane, Thomas, 106–107, 142, 148, 223
Laux, John, 37, 163
Lee, Fong, 41
legal estrangement, 77–78, 81
Leovy, Jill, 6
Levine, Jeremy, 75
Levy Armstrong, Nekima (formerly Nekima Levy-Pounds), 51, 53, 64–66, 74, 104, 124, 137
Lightfoot, Lori Elaine, 207
Locke, Amir, 155–156, 160, 165
Lorde, Audre, 150

MAD DADS (Men Against Destruction–Defending Against Drugs and Social Disorder), 173, 175–176
Marquez-Heraldes, Raul Salvador, 57–58, 192
Martin, Trayvon, 49, 194
Martinez, Sam, 74
mass incarceration, 49, 174, 209
Mayor of Minneapolis. *See* Ames, Albert Alonzo "Doc,"; Belton, Sharon Sayles; Fraser, Donald; Frey, Jacob; Hodges, Betsy; Hofstede, Alfred; Humphrey, Hubert; Naftalin, Arthur; Rybak, R. T.; Stenvig, Charles A.
McAdam, Douglas, 108
Metro Gang Strike Force, 41
Mill City, 5, 41, 225
Miller, Reuben, 217
"Minneapolis All Shall Heal," 182. *See also* 612 MASH
Minneapolis City Council, x, 14–15, 38, 41, 43, 46, 51, 63–66, 70, 72, 74, 104, 115–123, 125–128, 130, 133–137, 140, 151–159, 161, 167, 184, 187–188, 190–191
Minneapolis Civilian Police Review Authority (CRA), 38, 42
Minneapolis for a Better Police Contract, 64, 157–158
Minneapolis Police Department (MPD) (*see* policing): accountability in the, 63–64, 68, 146–150, 162–163, 170–171; barriers to the charter amendment to end the, 100, 121–125, 128–129, 132–135, 137–140; budget of the, 46, 70, 140, 142, 146, 152–153, 205; charter amendment to end the, x, xii, 1–2, 17, 47, 65, 70–72, 78, 93, 103–104, 115, 118–121, 126–127, 131–132, 136–138, 140, 143–144, 151, 154, 157, 161–162, 167–168, 171, 173–174, 177, 185–186, 205–206, 208, 220 (*see also* Department of Community Safety and Violence Prevention; Department of Public Safety); chiefs of the (*see* Ames, Fred W.; Arradondo, Medaria; Bouza, Anthony; Harteau, Janeé; Johannes, Michael; Laux, John; O'Hara, Brian); corruption in the, 24–25, 43, 68; gentrification and the, 40; militarization of the, 37, 41; officers in the (*see* Chauvin, Derek; Delmonico, John; Haaf, Jerome; Kroll, Robert; Kueng, J. Alexander; Lane, Thomas; Noor, Mohamed; Ringgenberg, Mark; Schwarze, Dustin; Thao, Tou; Walker, Rich; Wolff, Jason); policing of Native residents by the, 21, 29, 35, 169–170; policing of people with behavioral health disorders by the, 170; policing of white residents by the, 94–100; policing of women by the, 83–86; racial bias in the, 29–30, 38, 41, 43, 77–78, 82, 94–95, 143, 156, 168–169; racial disparities in the, 29–30, 37, 41, 61–62, 98, 156, 168–169; racial diversity in the, 36, 38, 42, 154; residency requirements for officers in the, 30; response to protest by the, 51–53, 109–111, 147, 159, 161, 170, 222; size of the, 2–3, 10, 17, 23–24, 26–28, 34, 38, 39, 40, 42–43, 59, 65, 71, 104, 118–120, 122–123, 126–131, 140, 153, 172, 206; strike activity in the, 63, 122;

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Minneapolis Police Department (MPD) (*see* policing) (*continued*) strike-breaking in the, 25–26, 43; the use of body cameras by the, 61–63, 106, 154, 159–160, 201; victims of the (*see* Allen, Aniya; Benjamin, Mario Philip; Blevins, Thurman, Jr.; Castile, Philando; Clark, Jamar; Damond, Justine Ruszczyk; Franklin, Terrance "Mookie,"; Garrett, Ladavionne, Jr.; Jordan, Travis; Lee, Fong; Locke, Amir; Marquez-Heraldes, Raul Salvador; Nelson, Tycel; Ottoson-Smith, Trinity; Sanders, Charles "Abuka,"; Smith, David; Vue, Chiasher; Wright, Daunte); vote on the charter amendment to end the, 135, 187, 226
Minneapolis Public Schools, 115, 123, 151
Minneapolis Star Tribune, 124, 129, 134, 140, 160, 198, 247n45
MinneapolUS, 179
Minnesota Board of Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST), 144, 162–163
Minnesota Department of Civil Rights, 158
Minnesota Department of Human Rights (MDHR), 77, 115, 143, 154, 156, 158, 166–170, 172, 226
Minnesota Freedom Fighters, 173, 177, 185
Minnesota Freedom Fund, 115
Minnesota Justice Research Center, 168
Minnesota Lynx, 63
Montgomery, Kandace, 67–68, 70, 116, 127
Moss, Spike, 40
Movement for Black Lives (M4BL), 9, 49, 165
MPD150, 68–70, 72, 115, 117, 134, 226, 262n14
mutual aid, 111, 113, 194–195, 197

NAACP Minneapolis, 30, 51, 55, 65, 74, 104, 176, 178, 194
Naftalin, Arthur, 30–31, 34
National Guard, 31, 110, 147, 225
National Initiative for Building Community Trust and Justice, 59–60, 64, 69, 156, 160, 225. *See also* President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing
Neighborhoods Organizing for Change (NOC), 67
Nelson, Tycel, 38
Nezhad, Sheila, 134, 136, 138
1934 Teamsters strike, 26
Nixon, Richard, 33, 35, 114
Noor, Miski, 67
Noor, Mohamed, 54–56

Obama, Barack H., 49, 59, 167, 169
Obiri, Gina, 192
Office of Community Safety, 2, 169, 198, 205
Office of Justice Programs' Diagnostic Center, 243n93
Office of Performance and Innovation, 187, 190–191, 194
Office of Police Conduct Review (OPCR), 42, 158–160, 166
Office of Violence Prevention (OVP), 46, 70, 119–120, 153, 173–174, 178–182, 186–187, 189, 194–195, 198, 205, 226. *See also* Department of Neighborhood Safety
O'Hara, Brian, 168
Operation Safety Net, 147
Ottoson-Smith, Trinity, 130
over-policing and under-protection, 6, 17, 36, 77, 81, 88, 100, 145, 203

Palmisano, Linea, 60
penal field, 275n2
Police Community Relations Council, 40
Police Conduct Oversight Commission (PCOC), 158–159, 161, 207
Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), 59
Police Officers Bill of Rights, 162
Police Officers Federation of Minneapolis, 27–28, 30, 34–35, 38, 41, 43, 55, 62–65, 71–72, 104, 112, 120–123, 135, 140, 154, 156–158, 162, 171. *See also* police unions
police reform, x-xiii, 1, 3, 5, 9–11, 17–18, 22, 25, 27–28, 30, 32, 36, 38, 40–41, 43, 47, 59, 65, 68, 72, 88–90, 94, 96–97, 99, 103, 116–117, 121, 124–125, 130–131, 133–134, 143, 145, 154–156, 158, 161, 163, 165–171, 179, 204–205, 207, 209–211, 217; accountability systems, 32, 36, 43, 47, 55, 61, 64, 68–69, 72, 88–90, 96–97, 117, 124–125, 134, 154, 157–158, 162–163, 165–166, 168–169, 172, 174–175, 181,

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210, 237n70; body cameras, 61–63, 89, 159, 165–166; capping overtime, 64; CeaseFire, 267n15; civilian oversight, 30, 38, 42, 47, 53, 69, 71–72, 74, 88, 125, 145, 158–163, 171, 207, 210, 215, 237n70 (*see also* Civilian Police Accountability Council [CPAC]; Community Commission on Police Oversight (CCPO);, Minneapolis Civilian Police Review Authority (CRA); Office of Police Conduct Review (OPCR); Police Conduct Oversight Commission [PCOC]); data collection, 60–61, 163–165, 263n33; ending "warrior" mindset training, 55, 63, 163; focused deterrence, 267n15; governance models, 46–47, 71, 74, 104, 119–120, 125, 127, 237n70, 238n11, 238n14; mental health screenings for officers, 64; police-community relations reform, 28, 32, 40, 59–60, 69, 87–88, 124, 168, 177, 210, 212 (*see also* National Initiative for Building Community Trust and Justice; Police Community Relations Council); police disarmament, 65; police union contract reform, 10, 63–64, 68–69, 125, 145, 156–158, 169, 171; proactive policing, 274n32; procedural justice, 59–61; progressive police chiefs, 59 (*see also* Police Executive Research Forum; President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing); racial bias training for police, 10, 27–28, 38, 41, 59, 69, 88, 96; racial diversification of officers, 32, 36, 38, 41, 88, 96–97, 154, 207; radical reform, 47, 55, 67, 69, 71–72, 88, 91, 116, 124–125, 157, 162, 167; residency requirements, 30, 88; restorative justice, 211; self-insurance for police malpractice, 52, 55, 69, 125; use-of-force policy reform, 60–61, 68, 117, 154–155, 162–164, 166, 168–169, 207, 263n33

police unions, 10, 14, 17, 63, 69, 99, 162, 166, 182, 208. *See also* Police Officers Federation of Minneapolis

policing (*see also* Minneapolis Police Department): abolition of, x, 10–11, 17, 47, 49, 66–72, 91, 97, 103–104, 114–120, 125, 127, 132, 134, 136, 140–141, 143, 145, 150–151, 153, 162, 164, 167, 170, 173–174, 176–179, 181–182, 186–187, 194–195, 197, 199, 202–206, 208, 211, 213, 222–224 (*see also* Black Visions; MPD150; Reclaim the Block); alternatives to, 17, 35, 46–47, 69–70, 88, 92, 104, 115–117, 119, 126–127, 130–134, 136, 145, 153–154, 164, 170, 172–174, 186–189, 194, 196, 206, 210–211, 217, 223 (*see also* behavioral health crisis response teams, Department of Community Safety and Violence Prevention; Office of Violence Prevention; radical emergency hotline; violence interruption programs); Black attitudes toward, 2, 6, 8, 77, 79, 86, 91, 125, 138–140, 198, 203; broken windows, 10, 212; citizen-directed, 25 (*see also* police reform: civilian oversight); defunding of, xii, 1, 10, 17, 46–47, 67, 69–70, 72, 97, 103, 115–117, 119–120, 122, 126, 130, 132, 134–135, 137–138, 141, 150–152, 154, 171–173, 202–203, 205–206; the economic cost of, 7, 151–152, 211; the functions of, 7–8; militarization of, 165; the origins of, 3–4, 23–24; political repression in, 48, 114, 254n31; the professionalization of, xiii, 4, 14, 24–25, 32, 36, 238n11; the promise of state protection in, 3–6, 17–18, 21, 29, 80, 86–88, 91–93, 104, 125, 128, 135, 140, 166–167, 202–204, 220; qualified immunity in, 165, 183; quality of life, 88, 258n77; racial bias in, 5–6, 32; stop and frisk, 10, 41, 210; the threat of state violence in, 3, 5, 202 (*see also* violence: police); traffic, 80–81, 147, 156, 162, 164, 168, 188, 211, 252n40

politics of policing, xiii, 3, 5, 14–16, 22, 28, 75, 115, 133, 140, 162, 172, 203, 216, 221

Pollard, Trahern, 181

Potter, Kimberly, 147, 150

Powderhorn Pledge, x, xiv, 1, 66–67, 103, 116–118, 130, 136–137, 140, 151, 153, 205

President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 10, 59, 69, 167, 169. *See also* National Initiative for Building Community Trust and Justice

prison industrial complex, 49

Public Employment Labor Relations Act, 120

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Quaintance, Kathryn, 56

racial capitalism, 195, 236n56
racial segregation, 11–13, 17, 21, 28–30, 33, 40, 77, 91, 99, 272n12
racial sympathy, 95, 99
radical consent, 195
radical emergency hotline, 194–197. *See also* Relationships Evolving Possibilities (REP); Revolutionary Emergency Partners (REP)
Rainville, Michael, 135–136
Reclaim the Block, 46, 68–70, 72, 115, 134, 150, 153, 167, 231n3
Relationships Evolving Possibilities (REP), 195–196, 211
reparations, 10
Revolutionary Emergency Partners (REP), 195–196, 199
Reynolds, Diamond, 53
Ringgenberg, Mark, 45, 56
riots, 30–32, 34, 38, 48, 109–114, 160, 174, 222; property damage during, 31, 109–110, 112–114
Ryan, Colleen, 160–161
Rybak, R. T., 40, 43

Samples, Randy, 35
Sampson, Robert, 194
Samuels, Don and Sondra, 123, 135
Sanders, Charles "Abuka," 51
Schmidt, Sherral, 123
Schroeder, Jeremy, 66
Schwarze, Dustin, 45, 56
Sharkey, Patrick, 8, 180
ShotSpotter, 57–58
Sierra-Arévalo, Michael, 211
612 MASH, 182. *See also* "Minneapolis All Shall Heal"
slave patrols, 3–4
Smalley-Weiss raid, 37–38, 40, 225
Smith, David, 42, 225
Smith, VJ, 175–177
Smith, Winston Boogie, Jr., 186
social media, 9, 15, 49, 83, 92, 109, 111, 146, 168, 196, 199, 216, 218
social safety net, 194, 212
Sole, Jason, 51, 176, 194–197
Stallings, Jaleel K., 110, 159–160
state baptism, 81
Stenvig, Charles A., 34–35
summer of racial reckoning, ix, 32, 91, 105, 108, 173, 206, 213, 216, 221–222
Sundberg, Andrew "Tekle," 201

Taylor, Breonna, 105, 155
Thacher, David, 197
Thao, Tou, 106–107, 142, 148
The New Jim Crow, 9, 49
The People's Budget, 153
The Urban Institute, 59, 61–62
Toledo, Adam, 208
Travis' Law, 164, 193
Trump, Donald J., 50–51, 62, 112, 114, 143, 160, 165–166
Twin Cities Coalition for Justice for Jamar (TCC4J), 53, 55, 69–71, 74, 124

Unity Community Mediation Team, 40
University of Minnesota, 11, 13, 36, 73, 92, 115, 137–138, 140, 217, 219, 223
Urban League Twin Cities, 124
Usmani, Adaner, 34

Vetaw, LaTrisha, 135–136
Vice Lords, 38
violence: community, 6–7, 17–18, 21, 33, 39, 42–43, 46, 61–62, 72, 77–79, 91–93, 98, 100, 104, 122–124, 128–132, 134, 140, 145, 165–166, 171–179, 186–188, 194, 202, 204–205, 208, 210–211, 220–221, 268n27; police, 3–6, 17–18, 21, 29, 36–38, 40–44, 49–50, 61–63, 67–68, 72–73, 75, 77–78, 81–86, 88–89, 93–100, 104, 107–109, 111, 115–117, 123, 125, 128, 132, 140, 142, 145, 147–150, 153, 155–156, 159–160, 163, 166–172, 174–175, 178, 182, 186–187, 192–193, 199, 202–205, 207–212, 215–218, 220–222, 224, 240n42 (*see also* policing: the threat of state violence)
violence interruption programs, 66, 72, 126, 130, 148, 154, 169, 172–174, 176–182, 184–187, 189, 194–195, 197, 199, 206, 211
Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, 166–167
Vue, Chiasher, xiii, 57–58, 192

Walker, Rich, 122
Walz, Tim, 110, 112
War on Drugs, 11, 36–37, 39–40, 210

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War on Poverty, 33
Weaver, Vesla, 81
Wells, Raymond, 29
We Push for Peace, 173, 181, 186
white supremacy, 5, 62, 66, 110, 112, 164, 178, 232n6
Whittier Cop Watch, 173, 186
Williams, Alfonzo, 177
Wilson, Darren, 49
Wilson, K. G., 130
Wolff, Jason, 57
Wonsley, Robin (previously Robin Wonsley Worbolah), 11, 137
World Wide Outreach for Christ, 177
Wright, Daunte, 147, 150, 164, 185
Wright, Imez, 184

Yanez, Jeronimo, 53–54, 56

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