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8 Can't Wait, explained

A new push for eight concrete police reforms is promising, albeit a bit unproven.

By Matthew Yglesias | @mattyglesias | matt@vox.com | Jun 5, 2020, 4:00pm EDT



New Yorkers protest over the death of George Floyd on June 4, 2020, in New York City. | Tayfun Coskun/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

Officials across the country are desperate to take swift, concrete steps to respond to protests against police brutality. Campaign Zero, which emerged from the police protests in Ferguson, Missouri, has come up with ideas that could fit the bill: They don't cost any money and could be implemented very fast.

The hashtag for the campaign, #8CantWait, is trending on social media. It's been **endorsed by Oprah and Ariana Grande**, and DeRay Mckesson is talking about it everywhere from **GQ** to **Fast Company** to **The Bill Simmons Podcast**.

The ideas include conduct remedies like banning chokeholds, changing reporting systems for use of force incidents, requiring officers to intervene when they witness misconduct, and more.

It's not entirely clear how big of a bite these measures would take out of police violence against civilians. But at the very least, they would respond to the public desire for police to make tough concessions while remaining more politically palatable to cautious politicians faced with the alternative rallying cry of **"defund the police."** The idea of **cutting police budgets polls poorly**, and numbers indicate that **already adopted reforms have made a difference** in terms of falling numbers of police killings of African Americans and unarmed people, especially in big cities. In that context, the 8 Can't Wait menu of further reforms is a concrete agenda for fast action.

Police organizations themselves, of course, tend to portray any move toward any restriction of police autonomy as a mortal threat to officers and public safety. But as the country continues to reel from multiple intersecting crises, a set of fast-moving, logistically tractable reforms is very appealing.

The eight that can't wait

Police departments have guidelines for the use of force. An officer whose use of force is within the guidelines is operating "by the book" and won't get in trouble even if he seriously injures a suspect or a bystander. But an officer who violates the guidelines is putting his career at risk.

Public attention tends to focus on the most egregious incidents of breaking with these policies — scenarios in which a civilian ends up dead and the misconduct is so flagrant as to potentially form the basis for a criminal charge. But there are lots of encounters between officials and civilians that are violent without being fatal, and also plenty of things that are not illegal that nonetheless shouldn't happen.

The essence of the campaign is eight procedural rules that Campaign Zero claims "data proves" can conjointly decrease police violence by 72 percent.



Campaign Zero

Some of these are fairly simple to understand.

When you place a person in a chokehold or a stranglehold, there is always a chance that things will go badly wrong. Instructing officers not to use these holds and training them in other modes of restraint will likely reduce deaths. Shooting at moving vehicles is inherently dangerous, and most departmental guidelines restrict it to some extent, but 8 Can't Wait calls for banning it altogether.

Others are a bit less transparent to those unfamiliar with policing jargon. A comprehensive reporting requirement means that officers need to report each time they use force or threaten to use force against a civilian. A duty to intervene rule requires bystander officers to step in if a fellow officer is using excessive force and formally requires police officers to break the blue wall of silence and report such incidents to supervisors. The use of force continuum is a specific set of requirements governing what kinds of weapons can be used versus what levels of resistance. And a deescalation requirement mandates that officers try to secure their personal safety through distance and communication before resorting to force.

These ideas all cut against officers' typical demands for maximum autonomy and minimal accountability while also remaining comfortably within the technocratic, meliorist domain rather than amounting to a radical transformation of policing.

Samuel Sinyangwe, a data scientist with Campaign Zero, tells me that's no coincidence. The point of the list, he says, was to assemble "policies that can make a big difference and that can be implemented most quickly by cities across the country."

Implementing new training regimes at scale across the country would take time. Creating a new corps of unarmed mediators and mental health professionals who could serve as crisis responders would likely take longer. 8 Can't Wait is about policy changes that could be made in a very rapid time frame. But do they work?

The evidence for 8 Can't Wait

Sinyangwe pointed me to the group's **research basis** document laying out their case.

One study shows a **fall in police shootings in New York** after a policy change in the 1970s. A similar study looks at **policy changes in Philadelphia**. A study of the impact of the *Tennessee v. Gardner* Supreme Court decision finds that a **change in legal doctrines** around use of force led to a nationwide fall in police shootings. These are not gold-standard experimental designs, but they meet a normal person's standard for being evidence on which to base a policy proposal.

The fundamental basis for 8 Can't Wait is a **big correlational study** of the relationship between cities' demographic characteristics, their use of force policies, and their level of police killings of civilians. And the results here are very clear: Adopting these policies is statistically associated with a lower level of police killings, whether judged per person or per arrest.

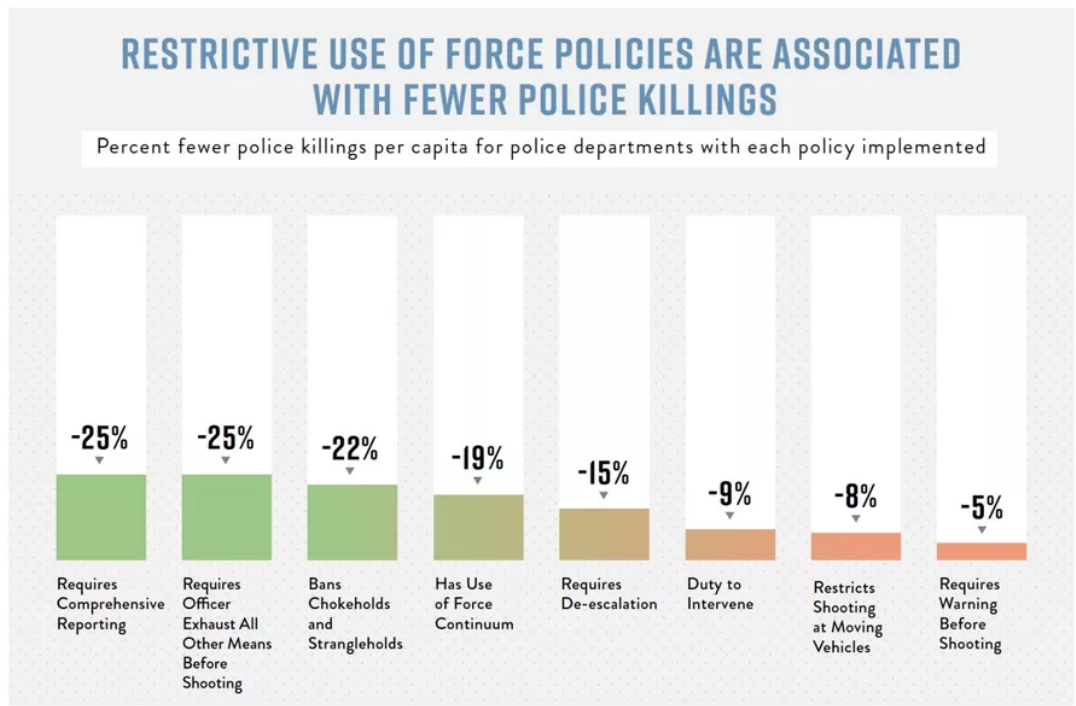


Figure 4: Use of Force Policies Associated with Fewer Police-Involved Killings per Population.

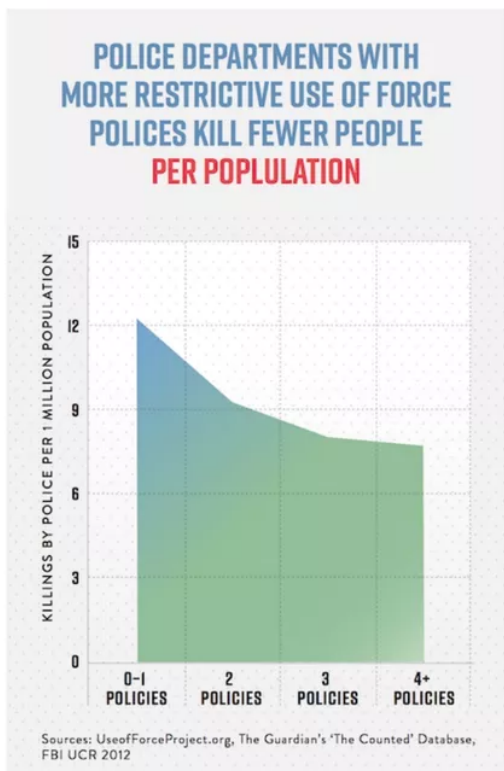


Figure 5: More Restrictive Use of Force Policies Predict Fewer Police-Involved Killings per Population.

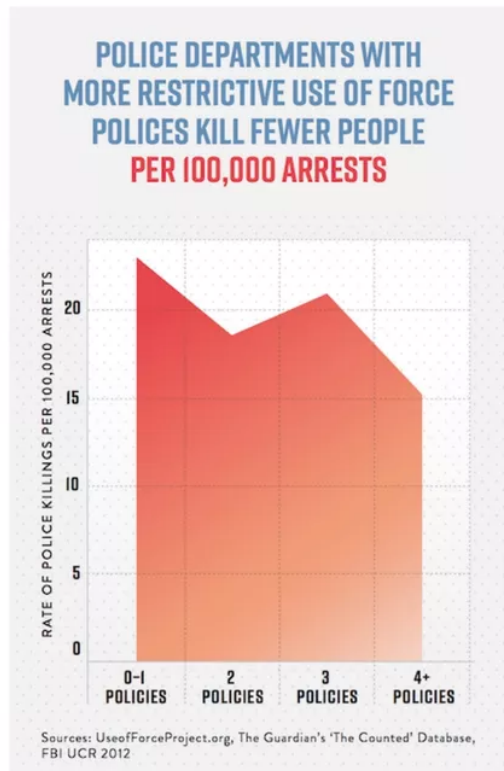


Figure 6: More Restrictive Use of Force Policies Predict Fewer Police-Involved Killings per Arrest.

Use of Force Project

I asked Jennifer Doleac, an economist at Texas A&M and the director of the Justice Tech Lab, what she thinks about the study. She pointed out that it doesn't really tell us *why* the

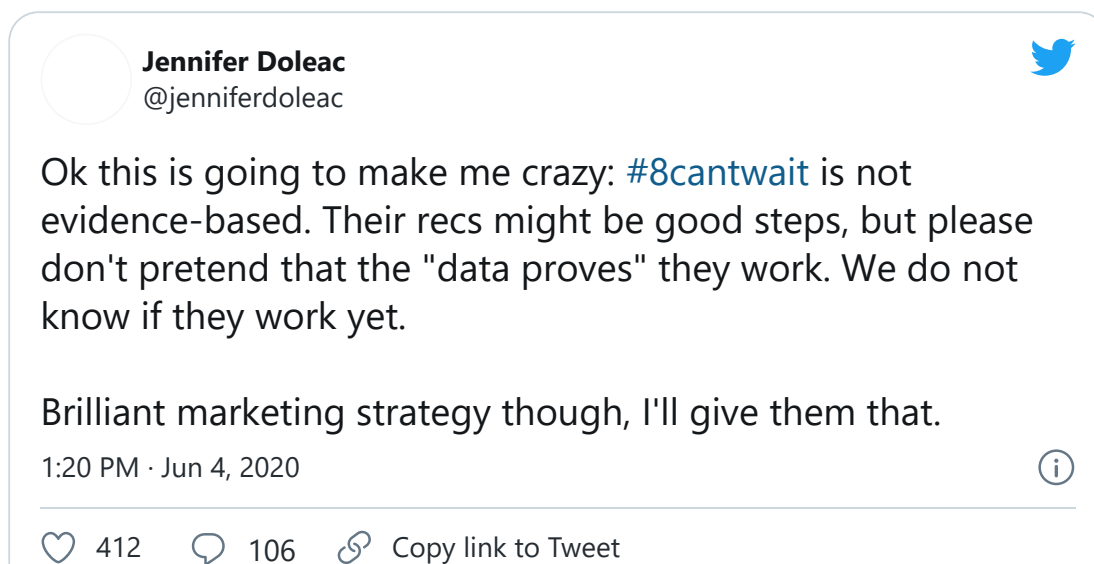
statistical relationship exists.

“Maybe there are other factors that explain differences between, say, San Francisco and Birmingham, AL” **she tweets**. “Or maybe these policies make a difference! Right now we can’t tell.”

Doleac’s research specialties are in crime and racial discrimination, and she hosts a podcast called ***Probable Causation***, a good sign that she’s a stickler for causal inference.

“I can’t think of rigorous evidence related to any of their 8 recs,” she says.

On Twitter later in the day, she called it a “brilliant marketing strategy” that “is not evidence-based.”



America needs quick fixes

As a journalist, I would not be comfortable making the kind of definitive proclamations Campaign Zero has about its ideas. Cataloging use of force policies and characterizing the relationship between their use and outcomes of interest is a valuable contribution, but there are a lot of questions about how rigorously enforced departments’ stated policies are, so there is room for doubt as to whether we could really expect the kind of enormous effect sizes they claim.

At the same time, there’s a case that Doleac is being too fussy and academic about this. Sinyangwe isn’t pulling random statistical correlations here. The theoretical basis for believing that instructing officers to be more cautious about the use of deadly force will lead to fewer deaths is pretty clear.

Most of all, right now in the United States there are thousands of people protesting daily in cities across the country. There are police officers staging often-violent counterprotests, beating demonstrators and journalists, and even causing a diplomatic incident with Australia. There are people looting and vandalizing in the shadows of the protest. And all the while, a deadly **pandemic** is raging.

Under the circumstances, it would be extremely useful for political leaders to be able to offer protesters some fast-acting concessions. The country would probably benefit from something like a blue-ribbon commission or a National Academies study to identify best practices and rigorous evidence over an extended period, but promising angry people a study isn't going to cut it.

The 8 Can't Wait agenda is extremely well-constructed for speed — it's right in the name — in a way that is deeper than branding. Since any given recommendation on the list is in effect in at least some American cities, all a place needs to do to become an eight-for-eight city is copy some stuff out of other cities' police regulations. The process moves quickly, and the logical relationship between these measures and reduced violence is clear and obvious.

Will universal adoption of all eight really generate the kind of massive fall in police violence this study indicates? There's plenty of reason for skepticism. But the ideas are genuinely promising, they are based on some evidence, and they fit the political needs of the moment very well. Mayors and governors looking to show a good-faith desire to tackle the problem of excessive police violence without lapsing into radicalism could do a lot worse than to pick up this message.

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