

Policing and Resistance in the U.S.

An incomplete timeline compiled by the Chicago Prison-Industrial Complex Teaching Collective and *Chain Reaction: Alternatives to Calling Police*, initiatives of Project NIA

Author's note: This timeline is designed as a tool for popular education about the history of policing and resistance to policing in the U.S. It is very incomplete and ideally its use will integrate the knowledge of workshop or training participants. We have loosely divided it into trends and themes in order to make it more useable in a brief interactive activity; there is not usually time to touch on all the specific points we have even in this limited timeline. There is also a bit of a focus on Chicago; every city could probably have its own timeline of policing. We hope you will add to it and correct it as you feel fit, drawing on the wisdom of the people you are working with.

1. Colonization and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

Resistance: Armed resistance, including revolutions like that in Haiti, cultural survival

Ca. 1100s: Origins of the “Shire Reeve” or Sheriff in England. Sheriffs were representatives of the crown who sat in on local affairs to make sure laws were actually being enforced (previously, localities had relied on collective enforcement efforts of citizens; the Sheriff’s role thus extended the power of the crown). These unpopular figures were also tax collectors, at least initially; later forms included coroner, justice of the peace, and constable.

1100s-1800s: Use of “night watches” in Europe and its colonies: civilian groups of men required by law to patrol the streets at night. They are unpaid, often unwilling, and “frequently drunk.”

1492: Colonization of the Americas by Europeans begins; brutal militia force is a routine part of land-grabbing. Later, Indigenous people are forced into working for colonizers in mines and agriculture.

1600s-1700s: Establishment of trans-Atlantic slave trade expands the use of force and control over people’s bodies. Slavery becomes an integral part of economic systems of the Americas.

1500s-1800s: Colonial forces import European justice systems to what is now the U.S., including sheriffs, constables, and night watches. They are unpopular entities whose jobs include taxing and elections alongside law enforcement.

2. Militias, Patrols, and White Supremacist Consolidation of Power

Resistance: Armed resistance, escape and subversion, cultural survival

1680s: South Carolina passes a law that allows any white person to capture and punish a runaway slave. In 1690 a law passes that *requires* whites to act in this role. Slavery and white supremacy are so fully institutionalized in the American South that “White supremacy served in lieu of a police force.”

1700s-1800s: London Watch is reformed to resemble a modern police department: pay, round-the-clock hours, and hierarchical command are established. As in the U.S., establishment of actual “police departments” is based on growth in property crimes.

1703: Boston passes a curfew law for all Black and Indigenous people, establishing race as a defining criteria in law enforcement in the new colonies. The legal importance of race continues even after the northern colonies reduce and eventually eliminate slavery.

1776: Formation of a nation-state in U.S. colonies; national militia unifies in effort to remove the British and a national constitution provides for maintenance of military and National Guard.

1700s onwards: Southern cities such as Charleston, Savannah, New Orleans, and Mobile form paramilitary groups tasked with the control of enslaved people, with the goal of preventing and repressing rebellion. Slave patrols and militias often work together. In the U.S., these organized patrols are the first proper antecedents to “modern” police forces.

Early 1800s: Pass laws in several Southern states require all Black people to carry passes and allow for arrest of any Black person without a pass, regardless of their status.

Mid-1800s: Police in the U.S. coalesce into modern police forces. Previous law enforcement models such as guards, watchmen, militias and slave patrols merge into city-run, 24-hour police.

3. Emancipation and Reconstruction

Resistance: Building Black political power, suffrage, legal reforms and increased accountability, armed resistance

1863: Emancipation of enslaved people in the U.S. Emancipation is followed immediately by passage of laws controlling Black people’s public movement and work. Emancipation also stipulates that slave labor may continue for those convicted of a crime, creating an incentive for whites in power to arrest Black people in order to exploit their labor and prevent their entry into wage labor and political power (13th Amendment).

1860s-70s: Reconstruction and a rapid gain of political power by Blacks in the south is met with extreme legal and extralegal backlash, including violent vigilante and militia action against Black people attempting to vote or run for office. Southern “law enforcement” is often indistinguishable from white supremacist vigilante groups.

1872: First Black police officer in Chicago

1885: In New Orleans following a levee workers’ strike, the mayor suggests to police to arrest any Black man who “did not want to work.”

Late 1800s: Increased urbanization leads to decreases in serious crimes, but increase in elite fears of working-class rebellion. “The crisis of the time was not one of law,” writes Kristian Williams, “but of order—specifically the order required by the new industrial economy and the Protestant moralism that supplied, in large part, its ideological expression.”

1886: Haymarket Riot. After an Anarchist throws a bomb at police at a workers rally in Haymarket square in Chicago, police riot against demonstrators, killing at least a dozen. Seven police are also killed. Raids on activist community ensue, and ultimately 8 men are convicted as examples. Four of them are murdered by execution.

4. Progressive Era: Reform and Bureaucratization to Protect Elite Interests

Resistance: Armed resistance, growth of urban social movements, immigrant and labor union organizing, reforms

1890-1930: Progressive Era reforms lead to “kinder, gentler” system and reforms of local corruption in city governments. Police departments become more disciplined and hierarchical as a

result. Progressive reforms also lead to innovations like the probation and parole systems, legalizing bureaucratic state intrusion into poor people's homes. Urban professional social services and public housing are also invented, often working in tandem with these new reformed government systems such as child welfare and the juvenile courts.

1900-1940: Formation of state police forces begins as a response to union actions. Prior to state police, large corporations had employed their own private forces. Reformists saw this as unsavory while corporations saw it as expensive. State Troopers are the solution.

1912: Lawrence Textile Strike (Bread and Roses). This notorious strike over the work week and pay for textile workers in Massachusetts leads to heavy police repression and the murder of strikers, many of whom are immigrants and most of whom are women.

1919: Chicago Race Riot. The riot begins when a white man throws rocks at Black people on a segregated Southside beach. Black WWI veterans were active in protesting police violence.

1920s-1930s: IWW and other unions are particularly active. Police are routinely employed as a shield between unions and corporations, breaking up strikes and threatening labor organizers with violence.

5. Birth of Civil Rights Movements

Resistance: Armed resistance, non-violent tactics inspired by anti-colonial revolutions abroad, solidarity with anti-colonial movements, legal reforms, rioting

1943: Detroit Riots. Arrests of several Black people after a skirmish and a rape accusation leads to days of white rioting against Black people met with Black rioting against whites. According to Thurgood Marshall, the police "used 'persuasion' rather than firm action with white rioters, while against Negroes they used the ultimate in force: night sticks, revolvers, riot guns, sub-machine guns, and deer guns."

1940s-1950s: McCarthyism and the Red Scare. Anti-Soviet sentiment and a government-produced fear of nuclear war and Communism are rallied as a justification for blacklisting and surveillance of anyone who is a suspected Communist—a pre-cursor to "anti-terrorism" policy today.

1950s: Emergence of the Civil Rights Movement as we know it, which uses civil disobedience strategically in national campaigns. Non-violent protestors, most of them Black, are routinely met with violence.

1950s onwards: COINTELPRO, a secret FBI program, is active in monitoring and disrupting Civil Rights and Black Power activities for two decades. COINTELPRO is ultimately a key player in dismantling the radical movements for justice that emerged in this era.

6. Height of Struggle for Racial Equality and Self-Determination

Resistance: Armed resistance, Black Nationalism, LGBT and women's liberation organizing, peaceful demonstration, rioting, legal reforms

1960s-1970s: After decades of quashed attempts, police themselves are finally able to form unions. State concessions to police create further unity up and down the police hierarchy.

1961: Southern Freedom Riders met with police violence, notably in Birmingham, AL, where the riders are arrested and removed. When they return on Mothers Day of that year, Klansmen beat them while police look away.

1965: Watts Riots. Riots begin after a standard “driving while black” traffic stop in the Watts neighborhood of L.A.; police assault some bystanders and arrest some people. The crowd’s response leads to a 6-day riot in which 34 people are killed and over 1000 injured.

1966: Formation of the Black Panther Party. The Party platform includes a demand for “an immediate end to police brutality and murder of black people.”

1968: Police repression of the protests at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Although many are injured and killed, this moment is an important watershed in that police mob violence is captured on camera and viewed internationally. Even Chicago police officials are forced to admit things “got out of control.”

1969: Murder of Fred Hampton in Chicago. FBI works with Chicago police to commit premeditated murder of BPP leader Fred Hampton in his house on the West side.

1969: Stonewall Riots in New York City. After a routine raid on the Stonewall Inn by police, gay men, lesbians, and drag queens fight back against police. Rioting goes on for several nights and is the spark for the modern LGBT movement in the U.S.

7. Backlash Against Activist Movements, Control of Urban Spaces

Resistance: Armed resistance, continued non-violent resistance, rioting, struggle for political power including more Black voices within police forces and mainstream politics

1970: Kent State and Jackson State murders. Four college students at Kent State in Ohio and two college students at Jackson State in Mississippi are murdered by police during anti-war protests. The four white students’ killings are national news, while the murder of the two black protestors is downplayed by the media and historians. Both events, though tragic, help to strengthen anti-war sentiment throughout the country.

1970s: Radical Black Power movement and other groups such as the Young Lords and the Gay Liberation Front are routinely infiltrated and criminalized by police and FBI. These movements are eventually torn apart in the process, forcing activists into either more mainstream politics and tactics, or permanent incarceration and marginalization.

1971: Attica Rebellion. Men locked up in Attica prison in New York State stage a massive rebellion in response to deplorable conditions and violent treatment by guards. The Black Panthers support the Attica prisoners in advancing a list of demands, but the immediate protest ends in a massacre of prisoners by state police called in to quell the rebellion.

1972: Chicago Police Torture begins. Under the leadership of Police Commander Jon Burge, at least 135 African-American men and women are tortured by Chicago Police between 1972 and 1991. By the time the issue is brought to the surface, the statute of limitations is up for a torture trial.

1979/1980: Miami Riots. The police murder a Black salesman named Arthur McDuffie after a chase. When an all-white jury in Tampa acquits three officers, crowds riot in Miami. Seventeen are killed and nearly 500 injured.

8. New Conservatism and the Drug War

Resistance: Media and legal campaigns to expose corruption and racism, rioting, peaceful demonstration

1980s: “Drug War” begins at Reagan’s urging, setting up urban communities of color as both victims and perpetrators in an ongoing process of criminalization. Crack-cocaine shows up in these communities while the feds look away.

Late 1980s: ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) begins to use civil disobedience to draw attention to the growing AIDS crisis and demand government support for research and aid to victims. Police suppress protests, but ACT-UP is successful in getting AIDS on the map as a social justice issue.

9. Reforms and Expansion of the PIC

Resistance: Organizing against zero tolerance and racial profiling; rioting

1990: Police and FBI set up “Earth First” activists Judi Bari and Darryl Cherney to make them look like terrorists. The two are acquitted, and in 2002 a jury awards them \$4.4 million in damages for violation of their civil rights.

1990s: Passage of “Zero Tolerance” policy, racial profiling laws like Prop 21, “Three Strikes Law” and increasingly extreme enforcement of drug laws support massive growth of PIC. Further criminalization of poverty and of young people of color works to move many of the most economically marginalized into the prison system.

1990s-2000s: Activism to support the passage of hate crimes laws brings LGBT movements into the business of advocating for heavier policing and stricter sentencing. This strategy widens the divide in LGBT movements between those who are routinely victims of policing and incarceration and those who are not.

1990s: Racial profiling on the map. Years of research and activism leads to the popularization of the term “racial profiling” to describe police practices targeting people of color. Police departments are forced to see racial profiling as an issue, and in some cases address the issue through policy changes (though not always in practice).

1996: Formation of the Oct 22nd Coalition to Stop Police Brutality, Repression and the Criminalization of a Generation. A broad coalition against police repression establishes a yearly day of protest on October 22, which continues to this day.

1990s-2000s: “Community Policing” model emerges around the country, encouraging homeowners, business owners, and local police to unify efforts to police the streets. This process is closely tied with urban gentrification, and “in practice certain populations generally get counted among the problems to be solved rather than the community to be involved” (Williams).

1991: Rodney King is beaten by L.A.P.D. after being pulled over for reckless driving. The beating is caught on video and broadcast internationally.

1992: Rodney King verdict and L.A. Riots. Rioting begins in the streets of LA after the police implicated in the Rodney King beating are acquitted despite videotaped evidence.

1997: Abner Louima is beaten and sexually assaulted by New York City Police following a disorderly conduct arrest. Police officer Justin Volpe uses a toilet plunger to rape Louima while he is hand-cuffed in a police precinct. When Louima requires hospitalization, police claim the injuries are a result of consensual gay sexual practices.

1999: Murder of Amadou Diallo by New York City Police. Diallo is shot 19 times after reaching for his wallet to show police his ID.

1999: WTO Protests in Seattle. Over 40,000 protestors take to the streets to criticize the World Trade Organization and global imperialism; the ensuing police riot leads to several days of violence against protestors that is publicized around the world.

10. Backlash Against Immigrants, Birth of New Movements

Resistance: This is where you come in. Share your stories!

2001: Patriot Act. Following the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, a federal law is hastily passed that drastically increases the powers of surveillance and profiling for the state.

2009: Murder of Oscar Grant by Bay Area Rapid Transit police. Oscar Grant, a young black man, is shot in the back several times by police on a train platform on New Year's Day. The murder is caught on cell phone video and incites massive protests, followed by accusations and fear-mongering by police claiming violent rioting by Black activists and their allies (in fact, while some present at the protests destroyed property, the majority of the violence was by police).

2010: Passage of Arizona's SB-1070 is the first in a rash of draconian anti-immigrant laws that task local police with immigration enforcement and formalize racial profiling by police and, in Alabama, even by school officials. The events lead to the strengthening of black/brown coalitions against policing and racial profiling.

2010: Jon Burge is convicted in Chicago for lying under oath about police torture cases.

2011: New Orleans police are convicted in Danziger bridge trial. Five current and former New Orleans Police Officers are convicted of civil rights violations for the brutal murders of civilians attempting to escape New Orleans via the Danziger bridge during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The U.S. Justice Department also targets New Orleans police for widespread brutality, corruption, and discrimination.

Selected sources used for this timeline:

Kristian Williams. *Our Enemies In Blue: Police and Power in America*. Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2007.

Christian Parenti. *The Soft Cage: Surveillance in America from Slavery to the War on Terror*. New York: Basic Books, 2003.

<http://www.october22.org/HistoryBackground.html>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AIDS_Coalition_to_Unleash_Power#Actions

<http://humanrights.uchicago.edu/chicagotorture/>

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/08/05/katrina-danziger-bridge-katrina-shooting-verdict_n_919502.html

http://www.may41970.com/Jackson%20State/jackson_state_may_1970.htm