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The Legal Violence of Police Calls for Service: Toward New Community Safety Infrastructure

Abstract: In this article, we return to the scene of the police call in the United States to conceptualize the basic needs and structural forces animating calls for service and their relationship to a jurispactic form of legal violence. We do so by revisiting the perennial question of why people call the police, analyzing how conditions of organized abandonment drive the call. We follow how police reports reveal the bureaucratic and administrative legal violence of policing itself, extending police logics and power into all social problems/response, obstructing the political capacity to imagine—and demand—the most basic of nonpunitive life-supporting infrastructure. Against this dominance, many are searching for more direct and meaningful ways to respond to crisis, making the police call a contested site for municipal politics and community resources through jurisgenerative abolitionist-like practices grounded in the empirical conditions of ordinary people’s lives.

Keywords: abolition, alternative crisis response, Appalachian Mountain South, cop narratives, organized abandonment, participatory research, police call, violence

I. Introduction

Sites of spectacular rebellion in the US—Ferguson, Baltimore, Minneapolis, Memphis and Atlanta in the South—make clear how the structural abandonment of entire communities to the carceral state is configured within the singular police-citizen encounter. In the case of George Floyd, as with so many others, this violence took shape through a now notorious routine 911 call made by a convenience store worker who, following business protocol, phoned to report Floyd’s attempt to use an alleged counterfeit twenty-dollar bill to purchase cigarettes. This escalation of low-level conflict into another publicly viewable racialized killing by police exemplifies how the call for service is essential to understanding the sheer violence of carceral power and law: its institutional capaciousness, structural

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logics, psychic/affective drives, and ideological and material commitments. In keeping with the authoritative police hold on public safety and city budgets—or the perennial “call” for police—the defund efforts that arose in the wake of Floyd’s killing were countered by a push to increase police funding (Akinnibi, Holder, and Cannon 2021; Parker and Hurst 2021). Mainstream media and politicians depicted “defund” and abolitionist aims as shortsighted and underdeveloped.¹ But many were surprised yet again when “defund” and “abolish” the police campaigns were back in the aftermath of another recent wave of police killings in 2023, including the deaths of Tyre Nichols in Memphis, Tennessee, and Esteban Paez Terán or “Tortuga,” a Stop Cop City and Defend Atlanta Forest protector. These killings take shape against the stark reality that police killings are ongoing, having reached record highs in 2022 (Jones and Sawyer 2020; *Washington Post* 2023; Campaign Zero 2023).

The chronic counterinsurgent demand for more policing alongside the spectral repetition of police and gun violence in the US speaks to the racialized necropolitical power of police logics in institutional and vigilante form—quite literally, a legal violence. For those working in and with communities, these realities mark the way sanguine images of police reform and public safety in mainstream politics and media eclipse steady and expanding grassroots efforts to create community safety in cities and towns across the US (Beckett et al. 2021; Butts et al. 2015; Camp and Heatherton 2016; Seigel 2018; Vitale 2017; One Million Experiments n.d.; Policing & Social Justice Project n.d.). In what follows, we argue that community struggles signify efforts not simply to reimagine safety but to implement forms of new and old crisis response, community defense, and political power that deepen control over the basic materials of life by those who have been directly impacted by violence in all forms (Gilmore 2007; 2022; INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence 2016; Kaba 2021; Kaba et al. 2022; Thuma 2015). We do this in three parts: (1) an introduction to the rise of community crisis response; (2) a sociolegal contextualization of the legal violence of the police call; and (3) a critical “place-ing” of calls for police in the municipal contests of the Appalachian South. Through an inverted reading and analysis of police calls for service, as documented by the police, we open up another way to read the scene of the call through the lenses of organized abandonment and organized violence.

II. The Turn to Alternative Crisis Response and Community Defense

As community organizers turn to historical efforts like the Black Panther Party Ten-Point Program and the work of antiviolence and anticarceral feminist scholars and survivors of color in the 1960s and 70s (Thuma 2015), their work centers on a spectrum of practices, echoing the mantra made famous in the era of Black Lives Matter by Black Youth Project 100, “we keep us safe.” In this usage, efforts to defund, crowd out, and abolish police are always efforts to counter the call for police and prisons *in order to survive*. The sheer scale and scope of this work—the call for public safety *without police*, alternatively working to dispatch mental health specialists, violence interrupters, medical professionals, and peer specialists in times of crisis—in the current moment is astounding. There are hundreds of organizations and efforts in our notes, inboxes, and communities, demonstrative of what legal scholar Jocelyn Simonson (2023) describes as the exponential geographic growth of collective tactics—bail funds, court watching, participatory and collective defense—by ordinary everyday actors to dismantle

¹ For instance, see Civil Rights Corps Director Alec Karakatsanis’s collected writing and tweets on *New York Times* coverage of crime, crime metaphors, media reliance on cop narratives, definitions of copaganda, and the role of media in shifting attention away from material conditions of society at <https://equalityalec.substack.com>.

mass incarceration, evidence of long-term struggle.² These efforts map out various responses to Gilmore's important question of "how can people who inhabit forgotten places scale up their activism from intensely localized struggles to something less atomized and therefore possessed of a significant capacity for self-determination?" (2022, 387). As Kaba et al. (2022) write in their recent volume *No More Police*, the call for no more police can only take shape if the crisis of policing has become visible.

Our research amid the cross-carceral-and-abolition geographies of the Mountain South follows this wave of scholarship and community organizing, where we find the use of the police call *and* the perennial call for police to be a compelling, and often gut-wrenching, set of strategic and desperate demands for the most basic of human needs, a clear manifestation of logics of organized abandonment and crisis. We see in the call a significant legacy of neoliberalism's delegitimation and dismantling of welfare state capacities, which has been "to reallocate racial capitalism's accumulation crisis by taking resources from institutions, programs, streets, households, and lives, throwing all into permanent crisis" (Gilmore 2022, 291–92).

How governance does this is crucial to what Gilmore calls the "twinning imperatives of organized abandonment and organized violence," exhausting and criminalizing "the capacity of ordinary actors to collectivize resources and build up infrastructure" while making the police and criminal justice system the brute managers of organized abandonment (2022, 293). For communities in chronic carceral conditions, calls to police are often used, out of necessity, to navigate and make demands for infrastructural resources with the call a perceived gateway to the most basic of public services: mediation and conflict resolution, mental health support and trauma resources, housing and food security, and basic medical, family, and social needs. Calling the police in communities that otherwise express a strong distrust of the police, tactically, speaks to how longstanding forms of community problem-solving and survival against poverty and violence have forced people to abdicate autonomy and vital problem-solving energies to the singular logic of police power. As legal and race scholar Monica Bell asks, in her research with Black mothers who rely on the police:

What does it mean, then, that respondents rely on police primarily to protect the home? What does safety mean to poor black mothers in the city? The results suggest that safety means familiarity with the actors who wield power in their daily lives. Safety means securing the home; although securing the neighborhood would be ideal, it is not as essential as the home and family. In this process, the goal is to produce therapeutic outcomes, not punitive ones. One

²The often-cited Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets (CAHOOTS) program based in Eugene, Oregon, as well as the highly successful Support Team Assisted Response (STAR) in Denver, are joined by the Crisis Response Unit (CRU) in Olympia, Washington; Seattle's CoLEAD model and JustCARE; the Family Crisis Intervention Team (FACIT) in Rochester, New York; Cure Violence in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago; Crisis Outreach and Support Teams (COAST) and Albuquerque Community Safety (ACS) in New Mexico; the Elite Victim Resource Unit (EVRU) in Brooklyn; Specialized Care Unit (SCU) in Berkeley, California; Alternatives to Incarceration (ATI) in Los Angeles; the Anti-Police Terror Project (a mental health first hotline) and the Mobile Assistance Community Response of Oakland (MACRO) Program in Oakland, California; the Harm Free Zone project in Durham, North Carolina; Hartford Emergency Assistance Response Team (HEARTeam) in Hartford, Connecticut; Audre Lorde Project's Safe OUTside the System Safe Neighborhood Campaign in Brooklyn; Be Heard DC (an intersectional abolition and disability organization) in Washington, DC; the Detroit Safety Team in Detroit; Vision, Safety, Win in New York; the Cambridge Holistic Emergency Alternative Response Team in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Collective Justice in Renton, Washington; Powderhorn Safety Collective (PSC) and Little Earth Protectors in Minneapolis; mobile crisis units in Oregon, Ohio, Philadelphia, Ann Arbor, Houston, Atlanta, Polk County, Iowa, and Community Defense of East Tennessee (CDET) and Healing Emergency and Alternative Response Team (HEART) in Knoxville, Tennessee.

aspect of safety for these women is the importance of retaining support from the welfare state while keeping its harsh penalties at bay. (2016, 340, citations omitted)

The powerful role of policing in the contemporary era is nowhere more apparent than in the desperate need and ubiquitous desire to call for more police by members of communities that have been most devastated by interpersonal, community, state, and structural violence, where recourse to any kind of public resources comes through necessary alignments with city government and their support for police (Gilmore 2002). Communities suffering intense forms of gun violence are typified as both victimized *and* blameworthy under the responsabilizing terms of organized abandonment, with investitures in policing not only increasing carceral creep into community but exacerbating the dwindling of other kinds of infrastructure—even as their presence fails to address this violence (Táíwò 2022; Kim 2020). As Forman exemplifies in his classic *Locking Up Our Own* (2017), there is a deep and abiding way in which Black communities that have been devastated by historically unprecedented levels of crime and violence through systems of organized abandonment relied on deeply punitive and increased calls for police and prisons. This any-and-all approach was grounded, however, in its close proximity to the ravages and political pressures of violence and abandonment, and in very real efforts to defend victims from these communities and community values. These demands, both for and against police, are distinct from the ways in which other kinds of calls, for instance, those originating from white middle-class neighborhoods, political officials, and mainstream media, distort the fundamental needs underlying security and safety issues, co-opting the very real needs of communities most impacted by violence. Quite simply, we are not having the same discussions about public safety in the US or in our communities.

III. The Legal Violence of Police Calls: Jurispathic Gatekeeping

Policing—and criminal justice—is overwhelmingly jurispathic in the sense that Cover (1986) lays out: necessarily given to killing the ideas and possibilities that compete with the state, including a broad commitment to social infrastructure and collectivities that are *not* carried out through policing and carceral forms. Law's enforcement, when considered as a material, visceral form of legal interpretation, invokes Cover's tripartite features of the social organization of legal violence as "(1) a practical activity, (2) designed to generate credible threats and actual deeds of violence, (3) in an effective way," but with specific regularized, racialized forms. Gilmore (2022) speaks of this when she describes "lawfare" as the key to the legal immunity—and thus impunity—foundational to police and the larger forms of the carceral state. In her account, police need only utter one legal phrase to defend any and all of their violent deeds: "I killed this person because I feared for my life"—therefore continuing the police cycle of waging warfare on poor racialized communities, a formation that takes relentless form through notions of order and "compliance." Operating as "an institution of state-sanctioned violence," Correia and Wall (2018, 4) note, "police are first and foremost violence workers," which forces us to rethink the function of police—and the police call—as, fundamentally, any "work that relies upon violence or the threat thereof" (Seigel 2018).

We see a similar kind of structural and legal immunity at work in Menjívar and Abrego's (2012) construction of legal violence, which focuses on the harmful effects of immigration law on every aspect of the lives of immigrants. Part of what makes legal violence slippery and pervasive is the manner in which it "is embedded in the body of law that, while it purports to have the positive objective of protecting rights or controlling behavior for the general good, simultaneously gives rise to practices that harm a particular social group. In these cases, the law enables various forms of

violence against the targeted group” (ibid. at 1389). The arrest—and constant threat of arrest—is one of the most harmful consequences of law, “legal, sanctioned, and legitimated through formal structures of power that are publicly accepted and respected” (1413), criminalizing people through various forms of structural, interpersonal, and state violence. Like the concept of organized abandonment, “the legal violence lens captures physical, structural, and symbolic violence made possible through the law, exposes the intertwined nature of these forms of violence, as one form begets another, and allows the recognition of violent consequences of the law when they are present, particularly when these are perpetuated and embedded in structures of domination” (1413). We find that these structural relations are illuminated in the public demand for police—the police call over the creation of forms of social infrastructure that redress organized abandonment and the need for public safety.

Much like the police stop (Camp and Heatherton 2016; Flacks 2018), the originating act of the police call signifies and performs a launching of law’s violence that, regardless of intention, need, or underlying conditions, drives the carceral state (Schrader 2019; Correia and Wall 2018; Murakawa 2017). But distinct from the police stop, the police call foregrounds public demand, one that is increasingly recorded in dispatch records, displayed on police department websites, available in police call data and reports, and caught in real time on social media. The call offers an opportunity to get at how policing on demand materializes in people’s lives, classically captured in Bittner’s (1990) insights about why people call the police: when “something-that-ought-not-to-be-happening-and-about-which-someone-had-better-do-something-now!” is taking place, making it the *singular* response available (in social, cultural, and political thinking) to access *most*, and in some way, all social goods and basic material needs for many groups of people in the United States.

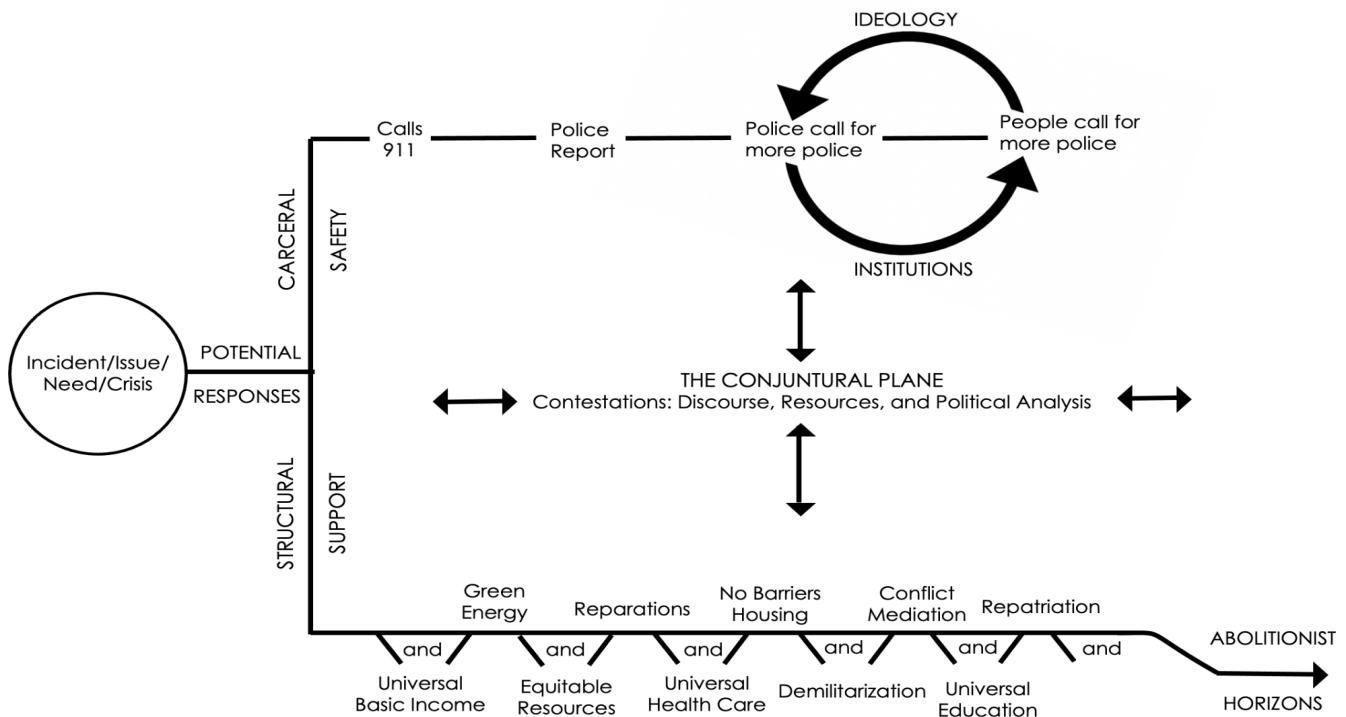
Given that most of what police do is not in fact related—nor should be related—to the police function of crime control, then it makes sense that those social needs could be pursued by other kinds of public roles, community power building, and social infrastructure. This is exactly what much of the current calls and efforts at alternative crisis response look like in cities and towns across the US, a refusal of the commonsense, superficial understandings of police as having a legitimate monopoly on safety and protection, a necessary crowding out of the state’s violence. But this claim is also rooted in a deeper transformation, one that is linked foundationally to community power and labor infrastructure. With more than 80 percent of criminal justice employees working in some kind of policing operation (urban police departments, private security, homeland security, counterinsurgency, criminal investigation, and immigration control), the carceral state is defined by a kind of violence work where carceral employees outnumber teachers, primary care physicians, and social workers (Platt 2018; see also Aviram 2015; Beckett 2018). Policing then is a practice and technology fused to the entrance, expansion, and maintenance of a carceral state *and* municipal budgets. As we find in the work of Akbar (2018) and Bell (2016; 2019), this necessarily requires an engagement with the radical potentialities of transformative legal claims—a radical reimagining of the law in conjunction with movements. Bell, invoking Cover, points us toward how “a social movement infused with legal actors and transformative legal claims-making—a 21st century ‘jurisgenerative community’—might effectively advocate for these essential but consistently overlooked components of racial and economic justice” (2019, 215; see Cover 1983).

Beyond the violence of the badge and gun (the more often researched reality of police as violence), police calls and their reports obscure the urgency of material needs while expanding structural violence. As Murakawa writes, “authoritative data sources are handmaidens to racial criminalization, and therefore these sources should be engaged with methodological creativity and an interpretive lens

informed by history” (2021, 231). Here we build from Spade’s (2015) administrative violence framework to consider how legal systems—welfare, punishment, health care, and immigration—organize people into vulnerable subpopulations disproportionately exposed to abandonment and/or imprisonment, all facilitated by cross-institutional policing processes (Neocleous 2021). Spade specifically focuses on the dangers for transgender people who “come into contact with administrative systems that distribute life chances and promote certain ways of life at the expense of others, all while operating under legal regimes that declare universal equality” (2015, 52). At the scene of the call, the violence of police takes shape as a profound and intentional institutional neglect—a disappearing of all other possible ways to deal with an argument, a fight, an accident, a nuisance, an emergency, a crisis, or a structural problem—and the police report, as we decode it, reads this carceral violence back to us. The call forces us into “categories of crime” and “types of calls” discussions over the profound and foundational ways in which every social issue that drives the call for police is a systemic one.

We provide a rereading of the call event from the perspective of organized resistance to police’s control over the infrastructure of life, viewing these nascent forms and ways of responding to harm as quite literal life support, urgently related to imaginative capacity, political power, and breathing room. We give attention to how claims for alternative forms of safety diverge from the taken-for-granted assumptions and ideologies that structure the police employment of narrative. We take lessons from these tactics for navigating power and the value of thinking “unthinkable” alternatives into being (Ewick and Silbey 2003, 1328). In our telling, the police call is, across recurrent rebellions and uprisings, a plane of contestation and intervention, a space in which political demands have the potential to take shape, as depicted in the figure below, against tautological demands for police, in relation to conjunctural (Camp 2016) and rhizomatic needs (Deleuze and Guattari 1988) that we lay out across this piece.

Figure 1. Rereading the Police Call Through an Abolitionist Lens



IV. Setting the Scene: An Inverted Reading of Calls for Police in the Mountain South

The launch point for our project took shape when we were called on in 2019, just before the COVID-19 pandemic, to collect police call data by way of a city council movement seeking more progressive and transformative governance led by Black Lives Matter, Democratic Socialists, and coalitional community organizers. The contexts were bleak. From the beginning of the project in February 2019 through the George Floyd uprisings and ongoing social and political effects of COVID-19, Knoxville, like many US cities, experienced a set of interlocked crises: waves of gun violence, police killings, youth suicides, organized abandonment (houselessness, food insecurity, etc.), all precipitating demands for “trauma-informed” resources (a foundational symptom of the afterlife of the racialized carceral state) against the securitization of schools and community, including the building of a new police headquarters public safety complex and the rise of a popular criminal justice curriculum in city high schools, a clear police recruitment effort. In April 2021, the mother of a white student called the police in reference to her daughter who was in an argument with her boyfriend, Anthony Thompson Jr., a Black student at the same school. After the call, the school resource officer allowed Knoxville city police to enter the local high school through a back door and led them to the boys’ bathroom where city police shot and killed Thompson in front of his best friend. The mother later voiced her regret for calling the police. That same year four other students, all from the same high school—Janaria Muhammed, Justin Taylor, Stanley Freeman Jr. and Jamarion Gillette—were shot and killed within months of each other. All died from gunshot wounds. Amid grief and anger, community members and organizers in East Knoxville, home to Knoxville’s historic Black community, called for a set of listening sessions with the school board and city government about what made students and community members feel safe and unsafe and how community safety could be more closely connected to community power and community defense. When there was no meaningful government response to this request, they allied with university activist scholars for research support to assist in coordinating listening sessions, focus groups, interviews, and presentations of their findings around visions of safety (of which this project is a part).

In providing accessible research to assist in progressive power building, we sought to bring scholarship and study into principled alignment in the service of movements, akin to participatory action research, participatory defense, and movement law (Akbar, Ashar, and Simonson 2021; Simonson 2019). Indeed, trust building has required long-term work and a reenvisioning of community research deliverables. As scholars and students, we have participated in networks of emergency response, mutual aid, and abolitionist-leaning organizations in the region for over a decade, including Black Mamas Bail Out, Community Defense of East Tennessee, East Tennessee Harm Reduction, First Aid Collective Knox, Healing East Tennessee Alternative Response Team, Knox Care Network, Sleeves4Needs, Mountain Access Brigade, No Exception Prison Collective, Southerners on New Ground, and Highlander Research and Education Center. This article models the discussions, the needs, and the alternative crisis and mutual safety practices we learned in and with these community efforts—the kind of research they demanded.

The carceral geography of the Appalachian South and Tennessee, grounded in a history of poverty, racism, and policing, is definitive to many cities in the US but is also a specific national and legal test case for far-right evangelical conservative politics, making it a key case for a legal violence lens. With violence, political attacks, and legislation focused on the criminalization of immigration, racial justice

curricula, LGBTQ and transgender people, social movements and protest, and reproductive justice freedoms, the region is a political hotspot, carefully monitored by state and local government, where urban renewal has hinged on gentrifying forms of violence, including the displacement and criminalization of historic Black communities (El-Amin 2019; Destine, El-Amin, and Brown 2023). There is also a significant carceral context built on the insistent demands of local government for the expansion of policing powers, including the use of the jail for immigrant processing and detention; the deputization of law enforcement around immigration; and a call for new jail construction at another \$40 million while contracting for profit with Securus Technologies to end in-person visitation. In 2022, the organizing efforts of Community Defense of East Tennessee and Free Hearts secured an important win for the city and state when the nation's only mandatory life sentencing for juveniles was ended in Tennessee.

This state court ruling, however, reveals the otherwise draconian sentencing around life imprisonment in the state. This follows a broader rural-urban Appalachian context where carceral boosters—politicians, local elites, agency officials, and others—have helped to expand police, jails, and prison through land and labor (Schept 2022). As one example, several of the twenty-nine federal and state prisons constructed in Appalachia since 1989 have been built on top of old mountaintop removal sites, with accompanying environmental concerns, including USP Big Sandy, FCI Manchester, and FCI McDowell in Kentucky; Wallens Ridge State Prison and Red Onion State Prison in Virginia; FCI Gilmer in West Virginia; and SCI Fayette in Pennsylvania. In fact, the nation's most expensive proposed and fiercely fought federal prison, totaling out at half a billion dollars, is poised to receive more funding than that earmarked for flood relief after historic rains in eastern Kentucky (Ryerson and Schept 2023). One of its primary law enforcement pulls will be those actors stopped on the I-75 corridor running from Knoxville to Lexington, Kentucky. These carceral initiatives, alongside some of the highest jail rates in the nation, have made Appalachia and the Mountain South a distinct center in abolitionist organizing (Norton, Pelot-Hobbs, and Schept 2024).

Policing has facilitated this carceral expansion as Knoxville has been siphoning, for decades, millions of dollars into law enforcement and policing institutions—tens of millions more than for public services and community development budgets combined. For the last twenty years, the Knoxville Police Department (KPD) has received the largest portion of the city budget. In 2020, KPD received roughly \$60 million, over 17 percent of Knoxville's total budget. In 2021, 24 percent of general expenditure funds were allocated to police, anticipating a proposed 15 percent increase to the police budget for the next year. With 519 employees, nearly two hundred more employees than public service, recreation, and community development combined, KPD has the largest staff of any Knoxville governmental unit—with the highest-paid entry-level employees in the city. While Knoxville has upward of ten thousand people experiencing houselessness, only \$7.5 million (\$5.4 million of which is federally funded) is allocated to affordable housing projects (City of Knoxville n.d.; Knoxville City Council Movement 2020). “Increased police budgets, in tandem with decreased funding to address other essential community needs are counterproductive to ‘public safety,’” as Cobbina-Dungy and Jones-Brown (2021, 10) write, “because more spending on policing means fewer resources for institutions and initiatives that stabilize and strengthen community well-being.”

We began this research by collecting publicly available data from the Knoxville Police Department's (KPD) “Open Records Page,” which maintains a continually updated log of calls for service during a twenty-four-hour period. This log provided us with general information regarding the date/time, location, code, and a brief description of the calls, but to amass the data necessary for understanding how calls for service perpetuate police violence in Knoxville, we determined it necessary to submit a

FOIA request and obtain all call data for two years, beginning in January 2017 and ending in December 2018. After receiving this data, we learned that police responded to a total of 35,942 calls during this time. While the calls came presorted into 241 categories according to the system 911 dispatchers use to interpret, classify, and prioritize calls, after reviewing the dataset, we found that it was possible to collapse categories due to redundancy without removing key information or biasing our results. We did this by recoding like categories with few calls under a single variable. For example, because “burglary-business,” “burglary-residence,” “burglary-vehicle,” “burglary-business in progress,” and “burglary-residence in progress” had few calls (items), we were able to collapse these categories under the variable “burglary.”

The recoding process allowed us to collapse the original 241 categories into forty-seven new categories, from which we generated a frequency table to better identify trends and patterns in the types of calls for service being made in Knoxville. Of these categories, we found that the five with the highest call frequencies were: property offenses (44.43 percent or 15,959), accident response (18 percent or 6,502); officer-initiated (7 percent or 2,357); interpersonal conflict and violence (12 percent or 4,345); and the hang-up call (3.02 percent or 1,086). These results align with scholarship from the Vera Institute (2022) on calls for service, which indicates that on average 62.6 percent of calls for service involve “noncriminal situations,” such as a loose pet, an abandoned car, or “suspicious” person. Our results confirmed what prior research has shown: that police are seldom dispatched to contend with violent offenses but are regularly called on “to be social workers, conflict mediators, traffic directors, mental health counselors, detailed report writers, neighborhood patrollers, and low-level enforcers” (Karma 2020). Given this, we were eager to gain a deeper understanding not just of the issues underlying calls for service within the Knoxville community but of how police were attempting to “resolve” them.

Since the call log data provided us with little context, we determined it necessary to request a random sampling of police reports from across the five primary call categories. We first randomly selected fifty calls from each of the five categories, for a total of 250 reports, before placing a records request to KPD. After receiving these reports, we split them among us to perform contextual analysis, finding that, on the whole, these reports were deeply surveillant documents in their demographic obsessiveness and techno-legal framing. What the reports offered us, first and foremost, was the perspective of police, with officers engaging in what Correia and Wall (2018) define as “copspeak” to not only offer detailed descriptions of all parties involved, including their names, dates of birth, age ranges, addresses, and, when available, the sex, race, driver’s license and phone numbers, weight, height, and hair color of complainant(s), victim(s), suspect(s), and/or witnesses, but to impart their interpretation of the incident within the “narrative/case notes” section. It was the narrative/case notes sections of these reports that helped us to better understand how violence operates through quotidian police responses to calls for service.

The bureaucratic documentation of the call reveals an archive of societal violence: interpersonal, accidental, institutional, systemic, structural, state. The report signals how police control the narrative through which “crime” events enter public record, evident in the language of the report in powerful, often unstated ways. Its authors, as violence workers, employ a succinct technical language that follows a distinctive form of facticity, decision-making rooted in the power of law as moderator of what constitutes harm. A hermeneutics of “proof” takes shape as to whether harm occurred, characterized by suspicion and judgment that overrides any meaningful response to actual harm.

The reports exemplify the logics and optics of criminal justice—how we think and document like the state or a cop. First, basic human needs are reconfigured through “threat” and suspicion, creating a self-serving necessity of governing through crime, followed, seemingly naturally, by the call for more police. Second, the report is incoherent in its racialization, making race a nebulous force moving in and out of visibility, often unclear or speculated about in the report and statements of key actors, thereby linking dangerousness to known locations or places in the Black community as opposed to deepening our analysis of organized abandonment and its relationship to the roots of harm and violence. Last, the quasi-legal language of the report, with its focus on the responsabilized individual as both victim and perpetrator, obscures all primary factors shaping the conditions of interpersonal, structural, and state violence.

From its launch, the call and the report, and the key policing operations of arrival at the scene, obscure how to address harm and violence but also the most basic of social needs. In this way, the 911 call and its report exist within a massive set of institutional justice records (court, probation and parole, social service files, etc.) that witness and record the failure of carceral and policing systems to meet any substantive public good. And yet, as Dunn and Kaplan (2009) write, institutional records often have the opposite effect to building empathy and connection, instead distancing us from the horror of poverty, racial capitalism, and its attendant structures of harm. These records are rarely read in a manner that highlights their absolute devastation. We sought to counter these optics with a read of all the ways crisis and community support could be provided, the way we make something together in opposition to organized abandonment. The police call, as a cultural artifact of state violence, is one place to highlight the use of these records for more liberatory and infrastructural aims. We must invert the call.

In a world that sees policing or nothing as the only two options, and views harm through carceral categories, we miss the scope of how to respond meaningfully to all issues. To counter this, we intentionally merge police categories of calls in our writing to reveal how a robust capacity to analyze structural forces, power, and institutional ideologies beyond police call responses is urgent and necessary. Following Derecka Purnell’s work, we looked specifically for voluntary versus involuntary encounters with police (Fuchs 2021). For instance, housing insecurity perennially surfaced in our police reports as a major force, across offense types, including theft, public intoxication, drug overdose, missing persons, disorderly conduct/fighting, forcible rape, indecent exposure, and attempted suicide. That housing status plays such a steady role across a variety of offense categories indicates how houselessness and housing insecurity leave people acutely exposed to calls for service and involuntary interaction with the police. We also examine how the arrival of police at the scene of the police call initiates a transformative extensionality of policing logics into mental health and all health care, substance use, schools, children’s services, domestic violence contexts, property conflicts and theft, public safety, and more. All social resources become available in the moment of crisis through the police call . . . and the call and the cop dictate the narrow web of social support. As Schenwar, Law, and Alexander (2021), Roberts (2022), Kaba et al. (2022), and others argue, social service interventions are already largely dictated through police power, requiring police as co-responders to situations that involve detox, substance abuse, mental health, houselessness, or issues caught in the purview of child and family services. Policing response then ignites increased carcerality across institutions—hospitals as holds, mental health agencies as weaponized, schools as securitized, and so on, chronically and in new geospatial and institutional configurations. In thinking through these needs, we must be attentive to police logics that already permeate most social institutional arrangements, which also rely on—and concede power to—police as gatekeepers to services. In what follows, we rely on several qualitative exemplars from our police data to demonstrate this intersection

of structural need against police power, weaving alternative response efforts throughout multiple case analyses.

V. The Public Nuisance

On 02 / 12 / 2018 at 3:27 p.m. I officer [REDACTED] and officer [REDACTED] were dispatched to 411 Summit Hill Drive. The victim / manager [REDACTED] said the defendant [REDACTED] was in the store naked and being violent. Upon my arrival the defendant was in the grassy area in front of Weigel's yelling at the business. Customers were stopping and looking at the defendant. I went into the business and the victim pointed to the defendant outside and said, before officers arrived, a customer complained to her that he was naked in the men's bathroom cleaning himself at the sink. The bathroom is a public bathroom with no lock. The complainant said she then knocked on the door and the defendant opened it shirtless with a blanket wrapped partially around his waist. Officer [REDACTED] and myself then approached the defendant and asked him what occurred inside the business. while talking with the officers the defendant became angry flinging his arms about and yelling. The suspect was advised he was under arrest. When officers attempted to handcuff the defendant he stiff-armed officers and refused to put his hands behind his back. The defendant was repeatedly told to put his arms behind his back. When the defendant refused to comply with officers commands I performed a leg sweep to the suspect to take him to the ground. officers were then able to force the suspects arms behind his back and handcuffs were applied to the suspect. This occurred in Knoxville Knox County Tennessee.

Here, in one of the most typical and mundane of police calls, the obviousness of houselessness in police logic is intentionally overlooked, making the nuisance (“customer complaint”) of a man washing himself in the bathroom a compliance issue, requiring force. The structural issues of housing, mental health, and privacy—a true problem-solving of community needs—are submerged in a graphic “leg sweep,” handcuffs, and arrest. Omitted are questions as to why people must use public bathrooms to bathe or questions about how housing, mental health, and support services might be made available in short-term crisis and long-term forms to address these conditions in nonpunitive and life-supporting ways. Instead, incident-based calls for police, as evidenced in police reports, drive the majority of public service response, configuring service and safety as violence work, causally and unremarkably familiar at the corner convenience store and gas station, while, in communities, anti-eviction and tenement organizing continue to increase, centering their efforts against the devastation of affordable and available housing.

VI. The Scene of the Accident

Traffic accidents are not only among the most common reasons people call the police, but traffic enforcement is the leading cause of interactions between police and the public (Johnson and Johnson 2023). This vast domain of police encounters represents how the bulk of police work is “administrative” and merges with organized abandonment and structural investments that impede community life. For instance, Knoxville is a city whose infrastructure at the level of the city center and surrounding neighborhoods was subprioritized to interstates, visible and audible in nearly all parts of the city, with limited pedestrian walkways and public transit. Police are regularly called on to respond to so-called hit-and-run motor vehicle crashes. In response to a call for service involving a motor vehicle accident, the officer arrives on scene to find that the driver allegedly “at fault” for the incident fled the scene. The white driver of the damaged vehicle said they had been rear-ended and told the officer that the “at-fault” Black driver had “offered money” before leaving the scene. In this case, two witnesses act as police by recording the driver as they left, enabling the officer to get a license plate number. The car was subsequently traced to the registered address and impounded by police. The

driver called the “investigating officer the next day and . . . was charged with leaving the scene, no insurance, no driver’s license, no registration,” and was reported as “at fault” for “following too closely.” The responsible driver’s effort at an informal accident negotiation, a well-known tactic among drivers who cannot afford insurance or do not have access to a driver’s license, is matter-of-factly criminalized. Even as accidents are a category that is shifting in relationship to direct police presence, as police leave the scene of the accident in departments across the US, their logics persist in insurance and actuarial logics where insurance adjusters operate on the binary of “at-fault” logics. In a convoluted performance, economic precarity is racialized and criminalized as opposed to contextualized and analyzed in meaningful ways (finding fair and viable nonpunitive solutions) that would reduce, rather than enlarge, the scope of harm. Rather than laying out a plan that ensures everyone involved has a pathway toward reparations, incorporating the reasons why driving itself is both necessary and unaffordable for some, and the conditions under which driving is harmful (substance use, digital devices, etc.), the responsible driver is criminalized, bystanders deputize themselves, and multilevel charges and layers of contact with a criminal legal system with lifelong impacts are created. Traffic enforcement is then a material space in which the deadly contradictions of property and racial capitalism enter municipal life as a primary and intentional site for the criminalization of vulnerable populations.

VII. Stolen Tampons and Baby Bibs

On 10/31/2018 at 09:36 Officer ██████████ responded to a Shoplifting/Misdemeanor at 1015 Ave. The complainant ██████████ said two black females entered the Family Dollar Store and stole two boxes of Tampax Tampons. The complainant said the suspects placed the box of tampons into their purse and fled on foot from the store. The complainant said the suspects got into a black Ford Edge car. Offense occurred in Knoxville, knox county TN.

In Knoxville, Knox County TN on 6130118 at 13:08hrs the defendant was inside Walmart located at 2501 University Commons Way. The defendant concealed a purse, panties, and baby bibs in her backpack and attempted to leave the store without paying. The value of the property is \$22.19. The defendant has been trespassed from Walmart on 09/23/2007 and again on 10/02/2010.

Property offenses, the primary reason for calling the police, are raw in their reporting in our data, with shoplifting as a criminal category obscuring the most basic ways in which precarity and poverty intersect at the site of the police call. Targeted goods from our sample were clearly gendered, following the research that women are more likely to be arrested for low-level shoplifting and fraud: socks, house shoes, tampons, purse, panties, baby bibs . . . some occurring repeatedly by the same person at the same locations. These patterned “incidents” beg for an analysis that centers basic life support. From theft, burglary, and vandalism to stolen vehicles and shoplifting, national crime statistics reveal that property crimes typically remain unresolved even after police are contacted (Gramlich 2017). To invoke the problematic data provided by police themselves, only about a third of property crimes are reported to police and of those only about 17.2 percent are cleared (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2019). Most of these offenses are nonviolent and produce minimal harm and limited damage. Research shows that basic forms of communication and reparation prove especially effective regarding property offenses, as victims are more likely to receive meaningful compensation for their lost property and victim-offender mediation shows a 90 percent victim satisfaction rate for minor property crimes (Adler School Institute on Public Safety and Social Justice 2012, 12). To divorce theft from police power and imprisonment forces an engagement with organized abandonment and racial capitalism, among other possible societal issues, including the more harmful impacts of corporate power and state

theft. Redlining and gentrification, economic disinvestment, and disenfranchisement point to the fact that theft as a social construct is land- and community-based (Whitlow 2019; Taylor 2020) and will require a new analysis of our systems of wealth distribution, taxation, and social welfare, including how city budgets generate revenue through the carceral state, fines, asset forfeiture, jail, detention, and other contracts for profit, centering their “safety” efforts in its expansion.

VIII. “A Danger to Themselves and the Public”

Substance use was the most highly criminalized of responses in our data: *all reports* received for calls of public intoxication were “cleared by arrest,” with officers stating the person posed a “*danger to themselves and the public.*” Although the specific details varied across reports, they all followed a similar narrative pattern: the police call was initiated by someone (a “*homeowner,*” “*businessowner,*” “*manager,*” etc.) who described the person as engaging in conduct such as “*loitering,*” “*sleeping on the sidewalk,*” and/or “*being too loud.*” These reports evoke sensory and behavioral cues used to describe intoxication, such as “*a strong odor of an alcoholic beverage and/or intoxicant, slurred speech, staggered gait, and bloodshot, watery eyes*” which is then used to “*justify*” the person being taken “*into custody.*” Studies show the likelihood of police “*use of force*” not only increases significantly during contact with a person suspected of being under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs, but that the person is significantly more likely to receive serious injuries—regardless of whether they “*resist*” arrest (Smith et al. 2010, 17).

In contexts of drug overdoses, criminalization is the first and singular response in our data, and a hermeneutics of suspicion drives the police encounter. In response to a possible drug overdose, one officer reports that upon arriving on scene the “*suspect was . . . observed/reported to be passed out and/or not breathing but . . . appear[ed] to have a pulse.*” Following his questioning of the “*suspect’s*” sister, the officer not only Mirandizes the man in crisis on scene but contends that he “*agreed,*” raising questions of consent, to answer questions at the hospital. The report notes that the “*suspect*” has “*no criminal history, no warrants on file, and no past overdose incidents,*” but then abruptly ends by saying “*see case notes.*” These notes are: “*Private to dept. Only.*” In 2014, Tennessee, along with several other states, enacted a “Good Samaritan Law” (GSL) to provide immunity from arrest and prosecution for individuals who call 911 seeking medical assistance during a drug overdose (Smiley-McDonald et al. 2022). However, the scope of Tennessee’s GSL law is limited, offering immunity only *once* to a person experiencing an overdose while allowing police discretion to arrest, charge, and prosecute individuals who call 911 for subsequent overdoses. A 2018 study by McClellan et al. found that GSL laws, especially when combined with increased access to the opioid overdose reversal medication naloxone, were positively associated with a 14–15% decrease in overdose mortality rates across 30 states. Despite these benefits, the effectiveness of GSL laws is significantly undermined by the fear of arrest, which is the most common reason individuals avoid calling 911 in overdose situations (Szalavitz, 2016).

Callers continue to leave the scene of an overdose or place the person outside of residences to avoid being arrested. With overdose being an issue of structural arrangements related to criminalized drug prohibition, fear of arrest, and attendant loss of housing, custody of children, and repercussions from drug suppliers (Latimore and Bergstein 2017; Koester et al. 2017), harm-reduction options center demands for Narcan availability alongside drug testing kits and the prevention of police as responders in medical emergency dispatch. Carceral reforms that align with police, linking treatment, diversion, and other types of “co-response programming” bridging health and policing, increase people’s fear of accessing lifesaving services, making police a death-dealing co-responder. Nonpolice, community-based responses to public intoxication include the use of “sobering facilities” that center harm-

reduction interventions and coordinate access to supportive services, such as medical care, food, housing assistance, etc. But, as with many of these models, if they maintain collaborative relationships with police, via referrals and oversight, they fail to be community-centered or safe, and perpetuate questions of coercive carceral control.

IX. Malingering vs. In Need of Aid

As seen above, institutional spaces beyond policing in our data are locked into the logic and scene of the police call. The hospital, as one example, is a key space for the weaponization of health care through a reliance on racialized and criminalizing institutional practices and policies (removal, discharge, denial of services, inadequate care, etc.) that are policing mechanisms themselves, further regulated by the physical presence of police. Responding to a typical “family disturbance” call from a health care site, a responding officer in our data was told by a mobile crisis clinician that a long-time patient was “*malingering*” in an “*effort to get moved to a permanent treatment facility*.” The clinician explained that staff felt obligated to call police and warn the patient’s wife after he continually threatened to assault her, stating: “*If you send me away from this place, I don’t know what I’ll do to her. I could kill her, and it’ll be your fault.*” In his case notes, the officer wrote that after speaking with the patient, “*it seemed clear to me that he knows if he makes statements about killing himself or someone else then the staff can’t release him [and that] he is using this information to accomplish his goal of being sent to a more permanent facility.*” The officer states that, together with the clinician and patient, they came up with an “*agreeable plan: patient would be given a bus ticket out of town so that he could be closer to the VA hospital where he would visit the emergency room and start treatment with hopes to stay at a homeless shelter until permanent housing becomes available.*”

The desire to erase vulnerable and marginalized people from the social landscape speaks to the roots of the “police idea” in securing “public” health and safety (Carroll 2002, 456). The use of so-called homeless relocation programs (busing people out of cities) by police departments, homeless shelter staff, and outreach workers is often celebrated as a humanistic alternative to incarceration. Yet these programs fail to address the structural roots of the issues faced by marginalized and vulnerable people. Without an influx of resources that shift thinking and practice away from the carceral, the person—and their family and loved ones—in need of support services and safe return get nothing. These programs only further embed the carceral through state-sponsored acts of erasure and disappearance. This report further highlights an important distinction between nonpolice, community-centered crisis response and police-involved, systems-based models of crisis response. The officer’s comment that the “*patient is using this information to accomplish his goal of getting moved to a more permanent treatment facility*” assumes a degree of calculation that is not only undermined by the man’s appeal to the clinician for care but illustrates the ways reliance on police obstructs health care and hospital staff from partnering with grassroots and advocacy organizations that connect people with resources that truly address their needs. In a more recent case, police were called when sixty-year-old Lisa Edwards, who had been discharged from a Knoxville university hospital, was still on site, insisting that she was still in need of medical help. Police accused her of lying and eventually forcibly placed her in a squad car; she died in custody, after repeatedly crying out the chilling police killing refrain, “*I can’t breathe.*” The role of suspicion, concerns about “*faking*,” and perpetual judgment focused only on the trustworthiness of individual claims marks the horrific way in which policing logics annihilate structural analyses that might recognize and respond to harm and need.

X. Relationships, Conflict, and Violence: “Did Have Some Redness About Her Neck and Had Difficulty Speaking”

Reminiscent of Bell’s writing about Black mothers concerned for their children’s safety, police also operate in our reports as the key arbiters of family and partner conflicts. Unlike assumptions about stranger danger (Renfro 2020), embedded in the frequent amber alerts on highways, phones, and other emergency networks, the majority of missing report calls were made by parents worried about their teenage children. These reports are short and undetailed. For example, one says a parent “*contacted police because [her] son left [the] residence without telling her where he was going. [Parent] does not know where he was going . . . [and] does not know when he will return home.*” These reports reveal parenting as a place of deep anxieties, fears, and concerns, which go unnoted. Police response avoids the underlying conditions (parent-child conflicts, patterns of family communication struggles, etc.) of these calls with no indications of any additional steps beyond filing a police report. Furthermore, many of the reports signal trauma/abuse. Most cases list the person missing as “female,” which, when placed in context with what we know about missing children, speaks to a likely experience of gender-based and sexual violence, which is then criminalized. Many missing children reports list drug/alcohol use as well as ADHD or other mental health conditions, such as bipolar disorder or autism, and/or a history of suicide attempts. One report identified the missing person as “*an 18 y/old white male who had left home before for short periods (5 days) before but had now been gone, according to his mother, for 7 days after leaving with friends.*” The report produces an incoherent set of priorities, stating: “*He is Bipolar ADHD, Autistic, and has a history of violence towards police.*” In this way, a variety of needs are all placed in the framework of dangerousness as opposed to an immediate and long-term crisis response that could address multiple fronts: gender-based violence, mental health, self-harm, and the need for safe, noncarceral spaces.

While not categorized as domestic disputes, instances from our categories of theft, burglary, and vandalism often appeared as strategic use of police and legal categories by people in fights, breakups, and divorce. The structural stressors of poverty and racial capitalism were rampant in accounts of interpersonal and intimate violence as well as simple petty fights and arguments. In fact, the appearance of violence was precisely the place in which all the structural omissions discussed above converged in categories that now took on heightened stakes in forms of aggravated assault, rape, and domestic violence.

On 09/06/2017, Officer ██████████ responded to a Aggravated Assault at 2450 Martin Luther King Ave. Upon arrival officer spoke with complainant/victim ██████████, who stated that she had walked up to her baby’s father, suspect, ██████████ in the parking lot with hopes of getting him to watch their son while she ran an errand. An argument ensued, in which the suspect would not keep the child. Victim state that suspect attempted to enter his vehicle to drive away, and victim blocked his door. Suspect pushed victim away and again attempted to leave. Victim stated that she then stood in front of the car as to block suspect’s retreat. Victim states suspect “ran into her” and the baby stroller as suspect was leaving causing injury to her leg. Officer asked to look at injury, victim stated that she had a bruised shin, and proceeded to raise her pant leg. Officer saw no visible injury, No bruise, or scrape or cut to victims leg. Victim was wearing sandal type shoes. There were no visible injury to either foot. Victim was asked if she needed EMS attention and she refused. Victim was given case information card. (Both are listed as white.)

Here, a conflict over childcare leads to a police report and a case information card as opposed to parenting support and structural resources for parenting and partnering in community. In a similar case, police arrive at an aggravated assault where a woman reported a fight with her boyfriend (both are listed as Black), who, in the midst of arguing, took her phone and locked her out of their duplex.

“She stated that [REDACTED] came outside and grabbed her that they fought. During the fight, [REDACTED] said that she struck [REDACTED] with a stick style stereo speaker . . . found in the yard. She stated that [REDACTED] fled when she was able to call the police. [REDACTED] had several abrasions and scratch marks around her neck and chest.” The report goes on to discuss overturned furniture; a “witness” nearby confirms incident. The witness, who says she is visiting, calls back a few hours later around 3:30 a.m. to report that the boyfriend is back and arguments are continuing; this time they find “a tub full of mens clothing that had bleach poured on them; thermostat broken off the wall; damaged laptop and playstation”; “the damage was too extensive for it to have come from a struggle. The door lock also appears to have pry marks.” The report then documents how police find that the witness is using a false name, even though, after checking, she has no warrants. Outcome: “Due to an inability to determine the primary aggressor and false information given by witness, no warrants were placed on the night of the incident.” The report includes photos of a broken window, damage in the apartment, and scratches on victim’s neck. There is an obsessive detailed list of value and type of property under “vandalism/felony.” Here again, conflict resolution, mediation, and other resources through the community itself, from trusted people with similar experiences—what might be needed to move forward and away from the recurrence and escalation of conflict—are completely foreclosed.

Survivors of domestic and sexual assault have long challenged the use of police as first responders by speaking out about their mistreatment, revictimization, and subjection to criminalization, traumatization, and blame by officers who regard them with suspicion (Bumiller 2008; Richie 2012; Goodmark 2018). Our police reports mirror broader cultural patterns of doubting the survivor’s experience, with police narratives including statements like “[homeless] victim may have been raped in Tyson Park” and “possible forcible rape.” In Knoxville, “domestic violence” calls make up a key category of requests for service at 5 percent, in comparison with national averages that range from 1 to 7 percent. These data do not accurately reflect the prevalence of these types of violence, which we know to be the most underreported of offenses, with national survey victimization data finding, for example, that only 53 percent of domestic violence cases and 25 percent of rape and sexual assaults were reported to police in 2018 (Morgan and Oudekerk 2018). In our final example, we explore the horror of violence in the home between intimate partners up close.

In this case, officers respond to a domestic assault call where, upon arrival, the victim states that she and her boyfriend were arguing when he began choking her. According to the report, she ran to get help and “did have some redness about her neck and had difficulty speaking.” The police did not find the boyfriend on the scene, gave the victim a “case information card,” and placed a warrant for domestic assault on file. Placing a warrant does little to address the actual needs of both people directly involved. Cuomo (2017, 3) describes how “the state response to intimate partner violence creates a distinction between ‘cooperative’ victims who support the arrest and incarceration of their abusers, and ‘uncooperative’ victims who place their individual economic, social, or personal needs above the social contract.” Intervening in the traditional notion that the state provides safety, abolitionist scholars and organizers argue against this kind of carceral feminism and advocate instead for approaches to gender and sexual violence that can bring safety through a direct address of interpersonal harms while transforming the structural conditions that produce intimate violence (Law 2014; Richie 2012; Thuma 2015)—crisis response for the long haul, especially given that we know most women will not leave partners they love, who provide material resources, and are parents to their children. Intersecting with antiviolence and abolition movements, this research centers survivor-centered approaches and evidence that argue for a broader understanding of what constitutes domestic violence, including interpersonal, intimate, and sexual violence as well as foundations and stressors that culminate in conflict and arguments that lead to such violence. In addition to meeting people’s basic needs regardless of barriers and without criminalization, survivor-centered approaches include providing

direct sanctuaries from interpersonal and state violence, creating support groups, pods and pod mapping, accountability mediation, popular education in communities about alternatives to policing, and programs not affiliated with violence work geared toward violence prevention and intervention. Alternative trauma-informed responses to conflict and violence require understanding the context for each situation and the various needs of everyone involved (Mingus 2015; Goodmark 2018; Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and Dixon 2019; Whynacht 2021; Kaba 2021). Emphasizing de-escalation, caring, and meeting needs requires decentering police imperatives such as compliance, obedience, surveillance, and other carceral configurations of home life.

XI. Conclusion: An Abolitionist Practice of “Emergency Response”

In the end, few reports directly indicate that police plan to investigate most incidents as actual crimes—the category itself acts as an institutional smokescreen. The reports are characterized instead by a hermeneutics of “proof,” where “evidence” is moderated by police who arrive at every scene through a bad faith and jurispathic commitment: one in which certain kinds of harms must be proven, while others are assumed, ignored, prolonged, or enlarged. Victims perennially appear as suspects, with a striking inability by the police to distinguish the two. Relying on visible evidence of injury with comments such as “did have a mark” and “did not have a mark,” attached photos of injuries, violence against women, gunshot wounds, the home and debris after a fight, the police call and its report are, in fact, popular archives to failed social response. They operate as a daily and massive ongoing list of nonresolutions: an intervention that does little to nothing to address, analyze, or help us understand complex and compounding situations, crises, and community needs. Officers arrive and interrupt momentarily, handing out cards or making arrests, both of which exacerbate harm and violence in very different ways: (1) through disacknowledgment and neglect—doing nothing, disappearing and erasing people and their needs—its own form of structural and state violence; and (2) through the introduction of direct state violence—coercion, compliance, and force—leg sweeps, handcuffs, arrests, and deaths in custody—as the singular way to respond to all social ills. In the meantime, people and communities continue to flee the scene of the incident: the fight, the home, the family, the partners, the school, the accident, with the 911 call emblematic of a perpetual death-dealing system of organized abandonment. Cycles of conflict and violence not only go unaddressed but create new dimensions of violence through the criminal legal system, with the carceral geography of policing hot spots materializing at the dollar store, the gas station, the school bathroom, and all the other ordinary spaces of community life.

While we view this as evidence of how deeply people and communities lack the infrastructure and capacity for a political imagination for a dedicated otherwise, in part because the police have become so entrenched in the foundational institutions of modern governments, we argue that abolition, while contested, offers, in no small part, a political *horizon* from which to do a much-needed kind of practical envisioning work that is already happening in practice. For those who see limited wins, it is true that mutual aid and community defense face no small challenge in going against the infrastructure and power of the carceral state to demand life support back. As Rachel Herzing notes of the Build the Block effort in Oakland and San Francisco, asking neighborhood groups, formal organizations, and individuals to consider the circumstances under which people may rely on law enforcement intervention is one thing; asking them to imagine and practice what no-call resources, relationships, knowledge, and practices may be employed to decrease that reliance is deep work (Herzing 2015; Kaba 2021). There are real and serious questions about the scale and use of the state itself in these efforts (Kurti and Brown 2023), and how to offset the perennial co-optation of this grassroots work into

governance logics built on policing—work we are doing with organizers, such as Community Defense of East Tennessee, in our own context of the Appalachian South (Mfamle Shu’la 2023; Simonson 2023).

But the police call, as many other seemingly mundane procedural practices that are, in fact, death-dealing, is a key site from which to do some of this work of disarticulating crime and punishment and their key assumptions and relations: What happens when we foreground the structural needs of the call rather than the call for police? It is not just that we see alternatives take shape; it is rather that the entire universe of crisis response becomes visible as a commonsense need for an entirely different world given to social need and the infrastructure of life. This reality demands an active intervention at the level of research, organizing, and political demands. As an abolitionist intervention point, naming the intentional disappearing of social needs in the police call, and demanding otherwise, is another portal to safety (Roy 2020).

As alternative response practices take shape, with variations played out in the inevitable reformist and nonreformist tensions of values and political alignments, they do the important work of naming, and seeking to respond differently to, survival activities that have been overwhelmed by categories of crime and punishment by police at every call. They do not assume that disempowered people will not need to call the police in situations of very real danger—domestic violence, sexual violence, and the need for self-protection, for example. But the singularity of that option can eventually be crowded out through large-scale organizing efforts and campaigns that shift political power and usher in new structures of governance with other kinds of emergency community resources. In the abolitionist world of nonreformist reforms, ending people’s immediate suffering in a manner that does not create more harm while building power is a core goal. As Akbar (2022) writes, nonreformist reforms signal efforts to reconstitute the terms of life, death, and democracy, through strategic battles that hold the bolder and longer arc of abolition in view. They prioritize housing; harm reduction; access to food, mental health care, and medical care; mediation and conflict resolution; living wages and work relief; child- and eldercare; disability justice; and other basic needs—all with the goal of no more police (Kaba 2021; Beckett et al. 2021; Butts et al. 2015). They show up in evaluative research as meaningful material reductions in gun violence (Delgado et al. 2017; Roman et al. 2017; Henry, Knoblauch, and Sigurvinsdottir 2014; Webster et al. 2013) that work by investing in the health and well-being of people (Corburn, Boggan, and Muttaqi 2020; Corburn and Fukutome 2021). In short, they continuously surface: as community safety and participatory defense; safety trainings; mobile crisis teams; base-building groups; harm-reduction teams; efforts to better support conflict mediation for family members, partners, workplaces, etc.; substance use and abuse counseling and emergency medical response; grief and loss counseling for those impacted by community and state violence; transportation to services; and more. They point to reliance on the people whom we were always supposed to call: each other.

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