COMMENTARY

Camden is not a blueprint for disbanding the police

What happened in Camden and the conversations taking place nationwide around disbanding police aren't the same

By RANN MILLER

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Police Officer (Getty Image)

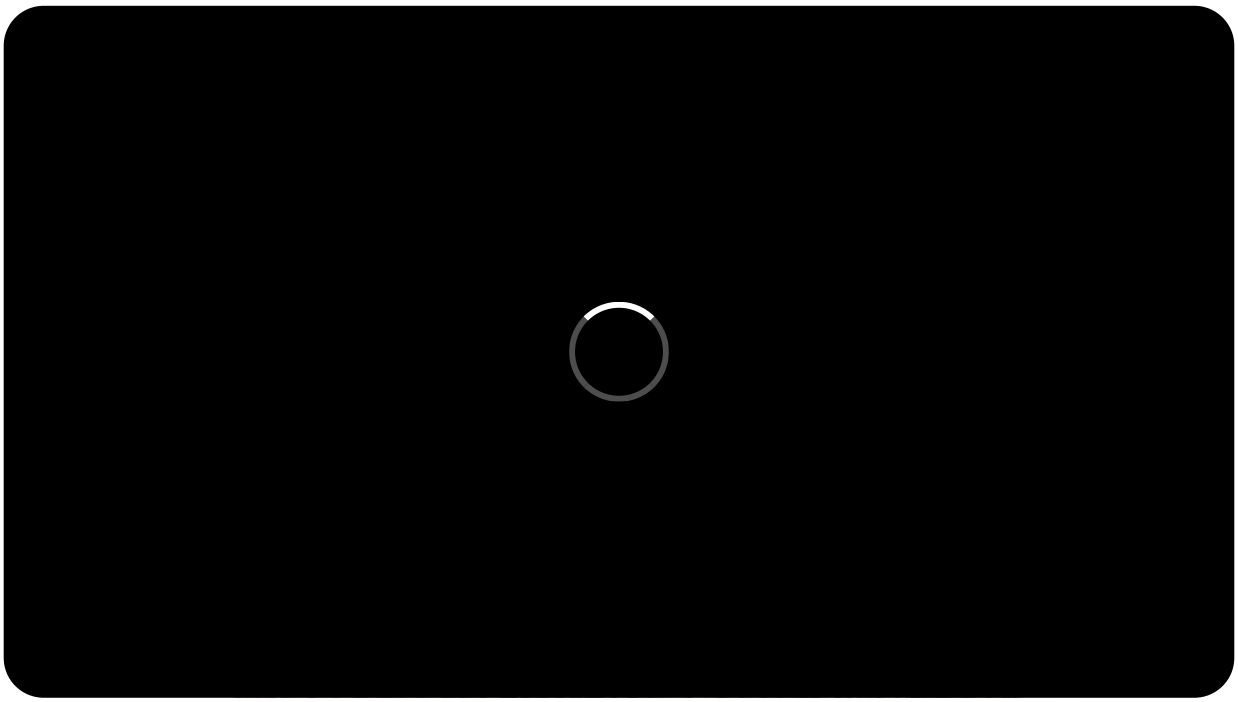
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Nationwide protest surrounding the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer has led to streets being renamed, greater solidarity among people and increased discussions about defunding and abolishing the police. Although Mayor Jacob Frey disagrees, the Minneapolis City Council has pledged to disband the Minneapolis Police Department.

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In the wake of this pledge, many pundits pointed to the case of Camden, New Jersey. A city known for high crime rates, Camden underwent a major change when in 2013, its municipal police department, the Camden Police Department (CPD), was replaced by a county-run police unit, the Camden County Police Department (CCPD). However, what happened in Camden and the conversations taking place nationwide around disbanding police aren't the same thing.

The CPD was under the authority of the mayor. Their union was in direct negotiations with the city on wages and the department presided over a city known for its crime. The CCPD by contrast is operated by the county government, and while there is a police union for the county to contend with, it is a new police union; the union for the Camden police department was disbanded with the Camden police department. Camden County government gave itself a clean slate. Statistics show the CCPD has contributed to historic drops in violent crime.

Recent talk of disbanding police departments is about ending police violence — and in many cases — ending policing itself and delivering a semblance of power to the people. What happened in Camden seven years ago was a policy decision that was one piece of a comprehensive initiative that took power out of the hands of Camden residents and placed it into the hands of the state; it was municipal paternalism.

Dating back to the turn of the century, Camden, a majority Black and Latinx, working-class city, has had its fate decided by the state of New Jersey with respect to its schools, its police

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and the city itself. In 2002, New Jersey implemented a municipal takeover of Camden city government whereby residents no longer had voting power as to its leader and thereby no elective say on how money would be spent.

The city still had a mayor — however, the governor appointed a chief operating officer who had the final say on all decisions.

Although Camden regained control of its affairs in 2010, the city continued to deal with massive budget shortfalls that compromised delivery of essential services. Easy scapegoats were former mayors Arnold Webster and Milton Milan, but underlying all of Camden's problems was the larger issue of systemic racism.

Zoning ordinances and rising housing prices were initiated specifically to keep Black and Latinx families out of New Jersey suburbs like Cherry Hill. Jobs in Camden, particularly manufacturing jobs, left with white people as the population of Black people increased. Any opportunity for the city to sustain a tax base, and for residents to establish the city as a bastion of the middle class, was gone.

Camden became a municipality where "budget realities" came at the cost of the will of the people, and thus Camden remained under the thumb of the state. It's why former Mayor Randy Primas, who was later an appointed chief operating officer of the municipal takeover in 2002, agreed for Camden to house a state prison, a sewage facility and a trash incinerator while mayor for the duration of the 1980s, for example. Nevertheless, Camden still faced "budget realities" that led to the disbanding of the Camden Police Department decades later

State aid was the method to meet the city budget. However, the state felt the city allocated too much money to police. Laying off officers wasn't enough to convince the state to assist Camden another year. In addition, Camden was consistently ranked as the most dangerous city in the United States according to FBI data compiled by *CQ Press.* In 2009, 2011, 2012 and 2013, Camden was ranked first; second in 2010. (These rankings are not without their critiques, but that is a topic for another piece.)

The state of New Jersey had a sincere opportunity to begin to transform the systemically racist structures that heavily contributed to Camden's circumstances. Instead, the state chose to remove one police department and replace it with another police department, an

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idea pushed by former Gov. Chris Christie, county leaders and power broker George Norcross.

The CCPD is under the authority of the Camden County Board of Freeholders. This means that the residents of Camden no longer have any semblance of direct control of the officers who patrol their streets. Freeholders are elected by residents of Camden County. The population of Camden City is 95 percent Black and Latinx contrasted to roughly 38 percent for all of Camden County.

White people in Camden County ultimately control how Black and Latinx residents are policed with their vote, without even living in the city of Camden. Unlike residents of the city of Camden, non-Camden residents of the county chose to opt out of participating in a county police force.

This is part of the racism many white people conveniently fail to see.

When a group of residents filed a petition with the state to allow residents the opportunity to vote on disbanding its police, then-Mayor Dana Redd and City Council President Frank Moran (who is the current mayor) sued its own residents. A court ruling was found in favor of the mayor and council president; however, a New Jersey Superior Court later ruled that the Camden police reboot was done illegally.

Too little, too late.

Despite appearing in a similar “most dangerous” list as recently as this year, the CCPD continues to be touted as a model of reform. In his 2015 visit to Camden, President Barack Obama praised Camden and the CCPD, calling it a symbol of promise for the nation. Yet the CCPD has had its share of problems, including the use of excessive force and a lawsuitaccusing the department of destroying evidence. Between 2014 and 2018, the department only sustained 4 of 158 excessive force complaints.

The CCPD became much whiter and received federal grants, as recently as this year, to increase the number of officers on the street.

While the CCPD departed from its broken windows approach and Police Chief Joseph Wysocki acknowledges feedback from residents and embraces a de-escalation style of

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policing, chokeholds are still allowed — even as other cities like Denver and Minneapolis have banned their use. As former West New York officer Rich Rivera said, "Camden County Police epitomizes what a police department should look like on paper while simultaneously trampling on an individual's civil rights."

Of course, many of those organizing the current uprisings don't think a police department should look like *anything* — on paper or otherwise. At a time where activists are calling for defunding and/or abolishing police departments, the process surrounding the creation of the CCPD clearly doesn't provide a blueprint. The abolitionist organizers leading this movement know this very well, but mainstream pundits continue to lift up Camden as an example.

False portrayals of Camden's police department may elicit a feel-good angle to frame how to "disband" a police department to reform policing, but revisionist history doesn't serve anyone.

CORRECTION: *This article has been updated to reflect that the CCPD has been represented by the FOP Lodge 218 since 2013.*

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