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# Why JR is preferable to police abolition

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**Abstract**

This article is an opinion piece, putting forward a case for justice reinvestment as preferable in Australia to police defunding and abolition. It is argued that there are certain societal dangers associated with the defunding and replacement of some/most/all police officers, and that these dangers are less evident in justice reinvestment initiatives.

Common justifications for both the defunding/abolition of police and justice reinvestment tend to begin with all that is wrong with the police and conclude that systemic problems require structural change. They both seek to solve harm rather than merely react to it (Purnell 2022; Social Reinvestment WA n.d.). It is argued, however, that the two movements differ markedly in objectives, approach, implementation, possible dangers and likely outcomes. It is concluded that justice reinvestment in the Australian context is less divisive and dangerous for society than defunding/abolition, while offering more immediate and lasting benefits for the communities.

## Why justice reinvestment is preferable to police defunding and abolition

### Introduction

Justice reinvestment [JR] and the defunding/abolition of police (and prisons, child protection authorities, criminal courts and invasive State surveillance) gained traction in Australia from 2009 as responses to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (from 1987), and the lead-up to the Black Lives Matter movement and the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (both from 2013). This article

argues that JR is preferable to police defunding and abolition in Australia, as the latter carries societal risks less evident in JR initiatives.

The timeframe considered is from 2003, when JR emerged by name in the United States. The important term 'community' refers to all people standing to be affected by a defunding/abolition or JR initiative in a particular locality. The geographic scope is Australia because this country has a developing interest in both defunding/abolition and JR for achieving social justice. The Australian situation is compared with that in the US where both movements are more established (Australia's first major JR initiative only commenced in 2012).

Both JR and defunding/abolition aim to strengthen local communities, prevent crime and reduce reliance on police, prisons, child protection authorities, and criminal courts. Both seek to eliminate or curtail dangerous, invasive State actions such as strip searches, excessive force, physical and chemical restraint, solitary confinement, militarization and State surveillance. Both movements redirect savings in law enforcement funding to other social services (Tucker and Cadora 2003; Chilton 2023). Although this article focuses on *police* defunding/abolition and *police* reinvestment in Australia, any mention of 'police' may be taken to also refer in principle to the defunding/abolition of, and the reallocation of funds from, Australian prisons and criminal courts (Clair and Woog 2022).

Defunding/abolition of police is defined in the literature in various ways—as general aspirational statements (Lopez 2022) or as actual outcomes to be achieved *in toto* (Kaba 2020). Many abolitionist groups, including MPD 150, Truthout, Inquest and the Sunrise Movement, advocate both positions. They describe police defunding as an essential first step towards the goal of absolute abolition (MPD 150 n.d.; McLemore 2020; Truthout and Inquest 2024; Sunrise Movement 2020). Lopez (2022) advocates the reduction of police numbers and funding (with a long-term aspiration of eliminating police and funding), acknowledging that concurrent reforms are necessary to reduce harm and save lives pending absolute defunding/abolition. Similarly, following the 2020 deaths of Ahmaud Arbery (23 February), Breonna Taylor (March 13) and George Floyd (25 May), Minneapolis City Council President, Lisa Bender, advocated a 'police-free future' which she described as

'very aspirational' (Morton and Richardson 2020). Nine of the 13 City Council members announced plans to effectively dismantle the city's police department, replacing it with a Department of Public Safety (Williams 2020), although their 2021 citywide ballot subsequently failed (Kaste 2021).

The defunding/abolition literature also includes advocacy for *a proportion of* (Schivone 2021) *or all* (Kaba 2020) police officers, and the defunding/abolition process may be framed as a *rapid* (Smith 2020) *or gradual* one (Purtill 2020). This article alludes to two defunding/abolition approaches— the *rapid* dismantling of the *entire* police force (referred to as the 'literal' version), and the *gradual* reduction in a *proportion* of the police force and its funding (the 'moderate' version).

JR is similarly described in various ways in the literature. JR is generally regarded as the 'redirection of money from prisons [and/or policing and other areas of law enforcement] to fund and rebuild human resources and physical infrastructure in areas most affected by high levels of incarceration' (Tucker and Cadora 2003, 2). By reinvesting in (or more accurately, 'reallocating to') the vital areas of education, health, job training/creation, housing, facilities, public spaces and prison/community programs (Tucker and Cadora 2003, 1-5), the underlying causes of crime can be addressed (KPMG 2018; Vinson 2007). JR initiatives, particularly in Australia, are community-based (designed, developed, led, implemented, monitored, reviewed and documented by the community and their agents). JR initiatives are also targeted; strengths-based; action, outcome and solution-focused; long-term; place-based; evidence-informed, economically rational, collaborative interventions (Attorney-General's Department. n.d.a., n.d.b.; Collaboration for Impact 2017; Finlay et al. 2016; Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research 2023; KPMG 2018; NTCOSS 2022; Willis and Kapira 2018). Whilst JR may appear synonymous with the 'moderate' *gradual*/*partial* model for defunding/abolition, it will be argued that, in the Australian context (as in the comparable US context), the two models differ markedly in objectives, approach, implications and outcomes. It is concluded that JR is less divisive and dangerous for society than even the moderate version of defunding/abolition, while offering more immediate and lasting benefits.

**Beyond semantics**

Both defunding/abolition and JR have plain/literal meanings and more moderate meanings.

***Literal meaning of defunding/abolition***

The plain meaning of 'defund' is to *stop or prevent previous funding*, and 'abolish' means to *formally end*. It is the literal meaning of complete and rapid defunding/abolition that attracts the most opposition, whereas reallocation from law enforcement budgets (or government budgets generally) to community services (as per JR and the partial/gradual model of defunding/abolition) is generally supported by the Australian (and American) public, provided the controversial terms of 'defunding' and 'abolition' are not used (Saletan 2020, 2021). There are a number of reasons why the pioneers of the modern defunding/abolition movement adopted such 'self-destructive' terminology (Saletan 2020). Kaba and Ritchie reveal that abolitionists intentionally adopt provocative terms for the 'impact' of 'powerful backlash' and to make the police angry (Levin 2022). Some aim to 'confuse' people into asking questions (Eaglin 2021, Flanagan 2020) or to establish radical credentials (Black Ink 2021; Taylor 2020). The 'abolition' term deliberately evokes slavery abolition (Lopez 2020; Kaba 2020; Purnell 2022), although the case that *all* policing is bad has arguably not been made as it has for *all* slavery. Radical terminology, depicting all police and correctional officers, as well as the capitalist system, as irredeemably oppressive, and thus demanding complete abolition, can mark the project as 'revolutionary' (Socialist Revolution Editorial Board 2020; Terwiel 2023, 663). All reforms may be denigrated as perpetuating and prolonging oppression (Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review 2020; Sisters Inside 2023). If people disagree with the revolutionary positioning, they may be boycotted or closed down using neo-Marxist-inspired cancel/call-out culture (Marcuse 1969, 95-137), with accusations of lacking imagination; being part of the 'pig majority' (Maher 2022); or any other slurs from the litany of available epithets.[1] Another possible

[1] Among them: oppressive/exploitative, 'racial capitalist'/bourgeoisie, neoliberal/neocon/fascist/nazi, patriarchal/misogynistic/toxic, white supremacist/colonial/neocolonial/Christian/imperialist, homophobic/ableist

reason for the extreme positioning is ironically akin to the 'madman theory' of *crazy-to-mellow* negotiating used by Nixon and Trump (Welle 2025), although it is couched by abolitionists in terms of transparency. Abolitionist Mychal Smith (2020, 16) states:

> When asked "What would you have us do with the police?," I make a point of saying, unequivocally, "Abolish them," because that is what I mean. I seek a world without police. When I explain that achieving such a world would require us to enact a number of redistributive policies and educational programs aimed at providing for everyone's basic needs and reducing violence…, I'm asked why I don't lead with that rather than the potentially alienating "Abolish the police." And my answer is that I believe in stating, in clear language, what you want, because otherwise you are beholden to the current state of consciousness and accepted wisdom.
>
> Smith 2020, 16

Smith goes on to say that he hates the police, not as individuals, but as an institution that obstructs true social (as opposed to retributive) justice (2020, 16). He therefore wants pure police abolition rather than incremental reform, because the latter 'keeps the grinding forces of oppression—of death—in place' (2020, 17). The final and main reason for adopting the two confronting terms is that it opens the door to challenge the current 'predatory' system where racist police misconduct has reached equilibrium (Davis 2021; Fegley and Murtazashvili 2023). The extreme terms are described as an 'entry point' (McElhone et al. 2022, 278) and 'discursive tactic' (Eaglin 2021, 120) to reveal the deep transformations required of government and society. Clarke (2020) elaborates:

> Critics argue that such demands would obviously require a complete, fundamental overhaul and restructuring of our entire society, and that these demands cannot be achieved while leaving any part of existing society just as it is. But this is precisely the point.

reformers defending the status quo/'racialized infrastructures'/establishment (Briond 2020; Chua et al. 2024; CPCP 2025; hooks 2018).

> Marx wrote that revolutionary activity was necessary not only because it was the only way to put political power into the hands of the people, but *also* because it is the only way for us to leave behind the worst of what capitalism has made of us, and to forge ourselves anew…

While radical complete defunding/abolition stances may deliberately fuel division and debate, the relatively unencumbered JR allows the opportunity to promote unity and immediate community-led action addressing the needs of those vulnerable to incarceration, or currently in or leaving prison. JR still brings deep structural change and some tensions, but rather than the defunding/abolition starting point, the community unites to identify their needs and build on their local strengths. In such a spirit, Australian localities that have progressed with JR initiatives to date have successfully engaged with the police on an ongoing basis, rather than treating them as an enemy. For example, the police, including successive police commanders, at Bourke have been in daily contact with members of the community-led Maranguka JR initiative from the beginning. The local police also volunteer their time at sports and homework clubs (PCYC 2025; Sacred Sports 2025). As Sarah Hopkins, then of the Aboriginal Legal Service, stated, 'I actually don't think you could run a justice reinvestment initiative without the police at the table' (Ferguson and Thompson 2016). Aided by such cooperation with the police, service providers and other stakeholders, communities have seen local health, safety, wellbeing and opportunities improve, with a resultant reduction in crime, incarceration and recidivism rates (AIC 2023; KPMG 2016,2018; PCYC 2025; Sacred Sports 2025).

***Literal meaning of JR***

The plain meaning of JR is *investing again in justice*, where 'justice' is understood as *social justice*. Tucker and Cadora's JR definition (2003, 2) contemplates a partial shift from investing in the criminal justice system to investing in the community and social services, with greater say for the locals in how funds are allocated. Most JR discussions reflect this *reallocation* meaning, but on relatively infrequent occasions in the literature there is discussion of the literal *reinvestment* of the savings derived from JR initiatives (e.g. Just

Reinvest NSW 2019), whereby the financial and societal benefits are tallied and reinvested locally. This reduces the local community's reliance on annual government grants. The effect of ever-increasing funds (based on a similar principle to compound interest) can reverse the downward spiral towards prison, transforming communities most impacted by incarceration. The huge potential of literal JR for meeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community needs, leveraging community strengths and closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians after the initiative enters the implementation stage (Joint Council on Closing the Gap 2020; Productivity Commission 2024) has been consistently recognized by First Nations leaders since its inception (e.g. APO NT 2023; Calma 2009, 2018; Dodson, M 2015; Dodson, P 2016; Ferguson and Lovric 2019; Gooda 2013, 2014; Justice Reinvestment Network n.d.; NCAFP 2013; Oscar 2021). Aboriginal communities are also adapting the original US definition of JR by not only calling for literal reinvestment of savings from JIRAD initiatives, but placing greater emphasis on social justice, self-determination, local decision-making, and data governance and sovereignty (Allison 2022, 7). Whilst some First Nations advocates regard abolition as a long-term goal (or sometimes adopting the moderate version of defunding/abolition in conjunction with JR), First Nations leaders have mainly prioritised JR above abolition. Unlike abolitionism/defunding, JR can readily be used to tackle the underlying causes of crime and incarceration, including lack of opportunity, systemic racism and intergenerational trauma and imprisonment, with the engagement of all stakeholders. The reinvestment of savings may also occur when individuals are diverted from incarceration through alternative funded supports (Beckett 2023, 104).

Like defunding/abolition, JR has *moderate* versions. JR may refer to justice *investment* (as opposed to *reinvestment*). The funds are derived not from the law enforcement budget, but from other government departments; or from financial or in-kind contributions made by philanthropic organisations, corporations, the local community or the general public (Willis and Kapira 2018, vii). Much 'JR' government funding (including the recent federal and NSW 'JR' funding) is actually justice *investment*—merely allocations for various initiatives to in mostly First Nations communities (Attorney-General's Department n.d.a., n.d.b.; Department of Communities and Justice 2024). Moderate JR may also involve relabelling (or 'bluewashing'

– Dollar 2023) of existing government-funded early intervention, crime prevention and community-based programs as ‘JR’ to align with JR’s popularity in Australia (Willis and Kapira 2018, vi), contrasting with the less favourable public perception of ‘defunding’ and especially ‘abolition’ - Elbeshbishi and Quarshie 2021).

**Comparing the literal versions of defunding/abolition and JR**

Common objections to police dismantling begin with concerns about not having police to respond to violent incidents. Rather than addressing these directly, abolitionist Lesage de La Haye (2021, 35) contends that we must instead ‘transform social logic’. Kaba and Nagao (n.d.) add that:

> We want more safety for everyone. Yet when we tell people that we want to abolish policing and prisons, they invariably ask..."what about the rapists?" [We] don’t demand police and prison abolition in spite of “the rapists.” We demand abolition because the current system produces and reinforces sexual violence while using survivors to justify its existence.

Most abolitionists discuss ‘envisioning’ a society without police. They ponder how the community could ‘imagine’ and contribute to safety without depending on and perpetuating violent law enforcement (Davis 2020, 215). In a CNN interview (Andrew, Fleischer, and Sarlin 2020), a number of abolitionists were asked the same question about how violent crime would be dealt with if police could not be called upon. The interviewees talked about imagination, community programs/actions, intervention by mental health professionals and other actions that could have been taken prior to the examples of domestic violence or a school shooting arising. The interviewer persisted by asking what would be done if, despite the community actions, there was still a violent incident to be dealt with. Vitale replied that police could possibly be needed as ‘violence workers.’ McHarris advocated sending specialized de-escalation public servants. Cullors rejected the use of guns in dealing with any violent incident. Kaba and Nagao argue that fear is weaponised to justify policing (n.d.), which in turn perpetuates violence and harm (Grimsrud and Zehr 2002, 261). In addition,

Lee et al. (2020) and Wickes (2021) suggest that increasing police numbers may not reduce the subjective fear of crime and that initiatives that reduce disadvantage and improve cohesion and opportunities in the neighbourhood will be more effective in reducing fear and crime. When pressed, abolitionists accept that there will still be violent rapists, muggers, drug suppliers and terrorists to deal with, but differ on whether police will need to be called (along with mental health professionals, counsellors, etc) (Andrew, Fleischer, and Sarlin 2020; Robinson 2017).

Prominent US abolitionists, Mariame Kaba and Andrea Ritchie (2022a), reject reform, arguing law enforcement has always functioned as violence against Black people. They favour complete abolition. Similar arguments exist in Australia based on the original purpose of the criminal justice system to administer the colony (including the dispossession and subjugation of First Nations peoples); the continuing overrepresentation of Indigenous people, people with disabilities and other marginalised people in the criminal justice system; and the greater impact on them from police heavy-handedness (Brooks, Lorange and Grealy 2021; Kilroy et al. 2021). Law enforcement in Australia indeed exhibits a level of engrained aggression, targeted repression, default brutality, biased exercise of power, incompetence, neglect, coercion and corruption (Gorrie 2021, 152-160, 169-173; Gorrie 2024, 21-60; Porter 2025; Stinson 2024). These police failures can be more painful and traumatic than those in the private realm because people feel powerless, victimized and betrayed by those who should be trusted (Harvard Law Review 2023, 1173-1176). The failure of police to address such issues, despite decades of reforms imposed by coroners, police reviews, government inquiries and enraged citizens, leads to the conclusion that such systemic problems and lack of accountability require structural change (Cunneen 2023, 1-20, 87-110; Farmer 2023; Gorrie 2021, 2024; Kaba 2020). Abolitionists try to claim that this structural change can only be brought about by abolitionism (and with agitation and conflict – Akbar 2023). They suggest a dichotomy between liberal/neoliberal reformism ('reformist reform') that perpetuates the current system, and the path to radical abolition ('non-reformist reform') that works against the prevailing order (Akbar 2023, 2507, 2527; Baldry, Carlton and Cunneen 2014, 171; Gorz 1968; Mathiesen 1974, 202). If we wish for change, then radical abolitionism is presented as what we should be pursuing, and by creating antagonism and

conflict between classes (Akbar 2023, 2497, 2564). André Gorz, who developed the idea of non-reformist reforms, went further, advocating 'a succession of more or less violent… trials of strength' (1968, 112). The abolitionist rhetoric obscures, however, an alternative question—whether literal defunding/abolition or literal JR has the greater potential for bringing the required structural change in a manner amenable to Australians.

A similar method employed by abolitionists is to say (quite reasonably) that there is a continuum between abolitionism/decolonialism ('non-reformist reforms') and reformism ('reformist reforms') (Cunneen 2025, 361; Mathieson 1974). The fault line separating these two extremes is then said to be 'whether proposed changes or reforms shrink or retract the system and have a clear pathway towards abolitionism' (Cunneen 2025, 361). JR also retracts the system, that is shrinks the need for police. The difference may be that the police may be engaged with in the JR initiative rather than hated (Smith 2020, 16) in abolitionism as 'class traitors' in the capitalist state apparatus, protecting and benefitting from the bourgeoisie class. In any case, abolitionism would seek to take the credit for the reduction in the need for police away from JR.

Yet another rhetorical device used by abolitionists is to gather all competing 'non-reformist reforms' under the banner of abolition as the long-term goal. They could, and do, try to include JR as one of these sub-categories, thereby appropriating or usurping JR. For example, Baldry, Carlton and Cunneen (2014, 171) write:

> Abolitionism provides a methodology and a theoretical framework for dismantling the expanding prison-industrial complex. Abolitionism is primarily concerned with strategizing alternatives to imprisonment and, ultimately, in the long term, the eventual eradication of prisons. *Radical* expressions of reform and decarceration can interlock to comprise contemporary strategies of this long-term project.

However, JR does not necessarily need to be a part of defunding/abolition, and to date it has been a separate and more effective pathway for reducing the need for policing. It is further contended in this article that literal defunding/abolition comes with dangers that are not as evident in literal JR.

One major difference between the two pathways is that JR is primarily a means to the end of addressing local community needs (including the root causes of crime) and building on community strengths. With defunding/abolition, it purports to be a means to the same end, but it is also an end in itself: We defund/abolish the police to reduce/end their authoritarian power over us and to further revolutionary ends (Akbar 2023, 2519). With JR, the reallocation need not have this focus. The JR movement acknowledges the same engrained issues within policing, but as a starting point. In defunding/abolition, as many police as possible are to be dismantled because they are considered violent, white-supremacist, patriarchal institutions, whereas JR initiatives recognize the advantage of addressing the causes of crime, which reduces crime, which reduces the need for so many police (the savings from which may be reinvested in further JR initiatives). Under JR, police levels can be reduced as the need for police declines. That JR is more politically neutral also means that, unlike defunding/abolition, it can be readily supported by both the left and right sides of politics for more streamlined implementation and change (Russell 2026). It is argued next that defunding/abolition comes with a political agenda that brings confusion, conflict, debate and delay rather than actual positive outcomes for the local community (as many JR initiatives have already provided). JR does involve politics, such as the fund-raising process or insistence by the community on self-determination and governance for the project. However, the JR committee and supporters generally have no agenda other than to meet local needs and leverage local strengths.

### *The political agenda of defunding/abolition*

Current abolitionist leaders and advocates include, from the US: Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Mariame Kaba, Andrea J. Ritchie, Derecka Purnell, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, Ayọ Tometi, Amna Akbar, Alex Vitale, Demetrius Noble, David Camfield and brian bean; and from Australia: Debbie Kilroy, Elizabeth Hilkerman, Moira Nolan, Chris Cunneen, Paddy Gibson, Amanda Porter and Liz Ross. Some are liberal abolitionists, but most are Marxian abolitionists who tend to assert that police abolition cannot be achieved under capitalism, and who are open about their desire to use police abolition as part of a larger revolutionary project. Non-Marxists have joined their organisations (which include Critical Resistance, the

Center for Place Culture and Politics (CPCP), Project NIA, the Social Justice Institute, Black Lives Matter, Solidarity and various communist parties) for other political reasons such as the perceived need for decolonisation or because of the rhetoric employed by abolitionists (refer previous section). However, defunding and abolition are predominantly interlinked with Marxism and calls for 'new democratic institutions' (McDowell and Fernandez 2018, 377; Davis 2016). Repressive policing is attributed to the racial, military and economic domination of imperialist capitalism, and activists seek to dismantle both institutions (Akbar 2023, 2515; Black Ink 2021; Farmer 2023). For example, McDowell and Fernandez argue for 'approaches to abolition that (1) aim directly at the police as an institution, (2) dismantle the racial capitalist order, (3) adopt uncompromising positions that resist liberal attempts at co-optation, incorporation, and/or reconciliation, and (4) create alternative democratic spaces that directly challenge the legitimacy of the police' (2018, 375). Davis considers that abolitionist advocacy 'can help promote an anticapitalist critique and movements towards socialism' (2016, 7). Kaba stresses that 'Dismantling capitalism is central to PIC [prison industrial complex] abolition' (Rodriques 2021). Taylor advocates 'defeating' the police, explaining that, 'We can't defund the capitalist state to death: we'll have to overthrow it in a revolution and reconstruct a society based on collective cooperation, to make unnecessary the gang violence that today we call law enforcement' (2020).

The issue for those that do not subscribe to Marxist theory/*praxis* (the vast majority of Australians[2]) is that defunding/abolition appears coopted by neo-Marxian academics and

[2] In Australia, membership of the Communist Party of Australia ['CPA'] declined due to such factors as the death toll and repression under Stalin, the cold war and Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, until the party was dissolved in 1991. The CPA was replaced by the New Left Party which disbanded in 1992. The Socialist Party of Australia, which had broken away from the CPA in 1971 when the CPA became critical of the Soviet Union, renamed itself the Communist Party of Australia in 1996. This new CPA hoped to run candidates in the 2016 federal election, but its registration was rejected by the Australian Electoral Commission for failing to prove it had at least 500 members. Another breakaway group, the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) refuses to say how many members it has but it wields virtually no political influence. Socialist Alternative, publishers of *Red Flag*, was formed as a breakaway from the now-ceased International Socialist Organisation in Melbourne. The leader, Mick Armstrong, recognised that socialist ideas did not have a mass following so established itself as a 'propaganda group' to argue their ideas rather than agitate for mass action (Armstrong 2007) The group only has about 600 members today. The Socialist Alliance is thought to have the largest membership of Australian socialist groups (between 600 and 1,650) and its elected officers are currently limited to three local councillors. In conjunction with Socialist Alternative and other socialist groups, they ran in

activists to bring Marxist political influence by stealth, destroying conventional *praxis/metis* in the process (Mclauchlan 2017). Overall, 75.7% of Australians trust Australian police (Biddle 2022) and only 30% believe there is institutional police racism (Murphy 2020). A minority support full defunding/abolition (iSideWith 2024). In the US, a minority express confidence in both the police and police abolition/defunding (and even 'reduction' in police funding) (Phelps 2021; Ryan 2022, 26,41; The Economist 2021, 53; Washburn 2023; Williams and Eichenthal 2020; Zaru and Simpson 2020). Americans (especially Black Americans) are against police defunding, with a 2021 Ipsos/USA TODAY poll indicating 18% of Americans were for defunding and 58% against (Elbeshbishi and Quarshie 2021). In a 2020 Gallup poll, 67% of US adults (61% of Black Americans) wanted police to spend the same amount of time in their area, and an extra 19% of US adults (20% of Black Americans) wanted police to spend more time (Rakich 2020; Saad 2020).

Even following George Floyd's murder by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin and the nationwide BLM-led protests against police violence, there has been significantly more support for police reform than for defunding/abolition. A national 2020 survey found that the proportion supporting police reform was 66%, abolition (23%) and defunding (34%) (Vaughn, Peyton and Huber 2022). The main reason provided for the opposition to defunding/abolition was concern that police would be unavailable for emergency responses and public safety. In Minneapolis, only 43.8% voted in 2021 for a measure put forward for referendum to set aside the minimum police presence required by the city charter and replace the city's police department with a public safety department that 'could' include police officers 'if necessary' to maintain public safety (51% support was required). More Black voters voted against the measure than White voters, with the former citing safety concerns as their reason (MPR News 2021). A month later, the police budget nearly returned to pre-Floyd levels and the city council described their former pledges (by 9 of the 13 councillors) to end the Minneapolis Police Department as merely 'aspirational' (Navratil 2021).

the 2018 Victorian state election as the Victorian Socialists, but failed (although elections are regarded by them as merely a platform). Socialist Alliance withdrew from the alliance in 2020.

Prominent abolitionists maintain police are irreparable and only a Marxist revolution will overthrow the capitalist state with its inequality, oppression and racist, militarized police (Taylor 2020). Critics argue that this position ignores public safety benefits and positive police interactions (Ryan 2022), but others highlight systemic police racism and harm to marginalised groups (Gorrie 2021, 2024), considering that our sense of safety is harmed by the safety not received from police (Kaba and Ritchie 2022b). People agreeing that the failures of Australian police are systemic and so have not been, and will not be, rectified by decades of police reforms may support defunding/abolition unaware of its Marxist underpinnings and agenda (Clarke 2020). There is very little discussion about this connection in the literature. A Marxist government might not be problematic if it were desired by the people and had prospects for success. However, only a handful of 'communist' countries survive today,[3] and this survival is aided by the introduction of market mechanisms and limited property rights.[4] Modern Australia has strongly rejected Marxist government[5], and even leftist scholars, writers and leaders have acknowledged the failure of authoritarian Marxist governments worldwide.[6] For example, Harcourt (2020, 19) selectively borrows from Marx to reconstruct critical *praxis* theory while admitting that 'Marx's philosophy of history no longer holds today, and his analysis of political economy is dated.' Similarly, self-described communist Žižek observed that communist governments have been a 'total failure' (Sackur 2009): 'I think that the communism of the 20th century, more specifically all the network of phenomena we refer to as "Stalinism" are maybe the worst ideological, political, ethical, social (and so on) catastrophe in the history of humanity' (Sackur 2009, 2:22-2:46). Žižek goes further, 'It is capitalism, again and again, that emerges as the only alternative, the only way to move forward and the dynamic force for change when social life gets stuck into some fixed form. Today, capitalism is much more

[3] Said to be China, Cuba, Laos, North Korea (DPRK) and Vietnam, with low 'Freedom in the World' scores of 9, 10, 13, 3 and 20 (out of 100) respectively (Scandinavian countries dominate the 100 score, Australia is at 95 and the United States at 84) (Freedom House 2025).

[4] Žižek (2021).

[5] Refer to Footnote 2 above

[6] These include leftists/socialists (Camus 1953; Cliff 1955, ch.4,8; Harcourt 2020, 19; Mason 2015, ch.3; Orwell 1945, 1946, 1949; Young 2011), Marxists (Althusser 1992, 222-226; Castoriadis 1994, 147-148; Luxemburg 1922; Tifft 2002, 248-250; Žižek 2016, 249-255) and former Marxists (Aron 1955, 105-109, 119-133; Bell 1988, 132-138; Koestler 1940, 1949; Sartre – refer to Birchall 2004; Solzhenitsyn 1973; Wright 1949).

revolutionary than the traditional Left obsessed with protecting the old achievements of the welfare state' (Žižek 2021).

The 'new democracy' and 'alternative democratic spaces' of neo-Marxist abolition are not actually representative of the people in non-Marxist countries. Without such popular support, abolitionists have invented 'abolition democracy' realized through 'meaningful political participation, substantive equality, and the fulfillment of basic needs for housing, healthcare, and education' (Terwiel 2023, 663), but these are achievable with JR without the enforced Marxism, thereby being more representative for people in democratic market economies. Genuine community policing, JR, crime prevention, early intervention, restorative justice, transformative justice, decriminalisation of certain offences (with support), diversion from prison and decarceration can all be not only imagined but actively pursued within the government that the people vote for, without the duress, division, debates, delays, dangers and distractions of unsolicited Marxist revolution. There will then be diminishing need for the police (as well as prisons, criminal courts and surveillance); and for the remaining law enforcement officers there will be a greater likelihood of truly restorative, respectful and respected service.

**Comparing the moderate versions of defunding/abolition and JR**

In the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, over 20 major American cities cut $840m in police funding, largely by shifting police functions to other agencies or leaving police vacancies unfilled. Only $160m was redistributed to community services to address the root causes of crime and disadvantage (Levin 2021). It is unclear to what extent the $840m reduction in the police budget (from a $100 billion national budget) was due to defunding/abolition calls, to JR initiatives or other reasons. Some city leaders attributed their cuts to Covid-19 economic pressures and reduced criminal activity during that period. In a similar number of major cities, police budgets were raised such that the national law enforcement expenditure rose from 13.6% to 13.7% of general spending (Akinnibi, Holder, and Cannon 2021). Nevertheless, this represents a major reversal of the steady rise in US

police spending. One noticeable difference between defunding/abolition and JR initiatives is that the former can involve substantial investment of time and effort in advocacy. The result can be that police funding is cut and some of the funds reinvested, but not in areas that will make a difference to the community (Akinnibi, Holder, and Cannon 2021). In contrast, the JR movement has been wholly established by the local community and there is an established strategy that may begin with comprehensive justice mapping and/or local discussions to inform JR strategies. JR initiatives are also strongly evidence-based, with the costs and benefits (including intangible benefits) typically examined in great detail. Even 'moderate' JR initiatives can generate considerable benefits (such as crime and prison averted; the costs of crime and law enforcement reduced; people working and contributing to society; and families kept together). For example, Australia's first Aboriginal community-led JR initiative (Maranguka JR Project, Bourke NSW that commenced in 2012 after discussions from 2007) delivered a 'new way of doing business' (KPMG 2018, 6). This was through Aboriginal design/oversight frameworks; trust between stakeholders; demographic and justice mapping; community discussions; analysis of data; identification of community strengths/needs/goals/options/priorities; strategic planning by the Bourke Tribal Council and local community; and diverse initiatives to support young people and families in a broad range of ways (Just Reinvest NSW n.d.; KPMG 2016). A 2018 Impact Assessment by KPMG estimated that the changes made in Bourke in 2017 alone resulted in the following outcomes compared with 2016 (and this followed significant improvements in 2015 and 2016):

- Youth: 38% reduction in charges across the top five juvenile offence categories; 27% reduction in juvenile bail breaches; 31% increase in year 12 retention rates; and 84% rise in the completion rate for VET courses by Bourke secondary school students
- Adults: 14% reduction in bail breaches; 42% reduction in custody days; 83% increase in licences through a Learner Driver Program; and 15% reduction in charges across the top five offence categories (aged 26 and above)
- Families: 23% reduction in police-recorded domestic violence incidents; and 19% reduction in domestic violence reoffending (aged 26 and over)

- Financial: AUD 3.1 million gross impact, with AUD 0.6 million operational costs. Two thirds of this impact benefitted the justice system and the other third benefitted the region economically.

Since the term was coined in 2003, US JR initiatives have consistently delivered extraordinary outcomes, including the scrapping of a planned prisons and cost-benefit ratios ranging from 1:3 to 1:45 (ATSISJC 2009, 20-25; Fox and Albertson 2020, 271-272; Matsuda 2023, 3-5; Dollar, Campbell, and Labrecque 2024, 566-567).

**Possible unintended consequences of defunding/abolition that are not as evident in JR**

JR initiatives start with detailed justice mapping and evidence-based investigation by local stakeholders. In contrast, defunding/abolition initiatives have largely been driven by what former Socialist Alternative leader, Mick Armstrong, called 'propaganda groups' which broadly argue their ideas (2007). A 2021 study of millions of 911 calls across nine US agencies by criminologists Lum, Koper and Wu commences with the observation that the 'defund the police' debate has 'generally proceeded without adequate research about either the scale or nature of issues that the police handle and the potential consequences of the proposed reform efforts' (2021, 255). The study found that about 50% of the 911 calls were dealt with by call-takers and those that were directed to police fell into 'categories not obviously transferable to other organizations or government sectors without significant resource expenditures, adjustments, and commitments by other entities' (258). The researchers added that '[i]f such responsibilities were transferred, those calling for defunding need to consider possible costs to safety, community satisfaction, and the potential for disparity that might arise' (258), and that the advantages of transferring calls away from police were 'speculative' anyway (259). For example, the research team drew attention to the fact that only 1.3% of calls to police related to mental health concerns, concluding that 'significant defunding of the police would likely not be achieved even if another agency handled these calls' (266).

Police unions will resist a reduction in police numbers and funding for defunding/abolition and, to a lesser extent, JR. Unions will react more strongly to calls for police dismantling based on claims that the police are brutal, racist, unaccountable and corrupt. On the other hand, JR's focus on crime prevention, early intervention, building on strengths, providing opportunities and police involvement in the community is far less likely to be opposed by the unions. It is true that effective JR initiatives will reduce crime and thus the need for police in the area of law enforcement, but police could conceivably give more time to the focus of the JR and areas that have been a challenge in policing (e.g. liaising with the community; engaging with young people in positive ways; and becoming better equipped to protect those who need it and to respond in a team with medical professionals to mental health crises). With defunding/abolition, it is more likely that police numbers and funding are partially reduced prematurely/rapidly for ideological reasons or due to pressure placed on policy-makers by the defunding/abolition lobby. This 'putting the cart before the horse' can raise the possibility of a number of further unintended consequences. As one example, Ben-Moshe and Steele (2023, 1-2) suggest that if abolitionists fail to place disability at the core of their work, there could be the 'unintended and perverse consequence of expanding ableism and sanism…[P]roposals to defund the police and direct funding into social welfare and health could inadvertently enhance the coercive powers of mental health practitioners and social workers.' A further issue for people with disabilities, given their greater need for protection from violence, could be the risk of an inadequate replacement for police, at least in the transitional period (Russell and Farmer 2025, 241). Another consequence of premature reduction in police funding and levels is that the demand for police services will be filled through state-corporate reconfiguration. Former police officers will enter other government agencies or the private policing/security industry (Grunwald, Rappaport, and Berg 2024; Sato 2023). Governments may even contract security firms to fill roles vacated by police officers (Grunwald, Rappaport, and Berg 2024). This shift could favour the wealthy, leaving others unprotected (especially from police officers who were forced out of the police due to dishonesty, heavy-handedness, vilification by activists or stress). A study of nearly 300,000 licensed private security officers in the State of Florida found that approximately 25% of the ex-cops in this cohort had been fired from policing (Grunwald,

Rappaport, and Berg 2024). Being privately owned, the security firms may take short cuts with regard to the safety of officers and people with whom they come into contact (Townsend 2019). There may also be an expansion of pre-emptive policing, oppressive risk management and surveillance, with increased use of AI identification, analysis and control (Palmer and Miller 2021). These changes bear the potential to disproportionately harm marginalized people through lack of protection in their communities and intrusive, under-regulated overpolicing in public spaces. For example, the Northern Territory Government now employs a private security force in Darwin's public spaces because the police are overstretched (Fryer 2023). Anthony (2023) and Fryer (2023) note the dangers of this quasi-policing and security, which includes that their powers and accountability have not been stipulated by government or understood by the public; their training has been minimal (despite carrying pepper spray) which endangers both enforcers and enforced; and they have been very active in apprehending, searching and violently manhandling First Nations people. It has been suggested that defunding/abolition could even give rise to the privatisation of police, which would result in more of the same public accountability issues (Rice 2021). In the future, there may be an imperative to reduce the power of private policing/security. However, as we have seen with the closure of scandal-plagued private prison operators—the companies simply shift resources to related business interests, engage top PR and lobbying firms, and win other lucrative contracts that typically continue to manage vulnerable people in an actuarial manner (Sadler 2022, 2025). Abolitionists like Lopez (2020) and Okazawa-Rey and Kirk (2020) question whether law enforcement really creates security through force when the most vulnerable are being oppressed and criminalised, but the dangers may be even greater if profit-driven private security/policing is expanded. It is submitted that the horse-drawn cart of JR can reduce the need for police without the unpredictability of a sudden police diaspora.

A diminished police force under personnel and financial pressure will seek to alleviate that pressure in multiple police-led, commissioner-led and politician-led ways. There may, for example, be an upsurge in police/prison corruption or 'taxation by citation' (where government uses fines and fees to generate revenue rather than enforce public safety), both of which make disadvantaged people even more susceptible to abuse and criminality.

Taxation by citation also works against the decriminalization of low-level offences as needed for significant decarceration (Dindial and Fortier 2021), while corruption increases poverty through lower economic growth rates and biased treatment in favour of the rich and powerful, including criminal gangs (Gupta, Davoodi, and Alonso-Terme 1998; Mauro 1997).

Significant reductions in police numbers may lead to increased private gun ownership (where permitted) (Kleck and Gertz 1995, 151-152) and error-prone extra-legal vigilante 'justice' (Read 2023), undermining the liberal democratic rule of law (Bateson 2021, 937).[7] With less police in conjunction with the desire for a better society, there will be a community tension. There can be healthy responses such as JR, restorative justice and transformative justice, but conversely the community will also be tempted to secure security in less healthy ways, such as through controversial gated communities, misguided activities such as 'naming and shaming' suspected offenders; and 'cancelation' of non-abolitionists. With less police, there may be efforts to increase the effectiveness of each police officer and staff member using technology such as facial recognition and data-driven predictive policing (Lee, Bradford and Posch 2024). Non-technological community versions of facial recognition and predictive policing could become widespread (e.g. nosy neighbourhood spying and dobbing in to authorities or community leadership). Understaffing and protests are causing stretched police officers to experience stress, overtime, sleep deprivation, sickness, injuries, burnout and low morale, accompanied by personal and public safety concerns, and possible contemplation of resignation, retirement or suicide (Alda 2024; Brunell 2020; Hanrahan, Lathouris, and Burrows 2024; Sato 2023). While some abolitionists claim that police officers have a relatively safe job (Kaba 2020; Vitale 2017; Cunneen 2024),[8] the Harvard Law Review (2023, 1158-1159) critiques efforts to downplay violent crime statistics to allay public fears and devalue the role of police.

[7] Although this decline in rule of law could be a cause for celebration amongst Maoist abolitionists (Oud 2022; O'Mallon 2021)

[8] Kaba quotes Alex Vitale who believes that the 'vast majority of police officers make one felony arrest a year. If they make two, they're cop of the month' (2020). Arrest statistics reveal that there are two to three felony arrests per officer annually, although there may be two or more officers involved in each arrest and there are many non-felony arrests for violence. The number of US arrests in 2022 (the latest data currently available) had declined to about 7.36 million arrests (Korhonen 2024), of which approximately 20-30% (1.47-2.21 million) were estimated to be felony arrests. In 2022, there were around 752,456 sworn police officers (FBI n.d.a, n.d.b).

Australia has a significant number of serious crimes, with over 1.9 million crimes each year (conservative since about one-third of crimes go unreported). Of these crimes, 887,000 are property crimes and 258,000 violent crimes. Australian police officers dealing with these crimes are overworked with 4,500 vacancies nationwide (59,473 positions filled) and many on long-term sick/personal leave or receiving workers compensation due to stress. This has meant rapidly declining emergency response times (Hanrahan, Lathouris, and Burrows 2024; Sato 2023). The prevalence of PTSD is six to seven times that of the wider community (Asmundson and Stapleton, 2008). A 2001 Australian Institute of Criminology report (Mayhew) on police safety risks found that police have 'a high-risk job compared to many others'; with deaths from murder, vehicle accidents or suicide. An estimated 10 percent of officers are victims of assault each year. While performing their duties, police can be exposed to a range of body fluids and communicable diseases. Police suffer stress and fatigue through 'constant exposure to danger, traumatic events, prisoner threats, conflicting task demands, shortstaffed stations, court appearances, departmental inquiries and work in isolated rural areas' (2001, 3). The report goes on to provide a long list of other risks including burnout, PTSD, physical injuries, and exposure to poisonous chemicals/vapours (Mayhew 2001, 4; Muir et al.). Abolitionist assertions that Australian police are rarely in danger or dealing with serious crime do not appear factual. Policing is one of the most stressful and high-risk occupations (Burke, Brief and George 1993; Hart and Cotton 2003). Abolitionist conclusions that police are not needed and easily replaced are therefore invalid. Conversely, the positive outcomes of JR benefit the health and safety of the entire community, including that of the police officers and the people they deal with each day.

**Conclusion**

A common thread running through defunding/abolition risks is that the powerful may again be favoured over those already suffering law enforcement overreach. Reduced police quality and accountability through pressures on time and health, pre-emptive policing, expanded surveillance, private policing/security, vigilantism, 'naming and shaming' and community spying/reporting are all ramifications of rapid/premature defunding/abolition that disproportionately harm marginalized populations. These dangers are not as evident in

JR because initiatives are led by the local community for the local community at the pace preferred by the local community. They are not delayed by divisive debates or hurried by a coercive revolutionary agenda. Without resorting to defunding/abolition and its associated neo-Marxist underpinnings, Australians of any ilk can actively pursue real change through genuine community policing, JR, crime prevention, early intervention, restorative justice, transformative justice, decriminalisation, diversion from prison and decarceration. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, co-founder with Angela Davis in 1998 of Critical Resistance, recommends *making* power through organized, hopeful community-based actions, rather than being distracted with *taking* power in an adversarial structural framework (2007, 248).

Even by itself, JR has the power to reverse the downward spiral towards prison in communities with high crime, incarceration and recidivism rates, provided there is ongoing intensive support for the community (Tanton et al. 2021, 7); investment/reinvestment; and ideally recurring reinvestment of the savings into the causes of crime and disadvantage and into the rehabilitation of prisoners and reintegration of releasees. Until the downward prison spiral is reversed, communities will need to push for opportunity, a significantly reduced need for law enforcement, and justice diversion. To do otherwise would be to abandon current prisoners and people vulnerable to the criminal justice system. We cannot simply disparage and give up on police and correctional officers either. Both movements would have us believe in the possibilities of rehabilitation and reintegration for prisoners and healing processes for victims and society in the present. Both movements would have us imagine greatly reduced police forces and prisons in the future. We can therefore believe in the meantime that the huge array of transformative evidence-based, community-led, trauma/vulnerability/disability/victim/justice-informed, place-based JR initiatives now being implemented will have a cumulative impact, particularly when the community strengths are recognised and built upon. JR is a preferable way to achieve all outcomes sought by defunding and/or abolishing the police, and without the divisiveness and other societal harms of the latter.

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