



What We Can Learn from White Terror in 2020

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It is not safe to go to work. *We shut down offices.*

It is not safe to go to school. *We shut down schools.*

It is not safe to go to houses of worship. *We shut down houses of worship.*

It is not safe to go to the mall. *We shut down malls and shops.*

It is not safe to go to restaurants. *We shut down restaurants.*

It is not safe to go play in the park. *We shut down parks.*

And the list goes on.

On Shutting Things Down

Whites do not often have to experience this level of fear. The nation-state is organized to keep us safe. Now the nation-state is going all out to fight this terror of Covid-19: this disease that can kill us for going about our business. This disease that can even follow us into our homes.

But what of George Floyd's right to go about his business? Or Ahmaud Arbery's? What of Breonna Taylor's safety in her home? Or Atatiana Jefferson's? We cannot forget that none of these things *have ever been safe* for Blacks in our country. Blacks are killed (or arrested or harassed) with stunning regularity in all of these settings.

We need to walk this out. *We need to understand that when white lives are at risk, we stop everything. And when black lives are at risk, we stop nothing.*

And the amazing thing is, to get a handle on Covid-19, we have shut down dozens of institutions—schools, courthouses, churches, hotels, office buildings, city halls, sports leagues, etc., etc.. But to drastically reduce the risk of death for black people in all of these settings (well beyond Covid-19), we only need to shut down one institution: the injustice system.

Let's start by using what we've learned from Covid-19. Shutting down massive elements of everyday life is extremely difficult, but it's more possible than we had ever imagined. With the will, we are making a way. (Or many ways.) So let's try shutting down policing.

To keep down the panic of the police and those of us who benefit from them, we will do stuff like we did at the beginning of the Covid-19 shutdown. We'll say "This will last about 2 weeks, or 2 months, or 2 years, until we flatten the curve on killing black people". We'll say "This will be hard on the economy, but we have to put the lives of people first." And we'll say, "Sure, it will be a rocky transition, but we will learn new strategies. And it could change the future of policing." And it can.

Indeed, those of us who care about social justice are already demanding that we don't return to the business-as-usual that got us here. People are demanding changes in eviction law, unemployment rules, health access, small business loan programs and more. Let us add to this new arrangements for community-led public safety that makes us all safer and more connected.

Alternatives to Police

Our colleague Steph Guilloud from Project South in Atlanta has forwarded this useful list of ways to activate community-led public safety as an alternative to policing.

First, stop calling the police.

Map our neighborhoods. We need to know our assets, including our people, our resources, and our access points. We need to know who can cook, or fix things, or talk to someone who needs help. We need to know who is vulnerable to health issues, lack of transportation, unemployment in this crisis, and shortage of basic needs. We need to know how to move effectively in our communities, where vulnerable places are and where safe zones could be identified.

Create safety networks in our neighborhoods. We learned and practiced social distancing pretty quickly. What if we learned and practiced social protection? We do not walk any street alone. We accompany each other when requested. We provide a safety kit to our neighbors with masks, sanitizer, supplies, and resources.

Organize regular gatherings. We need regular check in opportunities for people to meet each other and discuss issues that come up. That could look like monthly zoom calls or block parties with physical distancing. We need spaces to get to know each other and learn about our communities.

Shut down social media surveillance. Many neighborhoods experiencing gentrification have social media loops that target and surveil Black people. Create new protocols and guidelines that reject overt and covert racism on these platforms.

Create or support a mental health hotline that people can call for themselves, a loved one, or a stranger that will allow support to happen without criminalization and danger.

Create or support existing spaces for sanctuary, harm reduction, and basic wellness supports.

Re-invest money saved from policing and jails. If we stop the injustice system, we will have billions of dollars to redirect into the health, vibrancy and safety of our communities. Here are some ideas for where to invest:

- Trauma-informed and culturally relevant mental health support.
- High quality public schools, parks, public art, and libraries.
- Affordable housing that is welcoming, accessible and life-enhancing.
- Public transportation that gets people to jobs, school and home.
- Living wage for all workers.

Addressing the Pandemic of Black Murder

We know these are not ideas that can happen overnight. To some they may seem idealistic or far-fetched. But we need look no further back than February to know that we would not have believed all the changes that have taken place over the past few months.

When white lives are at risk, we stop everything.

If we consider the pandemic of Black murder with the same seriousness as we do the pandemic of Covid-19, we can start to address it with the scale and urgency it deserves. The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed how we are all connected: how we can affect one another so easily and spread a disease across borders, cultures, and vast geographies. Let us now expose how we can also spread resistance, care, and safety across all that space. We are connected not by our weaknesses but by our collective strength.

Let us demonstrate that when black lives are at risk, we will stop everything.