

Legislators Miss the Mark with Police Reform



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(Photo by Spenser on Unsplash)

Police reform requires starting over from the ground up. Anything less is just an adhesive bandage on a gaping, hemorrhaging, pus-filled wound.

In response to the massive protests against police brutality and cops murdering BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), the Oregon State House of Representatives, along with many other jurisdictions, has proposed more than half a dozen bills intended to address the egregiously violent behavior by so-called “peace” officers.

The biggest problem with these types of legislation and/or policies is that they’re built on the false premises that law enforcement officers obey the law and that if they just get more training their innate brutality and already criminal behavior will end. But police officers only enforce laws. **They do not obey them.**

- Portland Police Bureau officers repeatedly **violated** a court order forbidding them from shooting impact munitions at nonviolent protesters. They are still shooting impact munitions at nonviolent protesters. They were instructed by Mayor Edward Tevis “Ted” Wheeler, who is also the Portland Police Commissioner, not to use tear gas. They continue to use tear gas.
- Seattle Police violated a court order limiting the department’s use of pepper spray and blast balls during

Black Lives Matter protests **again** and **again** and **again**.

- **Lethal chokeholds are still used**, repeatedly, to kill and incapacitate Black people, including **teenagers**, even when **states pass legislation forbidding them**, even when **police departments** adopt policies prohibiting their use.
- Police routinely violate **department policies** to kill and maim civilians, especially BIPOC, and often face minimal, if any, penalties.

And these are just a few examples. You cannot reform an **historically white supremacist** institution by requiring that the Department of Public Safety Standards and Training adopt rules (**House Bill 2932**) prohibiting police and reserve officers from participating in white supremacist and militant groups and demonstrating overt and explicit expressions of racism. This still allows for surreptitious and cryptic expressions of racism, including racial profiling. Plus, there's nothing in that bill to keep bullies, domestic violence perpetrators, sexual offenders, murderers, etc. off the police forces where they now serve. Legislation to require psychological screening creates no meaningful change if it does not specify any traits, besides racism, that would prevent someone from being certified as a police officer.

In addition, each and every single one of the bills before the Oregon House Judiciary Subcommittee On Equitable Policing include the words "except" or "unless" (with the exception of HB 2936, which only directs rules to be written and I guarantee those rules will include enough "except" and "unless" to make them toothless).

Cops lie. They are trained **to lie**. They are legally allowed to **lie** under some circumstances. And they do so by **default**. They enjoy **lying**. They will lie to justify their violations of any legislation passed that includes an "except" or an "unless." They will memorize those exceptions and will always have their justifications ready, the same way they now claim that children with toy guns, young men with cell phones, and protesters with umbrellas and shields are threatening them. Civilians with no weapons are so menacing, according to police, that, despite body armor and guns, cops are *always* in fear for their lives.

Some of the bills under consideration in Oregon only give lip service to reform. For example, if **House Bill 2932** passes "The Oregon Criminal Justice Commission shall establish a statewide database of reports of the use of physical force by peace officers and corrections officers. The database must be searchable and available to the public. The commission shall **substitute an individual randomized number for an officer's certification number.**" [emphasis mine]

Portland Police discovered this type of freedom from accountability last summer when they removed their badge numbers and names from their uniforms so they could not be identified in the videos showing them beating, shooting, and gassing protesters, throwing them onto the ground, and piling on top of them. What is the point of collecting information about violent officers if they cannot be identified?

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Despite the ineffectiveness of the proposed legislation, the Oregon Coalition of Police and Sheriffs and the Portland Police Association (PPA)—the organization representing rank-and-file officers with the Portland Police Bureau (PPB)—**opposed the bills**, calling them “anti-police” and raising concerns that a database, which does not identify offending officers, could “dangerously” help the public obtain their personal information. Although police routinely **invade** and/or **fire guns** into civilians’ homes, often under false pretenses or using erroneous information, there are no documented cases of civilians attacking police in their own homes unless they were already known to each other. Moreover, police routinely plaster photos of those who are arrested but have been neither tried nor convicted of a crime all over the Internet and social media and often list those individuals’ birthdates, ages, and sometimes even addresses.

And then, of course, there is **House Bill 2943** which will make it even more difficult to discipline repeat offenders, police officers who even prosecutors do not trust to give unbiased or honest testimony. By not allowing departments to use evidence that law enforcement officers cannot be trusted, HB 2943 protects those offending officers from disciplinary actions when they kill, maim, and otherwise brutalize civilians.

Even though they won’t acknowledge it, legislators know the police are murderous bullies and abusers. Otherwise, there would be no need for **House Bill 2931** which requires that someone who arrests another person “ensure arrested person receives medical assessment.” If cops had any morals, if they cared one whit about the people they claim to “serve and protect,” that bill would be considered a waste of paper and time. But it is necessary. Because the same police who run crying to seek medical attention when they **bruise their knuckles** beating up a “suspect” or pull a muscle dragging someone across the pavement, routinely keep those they have critically injured in handcuffs, block medics from helping police brutality victims, and book people into jail with broken bones, severe contusions, concussions, cuts, and more serious injuries.

As someone who has studied and written about police brutality and the militarization of police across the country for decades, I maintain that abolishing police departments as they currently exist is the only way to “reform” the police. There is no way to reform a culture that finds mowing people down with **Sports Utility Vehicles**,* running **bicycles*** over people in the street, **shooting men in the back**,* **slamming teenagers*** onto concrete, etc. acceptable. [*Content Warning: extreme police violence]

Unlike how they are portrayed in television and movies, real life cops do not prevent or solve crimes. They show up after a “crime” has been committed, ask for the public’s help and/or tap into your business/personal surveillance video to figure out who did it, and then lie to get confessions/convictions. And much of what they consider “crime” (except that involving bodily harm) was created by **laws written** to continue slavery based on the wording of the **Thirteenth Amendment** to the U.S. Constitution (and have precedence in imprisoning uppity peasantry).

We must start over from the ground up with organizations that are designed to actually protect the safety of all—including BIPOC, LBGTQ+, immigrants, people with disabilities and/or mental illness, those who do not speak English, etc.—rather than brutalize them. Anything less is just an adhesive bandage on a gaping, hemorrhaging, pus-filled wound.



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F.I. Goldhaber's words capture people, places, and politics with a photographer's eye and a poet's soul. As a reporter, editor, business writer, and marketing communications consultant, they produced news stories, feature articles, editorial columns, and reviews for newspapers, corporations, governments, and non-profits in five states. Now paper, electronic, and audio magazines, books, newspapers, calendars, broadsides, and street signs display their poetry, fiction, and essays.

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