

Friday, June 19, 2020

Testimony offered by The Reverend Michael T. McBride, M.Div. at the House Committee on Oversight and Reform: Briefing on Abusive Policing Practices and Need for Justice in Reform Act

To Chairwoman Maloney, Ranking Member Jordan, and all the members of this committee.

On behalf of all my freedom fighting friends and comrades, as well as the victims and survivors of state violence I am in relationship with, I thank you for the invitation to testify today.

My name is Michael McBride. I am a father. A husband. A minister. Over 20 years ago, March 9, 1999, I was physically and sexually assaulted by San Jose police officers. Although a student at a bible college, living with my pastor and his family. That night, the police couldn't see my humanity. While returning home from visiting family, I was racially profiled, my groin and testicles were squeezed and groped, officers ran their hands through my underwear, claiming to look for weapons they would never find. I was brutally thrown to the ground, with knees in my back and neck, guns pointed at me and my arm feeling like it was on the verge of snapping in two. Verbal assaults and obscenities were hurled at me with no provocation. That evening, these men I did not know tried to crush my dignity. They left marks on my body and trauma in my spirit that persists even to this day.

I'm glad I did not die that night. While their guns were trained on me there were moments, I thought I would. I felt so unprotected. These last 20 years of activism and practice is the fruit that emerged from the soil of that horrific night. Weeks later I met and was mentored by Michelle Alexander and Olivia Araizo at the ACLU. Months later I was embraced by Van Jones and Maya Harris. Years later I learned at the feet of Rev. Eugene Rivers, Teny Gross, and Jeff Brown. Decades later, Ferguson revolutionaries, black lives matter visionaries and fellow peacemakers along with the thousands of young people I've met along the way inform my thinking and make up our community. This is not a half-baked community of public safety practitioners and experts. We are mighty. And we are many.

For many of us who have had our humanity degraded, our bodies mishandled, our most sacred parts violently abused under the guise of the law, there is a pain that never leaves. A shame and anger that rarely subsides. The ever-present question echoes in our mind, why did this happen to me? And why was no one held responsible? And many of us who show up in the streets to protest, arrive with scarred bodies and unresolved trauma, still mourning and enraged that in almost every case, the very person who harmed us, is still hired as a police officer in our communities, with no accountability or remorse. Our protest is a cathartic release and it is righteous and sacred. But it is not enough. The question for many of us in this room today and across the country is "How can we re-train our ears to hear the cries of the unheard not solely

as rage, but as deep guttural cries of trauma that contextualize and fuel our sense of urgency to end centuries long, arbitrary acts of violence by the state?”

Our country must do the hard but necessary work to uncouple itself from a 300 yearlong legacy of anti-black racism and violence, essentialized in the system of policing at work today. And on this Juneteenth day, when we memorialize the news of emancipation arriving to the enslaved Africans in Texas, how could we ask for anything less than freedom from this system of policing? This is what abolition points to. When many of us say abolish the police we are not saying abolish public safety. We are saying let’s formally bring to an end this current system of policing; a system all too willing to sacrifice dark skin bodies, native bodies, trans bodies, women’s bodies, male bodies, on an altar of a false sense of safety. Reasonable people can debate the how we achieve public safety, but all of us should agree this system of policing cannot continue at the cost of black lives and black safety and security!

The good news is we need not sacrifice public safety to end this system of policing. Nor must we start from scratch to reimagine a 21st century public safety system. For the past 20 years, I’ve been immersed in the work of public safety at the intersection of ending gun violence and mass incarceration. My journey as a survivor, faith leader, practitioner, organizer and national leader have taught me that victims and perpetrators are often interchangeable, and their networks of violence are largely concentrated and overpoliced. Particularly when it comes to violent crime, research from the Prison Policy Initiative tells us only 5% of all arrests are for violent crimes. Our experiences, reinforced by scholarship from the National Network of Safe Communities, tells us less than 1/2 of 1% of a city’s population drives as much as 60% of gun related shootings and homicides. In Oakland, internal police department data demonstrated how 90% of its policing services was actually focused on less than 10% of the population. 5%. Less than half of 1%. 90% focused on less than 10%. These trends have taught us over and over again in cities where violence has been stubborn, we can reduce violence without sending more black and brown loved ones to jail. And this wisdom is held by a robust network of practitioners, public safety experts and evidence-based strategists who have been refining this sector for the last 30 years, for such a time as this.

We can treat gun violence as a public health issue, all the while achieving historic reductions in firearm offenses between neighbors without sending more black and brown loved ones to jail and prison. There are experts and architects of this sector like Erica Ford in New York City, Chico Tillman in Chicago, Jeff Brown in Boston, Reygan Harmon in Oakland, Devonne Bogan in Richmond, Jose Osuna in Los Angeles, Susan Lee in Chicago, Antonio Cediell in Florida, Ben McBride in Oakland, and so many more who wake up every day living in these intersections, achieving peace without weapons or state sanctioned violence. And the documented success in cities like Oakland, Stockton, Camden, New York, Boston and Los Angeles can be beacons of light and hope to us. For there, we’ve seen these strategies cut violence by 30%-70% within 18-24 months. These strategies save lives, save dollars and accelerate the catalyzing of a reimagination of public safety among elected officials, community members and law enforcement leadership around the country.

Such gun violence reduction strategies, tried and true across the breadth of this country are cheaper and more successful than sprawling police departments that are unaccountable and resistant to almost every meaningful reform brought to bear within it. The hidden cost of this resistance to accountability and reform is paid by local taxpayers through police lawsuits and settlements that cost over \$300M dollars per year! A new system of policing, uncoupled from anti-black racism would save us hundreds of millions of dollars in lawsuits per year, that can be invested in gun violence reduction practitioners, urban schools, culturally competent mental health services, public health nurses, healers in our communities, food distributions and housing programs. All the components that keep us safe!

Shrinking the footprint of the police budget for the sole purposes of reinvesting these tax dollars in proven community-based safety and intervention programs is a recipe for success and not failure. Can you imagine how different our communities and our country would look if we unleashed hundreds of thousands of public health nurses, addiction counselors and healers in the 80s and 90s rather than more cops? We can still right that wrong today!

It is worth saying, I do not believe the average police officer is a bad person. I have family members and loved ones who serve with honor and distinction. I do mean to say the culture of policing turns too many good people into bad police officers. And we must reckon with this ugly truth: in 300 years of policing, we have not reached a national consensus that you cannot be a racist and be a cop! We have not agreed that socializing or championing the causes of white supremacist groups, neo-nazis, the alt-right and the KKK are disqualifiers for those who would police communities comprised of human beings these same groups believe are inferior to them. We must purge our departments across the country of racist cops. For it is them who maintain the current culture and form of policing, tied to an unbroken timeline of 300 years of anti-black sensibilities, racism and legalized violence. To preserve the humanity of people who are public safety servants, and save the lives of black men, women and queer and gender nonconforming loved ones being harmed by this form of policing, we need to transition from this current form into a new public safety system that centers the most vulnerable among us.

As I close, I know many members of Congress are uncomfortable with the language of defund the police as its been defined by many as a zero-sum gain. May I suggest we think of this very differently. Because after decades of over investment in failed systems, all the people are asking for is a refund.

Refund our tax dollars so we can put it into schools

Refund our tax dollars so we can hire public health violence interrupters

Refund our tax dollars so we can hire mental health and healers in our schools

Refund our tax dollars so we can prioritize housing the homeless and feeding the hungry.

And with the budget that remains, let us reconstruct a new public safety system of guardians,

protectors, healers and peacemakers. Let's radically reduce the number of individuals who carry firearms into nonviolent encounters with citizens.

Towards the end of his life, James Baldwin asked "What is it that you wanted me to reconcile myself to? I was born here more than 60 years ago. I'm not going to live another 60 years, you always told me that it's going to take time. It's taking my father's time, my mother's time, my uncle's time, my brother's and sister's time, my nieces' and my nephews' time. How much time do you want for your progress?"

The fierce urgency of now compels me to ask you how much time do you want for your progress. We must make choices. I am glad to see the Justice in Policing Act as a small piece of a much more comprehensive approach to reimagining public safety in America. We want investments in mental health and healers. We want our tax dollars to pay for violence interrupters. We want our tax dollars to pay for food programs. We want our tax dollars to pay for teachers and public health nurses and drug and alcohol counselors. We don't want two hundred more years of policing systems that have proven to not keep us safe. We want justice and we want it now!

What is at stake are not merely budgets or politics. It is Dignity. Life. Our Sense of Belonging to one another. Our shared Humanity. In this moment, courage fused with imagination can usher in what Shirley Chisholm declared, "A Bloodless Revolution", that brings to an end, centuries of uninterrupted trauma visited upon the bodies, the spirit and the souls of black Americans. In this season, you can do what legislators from the previous 300 years have been unable to do. If guided by a holy imagination, this moment need not remain an international scandal and a national crisis. Our collective work can be seen as a third reconstruction, continuing the centuries long work of enslaved Africans and moral centered citizens efforts to create a more perfect union, where all are free. We can forge a new identity with those who together, share a blood soaked past and an unwritten future. Yes together, we can make history. This is the sacred work of the moment. This is the moral mandate of our time. May our progeny look back on our times and say, to paraphrase Langston Hughes, these are the days when America became America for the many who have never had America be America for them.

Humbly Submitted,

Pastor Michael T. McBride
The Way Church, Berkeley, Lead Pastor
LIVE FREE USA, National Director
Black Church PAC, Co-Founder
6440 Buena Ventura Ave
Oakland, CA 94605
pastormike@thewayberkeley.com
@impastormike