

The Future of Policing in the U.S.: Reform, Transform or Abolish?

Compelling Question: How can we improve policing and public safety in the U.S.?

Grade Level		Time	Standards/Competencies	
K-2	3-5	60–90 Minutes	Common Core Anchor: Reading: R1, R2 Writing: W1, W4, W7 Speaking & Listening: SL1, SL4 Language: L4, L6	SEL: Self-Awareness Social Awareness Relationship Skills Responsible Decision-Making
MS	HS			



Web Related Connections

LESSON OVERVIEW

In May 2020, George Floyd was killed by then Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, who knelt on Floyd’s neck for more than nine minutes, while Floyd pleaded for his life, continually stating that he could not breathe. The killing was recorded on video by a bystander and the entire world could view it immediately. Following Floyd’s murder, one of the largest protest movements in U.S. history took place. In April 2021, Chauvin was found guilty on three separate counts, including second degree murder. Between the time Floyd was killed and Chauvin was convicted, there continued to be an overwhelming and steady outcry for changes in policing. People are advocating for reform, “defunding the police,” and a re-envisioning of public safety and some are recommending abolishing the police.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to explore the purpose of policing and public safety in the U.S., to identify and understand specific changes to improve policing and prevent these murders, and to reflect on their own views of policing and write an essay or speech to express their vision and approach.

[Note to Teacher: It is important to reflect on and consider the racial composition of your classroom, including Black, Latinx and other students who have been personally impacted by the issue of police violence, or have family members who have. They may have a range of thoughts and feelings about discussing this topic. Be prepared and sensitive to those students, taking into consideration the extent to which they are a minority or majority of your classroom, and plan accordingly.]

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will explore the purpose and role of policing in the U.S.
- Students will identify different categories for their visions of changes in policing (reform, transform or abolish) and evaluate specific suggestions according to those categories.
- Students will reflect on their own views of policing in the U.S. and write an essay or speech that reflects their vision.

MATERIALS & PREPARATION

- [Information of High-Profile Police-Involved Deaths, 2014–2021](#)

Lessons

- [Black Lives Matter: From Hashtag to Movement](#)
- [Exploring Solutions to Address Racial Disparity Concerns](#)
- [Privilege, Discrimination and Racial Disparities in the Criminal Justice System](#)
- [When Perception and Reality Collide: Implicit Bias and Race](#)

Other Resources

- [George Floyd, Racism and Law Enforcement \(In English and Spanish\)](#)
- [The Verdict is In: How to Talk with Young People about the Derek Chauvin Murder Trial Verdict](#)
- [Teaching about Racism, Violence, Inequity and Criminal Justice System](#)
- [Race Talk: Engaging Young People in Conversations about Race and Racism](#)

Key Words

abolition
 accountable
 activist
 advocate
 alternative
 carceral
 consent decree
 consternation
 contentious

- Prepare “The Purpose of Policing Statements” to be projected for whole class viewing.
- “Police reform, defunding, and abolition, explained” (Vox, July 16, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/21312191/police-reform-defunding-abolition-black-lives-matter-protests>), one copy for each student
- Reform, Transform or Abolish? (one copy for each student)

PROCEDURES



Information Sharing

1. Begin the lesson by asking: *Why is policing and law enforcement in the news lately? What have you heard about why and how policing needs to change?* Have students share their thoughts.
2. Depending on what students share in response to the question, share some or all the [information of high-profile police-involved deaths, 2014–2021](#).
3. After sharing this information, engage students in a brief discussion by asking: *What is new information for you? What is surprising? What more do you want to know?*



The Purpose of Policing

1. Ask students: *What is the purpose of policing in the U.S.? What do we need police and law enforcement for?* Have students jot some ideas down and share those briefly. Then share the “Purpose of Policing Statements” by posting them on the board/smart board for students’ consideration. Read them aloud, or have students take turns reading aloud.
2. After reading these statements, ask students: *Is there anything here that particularly resonates with you?* Have students add to their notes anything they particularly like or find compelling. These notes will begin to form their own mission statement about the purpose of policing.

Note: If time permits, invite students to do research and find additional police purpose/vision statements to inform their own.

3. Explain to students that they will next read an article about different kinds of changes to the way policing is handled, and they should be thinking, as they read it, about the purpose of policing.



Reading Activity

1. Distribute the article, “[Police reform, defunding, and abolition, explained](#)” to all students and give them 15–20 minutes to read it silently or read aloud together with students taking turns reading.

Alternative: Have students read the article for homework the evening before. Direct students to underline specific ideas for making changes to policing that they see in the reading.

2. After reading, engage students in a discussion by asking some or all the following questions:

- What are some of the big ideas discussed in the article?
- What do the three perspectives (reform, defund, abolish) have in common?
- What are some ways in which the three perspectives (reform, defund, abolish) differ?
- What are some of the services that the police currently provide that the article suggests may be handled by other professionals or governmental departments?
- What impact does “bad policing” have on individuals and society at large?
- What are some data points shared in the article that impact your thinking?

Key Words (cont.)

corruption
 decriminalization
 de-escalation
 defund
 delegitimize
 divest
 enforcement
 enlightened
 entrenched
 idealist
 infrastructure
 interventionists
 institution
 Ku Klux Klan (KKK)
 legitimacy
 opposition
 oppression
 polarization
 reform
 skeptical
 slave patrols
 transform
 utopians

- How did the article challenge your prior thinking?
- To what extent do you think our society needs to think differently about policing? How so?
- Did you find yourself gravitating to one approach more than the others? Please explain.
- What did you learn that you didn't know before? What was surprising?
- What are some of the changes to policing referenced in the article? (**Note:** When students share these proposed changes, start recording their ideas on the board/smart board.)



Reform, Transform or Abolish?

1. Following up on the last question above, explain that we are now going to discuss different kinds of police changes, and then organize them into three categories. Have students look up the words “reform,” “transform” and “abolish” by using online and print dictionaries. Have them share their definitions and come to the following definitions (or a definition that is close to these):

Reform: To improve something by removing or correcting faults or problems.

Transform: To change something completely and usually in a positive way.

Abolish: To completely do away with or put an end to something.

2. Based on the article they just read and other ideas they've heard about changes in policing, brainstorm a list of changes that are proposed to take place, recording those on the board/smart board. The list might include some of the following ideas (you can add some of these):
 - Require body and dashboard cameras for police officers and their vehicles.
 - End qualified immunity (qualified immunity shields state and local government officials, such as police officers, from legal liability for claims that the officer violated their rights, as long as the officer is not violating clearly established laws).
 - Ban no-knock warrants (no-knock warrants are issued by a judge and allow law enforcement to enter a property without immediate prior notification of the residents, such as by a knock or doorbell).
 - End chokeholds.
 - Prohibit racial, religious and other discriminatory profiling by law enforcement agencies.
 - Mandate training against racial, religious and other discriminatory profiling.
 - Create a national police misconduct registry to prevent police officers who are fired or pushed out for bad performance from being hired by other agencies.
 - Use federal grants to help communities establish commissions and task forces to study police reforms.
 - Address police militarization by limiting how much military-grade equipment is awarded to state and local law enforcement agencies.
 - Redirect funds from police budgets to social services, such as those that address domestic violence, substance abuse, homelessness, mental health, and other services.
 - Pass laws that reduce police use of deadly force.
 - Require police officers to attend training to reduce racial profiling and excessive force.
 - Require independent investigations (not the local police department) of all cases where police kill or seriously injure civilians.
 - Appoint special prosecutors in officer-related shootings or other killings.
 - Recruit and hire more Black, Latinx and female police officers.
 - Establish an all-civilian community oversight structure with discipline power.
 - Implement “community policing” models.

- End police department quotas for tickets and arrests.
- Reduce crime by investing more money in education, health care, etc. and spend less on law enforcement and the criminal justice system.
- Instead of police managing traffic violations, use automated enforcement and specialized trained civilian first responders instead.

Note: If time permits, have students research and learn more about some of these approaches.

3. After compiling the list, distribute a copy of the [Reform, Transform or Abolish?](#) worksheet to each student. Working alone or in pairs, have students place some or all the brainstormed ideas into these three categories: reform, transform or abolish. Give students ten minutes for this task.
4. Reconvene the class and as time permits, have students share what they included in each category. If there is disagreement as to where an idea is placed, have those students each explain and make a case for why they placed the proposed change in that category.

What is Your Vision of Policing and Public Safety?

1. Ask students: *Considering all you know now, what is your vision for policing and public safety for the future?* Recall conversation above and have them come up with their own mission or statement of purpose about policing in the U.S.
2. After coming up with their mission/statement of purpose, have students identify how they want to change, transform or abolish policing and why. Have students do additional research and use information that they have learned in the lesson. Invite them to engage in the writing process to write an essay and/or speech that answers the following questions:
 - What is your vision or statement of purpose for policing in the U.S.?
 - What are some of the issues and problems you see in policing today?
 - What changes need to take place?
 - What would you change, exclude or add and why?
 - Based on your vision and changes you want to make, how would policing and public safety look differently?
 - Describe a day in the life in their neighborhood (or an imagined neighborhood) with this vision of policing.
3. Have students share their essays or deliver their speeches in a whole class presentation.

Closing

Show students an imaginary line in the classroom. Explain (and show them) that at one end is “no changes” and the other end is “abolition.” Closer to “no changes” is “reform” and somewhere in the middle is “transform.” Have students consider where they currently would place themselves on the line in terms of how they feel policing needs to change. After they have situated themselves, ask a few to share why they’re standing where they are.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- [Fatal Force Database](#) (*The Washington Post*)
- [A Discussion about How to Reform Policing](#) (*The New York Times*, June 13, 2020)
- [“Cops are almost never prosecuted and convicted for use of force”](#) (Vox, November 14, 2018)
- [“Defund the Police? We’ve Been Doing That to Education for Years”](#) (Education Week, July 29, 2020)
- [“How I Became a Police Abolitionist”](#) (*The Atlantic*, July 6, 2020)
- [“Over half of police-involved killings in 2020 began after non-violent incidents”](#) (Axios, April 12, 2021)

- “The major police reforms enacted since George Floyd's death” (Axios, October 1, 2020)
- “With Slow Progress on Federal Level, Police Reform Remains Patchwork Across U.S.” (NPR, April 27, 2021)

Common Core Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
R2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
Writing
W1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
W4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
W7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
Speaking and Listening
SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
SL4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
Language
L4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.
L6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

CASEL's SEL Competencies

COMPETENCIES
Self-Awareness: The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts.
Self-Management: The abilities to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations.
Social Awareness: The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, & contexts.
Relationship Skills: The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups.
Responsible Decision-Making: The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations.

Information of High-Profile Police-Involved Deaths, 2014–2021

- In 2014, the police-involved deaths of Michael Brown (Ferguson, MO) and Eric Garner (New York, NY) ignited the Black Lives Matter movement. That movement, which began after the killing of Trayvon Martin, gained momentum and public acknowledgment after these two high profile cases. Neither of the police officers involved in their deaths were indicted (i.e., formally charged with a crime). In the wake of those deaths and accompanying protests, many advocated for police reform, and some police departments made changes. The city of Ferguson, MO entered into a Consent Decree with the Department of Justice (DOJ) to overhaul the city's courts and ensure that police would protect citizens' rights. (Consent decrees are court enforceable documents that govern efforts to resolve/address DOJ findings of pattern and practice of misconduct that violate provisions of the U.S. constitution and/or federal law.)
- In the aftermath of these high-profile cases in 2014, the Obama Administration convened a "President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing" which issued a comprehensive report with [59 recommendations](#). In addition, activists recommended police changes including [Campaign Zero](#).
- Since then, there continued to be killings of Black, Latinx and Native American people by the police, many recorded on video. Yet, it is still very rare for police officers to get arrested, prosecuted or convicted for shootings and excessive uses of force.
- In May 2020, George Floyd was killed by then-Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, who kneeled on Floyd's neck for more than nine minutes while Floyd pleaded that he could not breathe. Three other police officers stood by, watched and did not intervene; they have been charged with aiding and abetting second-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter. The killing was recorded on video by a bystander and the entire world could view it immediately. Following Floyd's murder, one of the largest protest movements in U.S. history took place along with protest and activism around the world. There was an outcry for reform, "defund the police," a re-envisioning of public safety and some called for abolishing the police.
- In April 2021, Derek Chauvin was found guilty on all three counts with which he was charged: second-degree and third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter. The murder, trial and conviction were extremely high profile. During the time period between when George Floyd was killed and Derek Chauvin was convicted, there continues to be a large and steady outcry from the general public that we need to change our policing, so these murders will stop.
- A total of [985 people have been shot and killed by the police](#) in the last year. Although half of the people shot and killed by police are white, Black Americans are shot at a disproportionate rate and are [2.8 times more likely](#) to be killed by police than white people.
- The [Mapping Police Violence](#) database reports that 58% of police-involved killings in the U.S. in 2020 began when officers responded to non-violent incidents. This fact is cause for investigation into changes that need to take place.
- Over the years, there have been a variety of efforts to reform or change police practices, coming from Department of Justice (DOJ) investigations, consent decrees, and changes police departments have made themselves. Following the George Floyd murder, federal legislation, the [George Floyd Justice in Policing Act of 2020](#), was introduced in Congress. The bill's stated goal is to "to hold law enforcement accountable for misconduct in court, improve transparency through data collection, and reform police training and policies."
- Since George Floyd's murder, there have been [police reforms](#) enacted in cities and states across the country, including dozens of school boards who have voted to end or reduce the presence of police in schools.

The Purpose of Policing Statements

- “The purpose of law enforcement in a free society is to promote public safety and uphold the rule of law so that individual liberty may flourish.” (*Jeremiah Mosteller, “Role of Police in America,” Charles Koch Institute*)
- “To build trust between citizens and their peace officers so that all components of a community are treating one another fairly and justly and are invested in maintaining public safety in an atmosphere of mutual respect.” (*Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015*)
- “To protect the dignity and human rights of all, to be the protectors and champions of the Constitution.” (*Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015*)
- The highest duties of government, and therefore the police, are to safeguard freedom, to preserve life and property, to protect the constitutional rights of citizens and maintain respect for the rule of law by proper enforcement thereof, and, thereby, to preserve democratic processes.” (*American Bar Association, Police Function*)
- To enhance the quality of life in New York City by working in partnership with the community to enforce the law, preserve peace, protect the people, reduce fear, and maintain order. (*New York Police Department, Mission Page*)

- “The fundamental purpose and role of the police in a free society is the protection of constitutional guarantees, maintenance of public order, crime prevention and suppression, and dutiful response to the needs of the community.” ([Minneapolis Police Department Policy and Procedure Manual](#))
- “To enhance the quality of life in the City of Houston by working cooperatively with the public and within the framework of the U.S. Constitution to enforce the laws, preserve the peace, reduce fear and provide for a safe environment.” ([Houston Police Department Mission Statement](#))

Reform, Transform or Abolish?

Name: _____

Directions: Put some of the ideas generated for changing and improving policing in the categories below where you think they best fit.

REFORM (To improve something by removing or correcting faults or problems.)	TRANSFORM (To improve something by removing or correcting faults or problems.)	ABOLISH (To completely do away with or put an end to something.)
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.
5.	5.	5.
6.	6.	6.
Additional thoughts I have...		
Questions I still have...		