

Defund SPD calls on Somerville to stop hiring new officers

Matthew Kennedy



This past summer, in response to yet another wave of anti-Black violence carried out at the hands of American police, Somerville residents demanded change. Thousands of Somervillans signed a petition to the City Council asking them to fund public services before police. More than 130 residents, including residents of color who had experienced brutality and harassment at the hands of the Somerville Police Department, offered six hours of testimony at a June budget hearing, demanding a 60% reduction of the police budget and the rejection of any budget with less than 10% in cuts. But the city failed to meet that demand, instead only cutting 7% of the \$11

million police budget. Now the mayor is attempting to fast track three officers to replace recent retirees. He also intends to hire another six new cops of color. We, Defund SPD, call on our city council to reject all new Somerville Police Department hires regardless of how diverse they may be.

We are fortunate to live in a city where our elected officials and civil servants recognize the grave threat of this pandemic and have worked hard to provide testing, good public health policies, and monetary assistance through the Somerville Cares Fund. But this is not enough.

The mayor's entire vision for reimagining SPD rests on the incorrect assumptions that police officers exist to protect the safety of people of color and that they can function in a racially just way. This isn't true. As we explained in a previous column, policing in the United States evolved from slave patrols designed to re-enslave Black Americans who had escaped bondage as well as sabotage paid laborers who were organizing for better pay and working conditions. Police were allowed to search private property to prevent enslaved people from organizing and educating themselves. Cops killed unarmed workers for striking. The police still function this way today, from beating up protestors to harassing people of color on the streets. The lens of "reimagining policing" is simply the latest attempt to hijack the language of activists while watering down our demands.

The June announcement that the city would hire a handful of non-white police officers came in response to global backlash against police violence. The implication is that a more diverse police force would help reduce racial bias as well as instances of police violence against people of color.

However, studies have shown no evidence that hiring a marginal percentage of cops of color reduces police violence against communities of color. Just as importantly, even if more diverse police forces were less likely to commit unlawful violent acts, we'd still have to reckon with the reality that the majority of harm caused by police is perfectly legal and even required by their job.

The infrastructure of violence endemic to policing is extensive: they conduct an ongoing war on drugs in which the police and courts punish low-level possession and distribution with life-shattering carceral consequences for people who are addicted or just trying to get by. Civil asset forfeiture is so rampant, cops across the country steal more than burglars. Police are notorious for racist surveillance and harassment that impact our city. And, unlike our mayor's current approach, which ignores several hours of testimony on this topic from his constituents, we don't believe that the way to solve these issues is to put friendlier faces on the same institution. We believe that our community can create racial justice by dismantling this infrastructure, defunding it, and reallocating resources to the life-affirming services such as housing, healthcare, and counseling that shelter, heal, and nourish the minds, bodies, and souls of our community's most vulnerable.

At the current average salary of \$94,855 (\$11,762,060 for 124 officers), these six new hires add up to an additional \$569,130 each year in police spending before factoring in benefits and overtime. In a time when our city faces a housing crisis for our residents, incredible stress on our school-aged children trying to learn from home, and a pandemic that still ravages our neighbors' health, our budgetary priority should not be to make sure that there are a few more cops on the beat. Permanently reducing the number of police officers on the city's payroll would make millions of dollars available for public health services and the material needs of our community. De-escalation, crisis intervention, and mental wellness check-ups are all services that are better performed by non-police professionals. We'll never be able to properly invest in these alternatives as long as public funds continue to be siphoned off by our police department. The money is already here. It's time we start putting it to good use.

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