Amanda Alexander is an assistant professor of Afro-American studies, postdoctoral fellow in law, University of Michigan.

Those who focus on police reform are asking the wrong questions

Amanda Alexander
Published Friday, Jul. 29, 2016 07:00AM EDT
Last updated Monday, Aug. 08, 2016 12:54PM EDT

August marks two years since police killed 18-year-old Michael Brown. Despite high-profile discussions of U.S. police reform since then, police shootings continue; officers have killed 604 people since January. The most recent police shootings of unarmed black people – and the protests in their wake – lay bare the depths of U.S. problems and the inability of police reform to solve them.

The deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile underscore two truths about the United States: We make it difficult for people to get by and harder yet to care for each other. After decades of slashing welfare budgets and increasing investments in prisons, federal and state governments have charted a path for the country’s poorest: aggressive policing and incarceration. We’ve locked people out of the formal job market and criminalized their survival.
It is not coincidental that officers in New York and Baton Rouge killed Eric Garner and Alton Sterling, respectively, in the course of policing informal economies (selling loose cigarettes and CDs). We simply make life hard for people – until we extinguish it entirely.

We made it hard for Philando Castile to keep showing up at the Minnesota school where he was a cafeteria worker, greeting every child by name. After he was pulled over for having a “wide nose” (as police recordings later revealed) and killed, we learned the 32-year-old had been similarly stopped 46 times and faced more than $6,000 in fines. Each time he got in his car, he risked death – until it finally came. Poor black people across the country are asked to take that same risk daily.

On July 18, Charles Kinsey, a behavioural therapist in North Miami, was shot while trying to prevent police from shooting his autistic patient who held a toy truck. “I was really more worried about him than myself,” Mr. Kinsey said. “I was thinking as long as I have my hands up ... they’re not going to shoot me. ... Wow, was I wrong.” A few days later, footage circulated of police body-slamming Breaion King, a teacher in Austin, Tex. The officer justified the beating by telling her that black people have “violent tendencies.”

Each day, we require black people to risk their lives to be cafeteria workers, teachers, therapists. The United States demands impossible sacrifices from black people to sustain its economy, and has since slavery.

What does this have to do with police reform?

Very little. Reformers are asking the wrong questions. They have turned to increased police training and altered use-of-force protocols to end this nightmare. Fortunately, some among us demand another way. Young black activists are not just asking, “How do we make cops stop shooting us?” but instead, “What do our communities need to thrive? How do we get free?” They’re not begging for scraps; they’re demanding the world they deserve. If there’s a future for any of us, it’s in asking these questions, demanding fundamental shifts in resources and organizing like hell.

So far reform has brought little outside of multimillion-dollar investments in police departments for body cameras. It remains to be seen whether they will be effective in reducing brutality and deaths. But one thing is clear: We’ve decided that doubling down on investment in the police, rather than the communities they patrol, is the best solution to ending the slaughter of black people.

Ultimately, the real beneficiaries of these reforms are not the residents of Oakland, Chicago and Ferguson, Mo., but San Francisco and Silicon Valley.

Meanwhile, cash-strapped cities continue to raise revenue from policing and fining the poor. And because of insufficient social service investment, Americans rely on police to be first responders to crises of mental health, addiction and homelessness. The results are tragic: Half of those killed by police have a disability.

It’s no wonder that mainstream discussions of police reform seem to miss the mark. Yet black movement activists remain bold. Organizers with Black Youth Project (BYP 100) and the Movement for Black Lives held more than 80 actions last week under the banner of #FreedomNow. BYP 100 renewed its demand to “fund black futures,” calling on Americans to divest from the police state and invest in communities to promote economic sustainability.

This call to fund black futures is not a call for reform. Instead, it understands the futility of our current path. It’s ultimately a call to a future where policing will never take us.

And they’re organizing to make it so. In Chicago, Fearless Leading by the Youth demanded – and won – a state-of-the-art trauma centre to serve their community. In Cleveland and Chicago, organizers
Those who focus on police reform are asking the wrong questions - The Globe and Mail

removed prosecutors who failed to act on police shootings. Advocates are testing alternatives to police – gun-free zones, 911 alternatives, restorative justice – and also fighting for health care and education.

These young people are fighting to do more than breathe, more than reform. From grief and pain, they’re offering a dream of something more.

© 2017 The Globe and Mail Inc. All Rights Reserved.