

**NYU****ROBERT F. WAGNER GRADUATE  
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC SERVICE****URPL-GP 4666**

# **Topics in Urban Studies: The Uprising for Racial Justice Fall 2021**

## **Instructor Information**

- Errol Louis
- Email el3680@nyu.edu

## **Course Information**

- Class Meeting Times: Mondays, 10 am – 11:40 am, 11/01/2021 -- 12/14/2021
- Class Location: 194 Mercer Street, Room 305

## **Course Overview**

### **Week 1: A Movement or A Moment?**

With a rarely seen urgency, politicians at every level of government, from coast to coast, are rapidly trying to turn the tumultuous national protests against police brutality -- sparked by the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis -- into new laws, policies and political alliances. American law enforcement is changing before our very eyes.

But this moment comes with some big caveats that cry out for further research and exploration:

1. Not all reforms are equal. Some proposed changes are basic and necessary, like banning chokeholds, requiring anti-bias training and mandating the use of body-worn cameras. The assumption behind such changes is that cops need more oversight and training to better accomplish an essentially unchanged mission.
2. A deeper transformation is signaled by a growing consensus that New York and other big cities should not send cops as first responders to deal with nonviolent people who are

homeless or have mental illness, or children acting out in school or on street corners. In some cases -- including under the provocative and misleading “defund the police” moniker, funds are being diverted to public and private agencies that deal with housing, mental health, job training, youth recreation and the like.

3. A head-spinning number of these procedural laws and policies are being introduced, approved and implemented, in some cases with little or no debate. Major changes are being proposed and implemented with scant solid research to back it.
4. Social movements give rise to equally potent counter-movements. The Black Lives Matter movement has provoked a [grassroots, pro-police movement](#) complete with its own [Thin Blue Line flag](#). The success of the counter-movement has been aided by the decentralized, “open source” philosophy of Black Lives Matter, which has been open to mistakes, misappropriation and misuse by people motivated by ignorance, greed and bad faith.

This course will examine several of the most prominent and promising reform proposals to flesh out what works and what doesn’t.

#### Readings

- [Did Last Summer’s Black Lives Matter Protests Change Anything?](#)
- [Head-spinning changes on policing raise key question](#)
- [Gallup: Optimism About Black Americans' Opportunities in US Falls](#)
- [Judge: Black Lives Matter Movement Is ‘Not An Entity Capable Of Being Sued’](#)
- [Movement for Black Lives: Feds targeted BLM protesters](#)
- [Black Lives Matter in Europe: What remains of the movement?](#)

#### Week 2: How Many People Are Killed By Police?

More than 20 years ago, Congress approved a law, the [Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994](#), signed by President Bill Clinton, that requires the federal Justice Department to collect data on deaths caused by police. The law has never truly been implemented, leaving us with patchy information about particular episodes rather than a comprehensive sense of how race and policing play out in America.

As then-FBI Director James Comey noted in 2015: "It is unacceptable that The Washington Post and the Guardian newspaper from the U.K. are becoming the lead source of information about violent encounters between police and civilians. That is not good for anybody."

Scholars, activists and the media have filled the gap, creating dashboards and databases that put the number of killings at about 1,000 per year.

Why can't we do better?

#### Readings

- [End stonewalling on shootings by cops \(Opinion\)](#)

- [Eyes wide shut on killings by cops: The press has stepped up where the federal government has failed miserably](#)
- [Police Brutality: A Backstory](#)
- [Four years in a row, police nationwide fatally shoot nearly 1,000 people](#)
- [Blacks more than twice as likely to be killed by cops: study](#)
- [LA sheriff is stonewalling inspector general](#)
- [Some autopsies remain secret for years. Families of those killed by police want that changed](#)
- [DC police misconduct lawsuits: Settlements reveal painful interactions](#)

## Databases

- [Fatal Encounters – A step toward creating an impartial, comprehensive and searchable national database of people killed during interactions with police.](#)
- [Police Use of Force Project](#)
- [The Counted: tracking people killed by police in the United States | US News](#)
- [Mapping Police Violence](#)

## Week 3: The Body Camera Conundrum

In New York and other major cities from coast to coast, body-worn cameras have been implemented as a reform measure in recent years. By 2015, [95% of major cities](#) in the United States either had begun implementing their usage or committed to phasing them in. But consider the following:

- The graphic and horrifying videos of police killings of [Eric Garner](#), [Walter Scott](#) and [George Floyd](#) were all shot by civilian bystanders, not police officers.
- Fewer than 20% of police calls involve felony crimes and only 1% of calls result in the use of physical force, meaning the vast majority of recorded interactions will not address the crucial segment of interactions the expensive cameras are supposed to capture, raising concerns about privacy.
- A [much-touted study](#) of police in Rialto, California, found that using cameras led to a 60% drop in the use of force and a 88% decline in citizen complaints in a single year. But the study covered only 54 of the Rialto department's 115 sworn police officers, who patrolled a city with just under 100,000 residents over 28 square miles -- a very small sample that was used to justify applying the policy to the NYPD.
- Some departments (including the NYPD) do not allow public access to body-worn camera footage unless it supports the department's interpretation of facts. In some cases, delays of more than a year led to release of footage that directly contradicted the "official" story about the killings of Laquan McDonald in Chicago and Kawasaki Trawick in New York. NY1 has [sued the NYPD](#) for access in a case that is now several years old.

## Readings

- [The elusive promise of police body cams - New York Daily News](#)
- [Police body cams: Will they really help?](#)

- [Cops not ready for their closeup: With body-camera policy a mess, Bratton and the NYPD should hit the pause button and write better rules](#)
- [Body Cameras And Tasers Rake In Billions For Axon, But They're No Panacea For Police Violence](#)
- [The heinous killing of Kawasaki Trawick: The NYPD and Mayor de Blasio must answer for their behavior](#)
- [Chicago politics: How justice was delayed for Laquan McDonald](#)

## **Week 4: Fees and Fines: Nickeled and Dimed to Death**

From small towns all the way up to Chicago and New York City, America operates debtors' prisons. In a shocking number of places, local governments hit citizens with a tidal wave of nuisance fees. Failure to pay means getting locked up. It's both cause and effect of the decades-long explosion of incarceration, with police transformed from peace officers into collection agents, with people treated as revenue streams instead of citizens with rights. As America discovered in Ferguson, Missouri, that is how riots begin.

- “Ferguson’s law enforcement practices are shaped by the City’s focus on revenue rather than by public safety needs,” a [105-page civil rights probe by the federal Justice Dept. determined in March 2015](#). “This emphasis on revenue has compromised the institutional character of Ferguson’s police department, contributing to a pattern of unconstitutional policing, and has also shaped its municipal court.”
- Louisiana is one of two states (the other is Ohio) that allow towns to operate so-called “[mayor’s courts](#),” which are run by local officials independently of the judicial system and are allowed to set fees, fines and penalties in traffic and misdemeanor cases with little oversight.
- An [investigation by the Washington Post](#) found that as many as 7 million people nationwide may have lost their licenses due to nonpayment of administrative fees and fines.
- In at least 41 states, inmates can be charged room and board for jail and prison stays; in at least 44 states, offenders can get billed for their own probation and parole supervision; and in 49 states, there's a fee for the electronic bracelet that monitors people when they're out of jail. When people struggle to pay those fees, they have violated probation and can go to jail. The practice is called ‘pay or stay’ — pay the fine or stay in jail.

### **Readings:**

- [How Municipalities in St. Louis County Profit From Poverty](#)
- [Selling Off Our Freedom: How Insurance Corporations Have Taken Over Our Bail System](#) (ACLU Report)
- [Cruel and Counterproductive: NY has to stop suspending driver's licenses for unpaid fees and fines](#)
- [The Fining of Black America](#)
- [Profiting from Probation: America's Offender-Funded Probation Industry](#)

## **Week 5: From Beat Cops to High-Tech Warriors: The Militarization of Policing**

Police in big-city departments have regularly had access to special weapons to deal with high-pressure situations like mass demonstration and terrorist attacks. But departments with little crime have now gained access to similar weapons, thanks to a controversial Pentagon program that transferred more than \$5 billion in surplus military equipment to local police departments since 1997.

- Congress, fully controlled by Democrats, enacted the National Defense Authorization Act of 1990 that included Section 1208, which allowed the Pentagon to “transfer to Federal and State agencies personal property of the Department of Defense, including small arms and ammunition” to quell drug violence — free of charge. It was considered part of then-President George HW Bush’s war on drugs
- The process continued during the Clinton administration, when Congress widened access to military weapons in the National Defense Authorization Act of 1997, which made transfers “suitable for use by the agencies in law enforcement activities, including counter-drug and counter-terrorism activities.”
- Just 290 law enforcement entities received \$9.4 million in equipment in 1998, three years before Al Qaeda launched its attack on the U.S. That climbed steeply after 9/11: a whopping 3,029 agencies got close to \$800 million in surplus material in 2014 under the so-called 1033 program.
- The Obama administration put limits on the military equipment transfer programs. President Trump lifted the restrictions.
- We’ve seen evidence that the free availability of armored vehicles, silencers, body armor, assault rifles and other weapons of war has lead to a proliferation of SWAT teams and military-style policing tactics, including in places like Neenah, Wisconsin (popl. 25,000), a low-crime jurisdiction that acquired an armored tank in 2014. “We’re not going to go out there as Officer Friendly with no body armor and just a handgun and say ‘Good enough,’” said the city’s police chief.

Readings:

- [The United States of SWAT?](#)
- [No, the feds shouldn’t give war machines to the police](#)
- [War Comes Home: The Excessive Militarization of American Policing \(ACLU Report\)](#)
- [“Do Not Resist” and the Crisis of Police Militarization](#)
- [MRAPs And Bayonets: What We Know About The Pentagon’s 1033 Program](#)
- [Demilitarize the Police](#)

## **Week 6: Violence, Interrupted**

Quasi-miraculous declines in street violence have been achieved in Boston, New York and other big cities through collaborations between cops, prosecutors, civic activists and churches over the last two decades. Our job is to look at the research to discover what works and what doesn’t.

- The Cure Violence program, created in Chicago, reduced shootings in the neighborhood where it operated by [67 percent its first year](#). The program has since spread to cities around the world and continues to [yield positive results](#).

- In 2019, according to [city data](#), a Baltimore project called Safe Streets mediated more than 1,800 conflicts. Though the city still suffered from a record number of homicides, Cherry Hill, once considered one of Baltimore's most violent neighborhoods, went a year without a murder, [a success many attribute to Safe Streets](#)

**Readings:**

- [California: Operation Ceasefire and the Safe Community Partnership](#)
- [Baltimore: Credible Messengers](#)
- NY: [How 'Violence Interrupters' Are Trying to Stop Gang Shootings in Brooklyn](#)
- NY: [The Plight of the Violence Interrupters](#)
- [The doctor who predicted Chicago's homicide epidemic](#)
- Chicago: [Anti-violence programs shut down as Chicago shootings climb](#)
- [Chicago Drops CeaseFire from Anti-Violence Strategy](#)
- Boston: [Donald Trump, urban violence and the struggle for Ten Point Coalition's soul](#)
- Boston: [DOJ Evaluation of the Boston Gun Project](#)

## **Week 7: Making Sense of It All**

We will review the different reform proposals and outstanding data questions to form a preliminary “best practices” summary.

## **Letter Grades**

Letter grades for the course will be assigned according to NYU Wagner’s [grading scale](#).

## **Class Policies**

This is a seven-week course and attendance is required at all class meetings. Extensions on assignments due will be granted only in case of emergency of an extraordinary circumstance. This is out of respect to those who have abided by deadlines, despite equally hectic schedules. Papers handed in late without extensions will be penalized one-third of a grade per day.

## **Academic Integrity**

Academic integrity is a vital component of Wagner and NYU. All students enrolled in this class are required to read and abide by [Wagner’s Academic Code](#). All Wagner students have already read and signed the [Wagner Academic Oath](#). Plagiarism of any form will not be tolerated and students in this class are expected to report violations to me. If any student in this class is unsure about what is expected of you and how to abide by the academic code, you should consult with me.

## **Henry and Lucy Moses Center for Student Accessibility**

Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. Please visit the [Moses Center for Students with Disabilities \(CSD\) website](#) and click the “Get Started” button. You can also call or email CSD (212-998-4980 or [mosescsd@nyu.edu](mailto:mosescsd@nyu.edu)) for information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are strongly advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

## **NYU’s Calendar Policy on Religious Holidays**

[NYU’s Calendar Policy on Religious Holidays](#) states that members of any religious group may, without penalty, absent themselves from classes when required in compliance with their religious obligations. Please notify me in advance of religious holidays that might coincide with exams to schedule mutually acceptable alternatives.

## **NYU’s Wellness Exchange**

[NYU’s Wellness Exchange](#) has extensive student health and mental health resources. A private hotline (212-443-9999) is available 24/7 that connects students with a professional who can help them address day-to-day challenges as well as other health-related concerns.