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# Establish a Truth & Reconciliation Commission to Change Policing [1]

*Note from the CPD Blog Manager: This piece was originally published by the San Diego Tribune here. Author Joel Day is a CPD Research Fellow whose project, "Peace and Security in the City: Local Leadership in Global Governance," evaluates how cities are creating a global epistemic community of practice and norm elaboration on environmental, food, health, political and other everyday forms of security.*

To solve deep systemic racism, our society needs more than paper reforms. Calls to defund and abolish the police speak to upending a system that is built on assumed and unspoken oppressions and histories of predation. We must address police brutality in the context of systemic generational injustice. Meaningful change doesn't come without education, empathy and public recognition of injustice, which is much more complex than a police budget debate.

## *The path forward may be complicated, but we need not walk it alone. More than 40 countries around the world have addressed their histories of political violence, racial oppression and civil war with public Commissions of Truth and Reconciliation.*

Truth and Reconciliation Commissions provide a mechanism to both address interpersonal wrongs and publicly discuss underlying genealogies of collective trauma. Such commissions investigate, record and surface wrongs, and then recommend pathways forward for never repeating the crimes of the past. To truly create change in culture, America should replicate the models provided around the world.

The examples of such commissions abound: Colombia's 2016 peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) stipulated the establishment of a Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-repetition. Canada created a commission to address the lineage of human rights abuses of indigenous communities—something the United States must also take seriously. Post-war Sierra Leone, post-Pinochet Chile, and, most famously, post-apartheid South Africa, provide examples of a society recognizing systemic failure and engaging in a public process of healing and visioning for the future.

In each case, the commission process focused on lifting up the stories of marginalized communities while educating the country on political violence cases. Some of these tribunals also gave recommendations for prosecution, reparations and institutional reforms.

While America's original sin of slavery spurred a bloody civil war, our country has never grappled openly with the systems of oppression that were allowed to continue unabated—systems that still govern our public policy today.

Slavery, which gave way to Jim Crow, then became written into the zoning and building codes in all American cites. Redlining laws, which backed mortgages for homes in White neighborhoods, fully segregated our cities. The policy evolved into the current practice of "single family zoning" that allows majority White communities lower densities and more amenities than minority neighborhoods.

Such zoning decisions concentrate Black and Brown bodies in urban ghettos, while cities import heavily militarized law enforcement, who live outside those areas, to police communities they know nothing about.

Indeed, the segregation of law enforcement and minorities—officers not living in the communities they police—is endemic to almost every American city. Racial segregation isn't a historical artifact—it remains the cornerstone of the American experience and recognizing this truth can put us on a pathway to healing.

A Truth and Reconciliation Commission must begin by investigating a simple question: "Why do we, as a country, value Black bodies so much less than White ones?" For instance, contrast two interactions with police: Walter Scott, an unarmed Black man, was fatally shot in the back in South Carolina after being stopped for a non-working taillight in 2015. Just miles away, a couple months later, after being arrested for killing nine people in Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal church, Dylann Roof, a young White supremacist, was given Burger King by the police as they politely questioned him.

Uncovering the truth of historical bias and injustice is the first step. These commissions are also built around reconciliation. Reconciliation comes from victims and perpetrators jointly acknowledging the past, creating healing through recognition and opportunity for repentance and reparation. The process creates space for victims of generational injustice to share their stories and provide a grounding narrative for who we want to be as a society going forward.

Finally, long-term justice means endowing a commission with the mandate to provide recommendations to prevent a recurrence of abuse. De-naturalizing taken-for-granted policies like single-family zoning should give way to removing barriers for communities of color and re-engineering police departments to respond to crime, not police Black communities like an occupying force.

Dismantling racial injustice brick by brick requires understanding its foundation. At the foundation of policing in America are deep racial sins that criminalize people of color. Defunding the police can be done with across-the-board cuts, but a better alternative is to directly link the cure to the deeper illness. Recognizing the injustices of redlining and ongoing segregation might cause us to rethink how cities police particular neighborhoods and not others. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission in America—at the federal level, or within our cities—is necessary to break down government unresponsiveness and social denial.

Our country must fully grapple with how modern policing has been used to protect a system grounded in unnamed trauma. The place to start systemic change is with a robust truth and reconciliation process.

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