

Defunding the police and abolishing prisons in Australia are not radical ideas

Ongoing Aboriginal deaths in custody, high rates of incarceration, and police brutality require us to dismantle these systems



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Robyn Oxley for IndigenousX
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The past few months have sparked conversations about defunding the police, specifically through the Black Lives Matter protests held around the world. I want to explain, from a criminological point of view, why this is imperative.

We know that there have been more than 440 Aboriginal deaths in custody, according to Guardian Australia, since the royal commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody report and recommendations were released in 1991. We know that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people make up approximately 28% of the total prison population in Australian prisons, despite making up only 2% of the total adult population in Australia.

We know and have witnessed police brutality, we have seen the lack of police discretion when it comes to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in the community. We know that police surveillance on our young people is occurring through "taskforces" – particularly in New South Wales. This includes children as young as nine years of age.

We know that deaths in custody would not occur if racist legislation was overturned, specifically in relation to the summary offence of public drunkenness. Victoria is still yet to decriminalise public drunkenness, despite the commitment to do so in August, 2019.

Defunding the police, prison abolition and dismantling the systems that created and continue the ongoing oppression, violence, discrimination and the “othering” of this country’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, is not a radical idea.

I was recently interviewed on Progressive Podcasts about prison abolition and defunding the police. The main points of this podcast are to look beyond punishment as a way to address crime. It is, after all, a social problem. I am certainly not denying there are people who need to be protected in society and vice-versa. However, in 2016, we knew that approximately 46% of people in Australian prisons were incarcerated for non-violent offences. The cost of incarceration of people in prisons for non-violent offences equates up to \$1.8bn nationwide.

We need to be looking at redirecting those funds to services that adequately and appropriately address the social issues around non-violent offences. Prison abolition is not about simply opening the prisons up and letting dangerous people into the community. It is about supporting the services that are integral to society. This includes housing, health, education and employment. These areas have all been defunded, yet this is not seen as radical – it is almost expected and accepted.

Police brutality is another reason why we should be looking to defund the police. Corey Penny, an Aboriginal man, said he was violently thrown off his bicycle by police officers in Melbourne recently and called a “black cunt”. An Aboriginal teenager in New South Wales was kicked to the ground by police officers in an incident caught on camera. Video footage also showed an Aboriginal man being arrested and hit by police in Adelaide, in June 2020. In Sydney, Aboriginal man Kris Bradshaw was tasered in the face and was thrown to the ground in June 2020. These examples have occurred over the past few months, but police brutality is a practice that has occurred since colonisation.

We have seen time and time again that police are not held accountable for their excessive use of force and violence towards people in society.

What is radical is living in a society where acts of violence are accepted because a blue uniform is worn or where racist legislation exists.

It is not so radical to say we need to defund police and pour much needed funds and resources into areas that improve social issues such as housing, health, education and employment. These, in turn, reduce the incarceration rates of Aboriginal people and reduces the over-reliance of degrading and dehumanising punitive measures such as prisons. It also addresses the social issues that impact on the disproportionate numbers of Aboriginal people in prison. We need to be exploring alternatives to prison and stop violence in the community. We must address the issues at the beginning, not looking for services to respond and ‘fix’ issues created by the criminal justice system.

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