

Photos show how policing has evolved in the US since its beginnings in the 1600s

Frank Olito Apr 26, 2021, 3:00 PM





The evolution of a police officer. Bettmann & Anadolu Agency/ Getty

The modern police force started in the early 1900s, but its origins date back to the colonies.

In the South in the 1700s, patrol groups were created to stop runaway slaves.

Now police departments across the country are facing accusations of brutality and racial profiling.

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Before a formal police system was put in place, colonies were protected by a "night watch," dating back to the 1630s.





Watchmen in the 1600s. Universal History Archive / Getty

The night watch was made up of men who volunteered for a night's worth of work. Sometimes people were put on the watch as a form of punishment for committing a crime. These watchmen, however, were known to sleep and drink while on duty.

The first night watch was founded in Boston in the 1630s and then New York followed suit in the 1650s.

During this time period, the wealthiest in the colonies also hired people for protection. Those hired for protection were mostly criminals.

The history of the police in the South differs from other parts of the country because of the prominence of slavery.



Patrollers in the 1800s. Time Life Pictures / Getty

The first form of policing in the South was known as slave patrol, which began in the colonies of Carolina in 1704. The

patrol was usually made up of three to six men riding horseback and carrying whips, ropes, and even guns.

The group's main duties included chasing and hunting escaped slaves, releasing terror on slave communities to prevent riots, and to keep plantation owners in check, according to Ben Fountain's book, ["Beautiful Country Burn Again."](#)

The slave patrols lasted until the Civil War and eventually gave way to the Ku Klux Klan.

In the north, as more immigrants moved into cities by the mid-1800s, citizens looked for a more formal way to keep order.





Riot in the colonies. MPI/ Getty

Immigrants from [Germany and Ireland](#) began settling in [cities](#) like Boston and New York between 1820 and 1860. This new group of immigrants clashed with original settlers from England and The Netherlands. As the original settlers argued that the new immigrants were ruining American society, crime

began to rise. The cities saw mobs, public lewdness, disorderly conduct, and prostitution.

The cities were ill-equipped to keep order and the night watch was rendered useless.

In response, the first official police force was established in Boston in 1838.





Police officer in the 1800s. Bettmann / Getty

Shortly after, in 1845, [New York began its own force](#), followed by Chicago, New Orleans, and Cincinnati. By the 1880s, almost every major city in the country had a police force.

Almost all of the police forces were structured similarly, and their main duty was to prevent crime and keep order.



The New York Police Department in the late 1800s. MPI / Getty

Each police department was public and bureaucratic, had full-time policemen, and reported to a governmental authority.

It wasn't until the 1850s that the cities started developing detective units whose main jobs were to investigate crimes.

In the 1800s, there were reports of corruption among some police forces.





Police officer in New York City. Alexander Alland, Jr. / Getty

At the time, America was a political machine, meaning local businesses and police forces reported to a single political leader in exchange for a reward. As Time magazine reported, this led to corrupt politicians and corrupt police officers. For example, some politicians paid off officers to ignore certain groups' illegal activities.

This led to the start of private police forces, like the Pinkerton National Detective Agency.

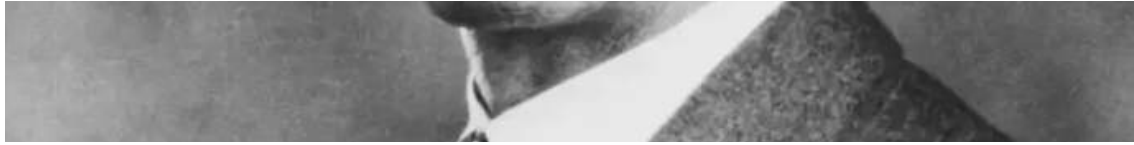


Allan Pinkerton. Photo 12 / Getty

Allan Pinkerton was an immigrant from Scotland who created the Pinkerton National Detective Agency, which was made up of private detectives who stopped train robberies and prevented strikes.

In the early 1900s, the police forces made dramatic changes, thanks to August Vollmer.





August Vollmer. Bettmann / Getty

The early 1900s marked the beginning of a new police system. August Vollmer, "the father of modern policing," stressed the importance of sociology, social work, psychology, and management in police work. In this system, officers patrolled the neighborhoods they lived in on foot. Vollmer also made sure policemen went to college and even created a separate system for juveniles to be tried and punished instead of trying them as adults.

Federal and state police forces were born in the early 1900s.



Police emptying alcohol into the sewage drain. Keystone-France / Getty

During Prohibition, cops were tasked with stopping the sale and distribution of alcohol. At times, the police would confiscate the

illegal substance and dump it into sewage drains.

At the same time, organized crime began to take shape, and protests, riots, and petty crimes were also on the rise. The local police forces could not keep up.

In response, the Department of Treasury created "T-Men," a group of 4,000 men who were charged with enforcing the laws of Prohibition. State governments also started creating their own police forces in the early 1900s to stop the spread of crime in cities.

In the 1920s, J. Edgar Hoover created the FBI and changed the face of police work.





Policeman in his cruiser in the '50s. Three Lions / Getty

Instead of following Vollmer's model, which concentrated on social work and psychology, Hoover made sure local forces were fighting street crimes. Under this new system, police officers were less connected to the neighborhoods they worked in as officers patrolled neighborhoods by car.

The '60s marked a turning point in policing.



Race riots. Hulton Archive / Getty

During the 1960s, African Americans began to challenge the way police were treating their communities. To protest the treatment and racial profiling, riots, boycotts, and peaceful protests broke out in the US, mainly in the South. In response, the police used harsh tactics to keep order, including tear gas, high-pressure water hoses, and attack dogs. Some of these events were televised nationally.

Much like the civil rights movement, in 1969, the Stonewall riots against New

York City police sparked another movement.





Stonewall Inn in 1969. New York Post Archives / Getty

Policemen at the time were also profiling the LGBTQ community in cities all over the US by raiding bars and nightclubs and arresting patrons, especially at the Stonewall Inn, according to CNN.

On June 28, 1969, policemen raided the Stonewall Inn in New York City and started arresting people. In response, the patrons and neighborhood residents fought back, starting a riot that lasted six days. The fight against the police sparked the gay rights movement.

In the mid-'70s, studies found that policing was unsuccessful and departments attempted to make changes throughout the late 1900s.





Community policing. Steve Liss / Getty

Studies, like in [Kansas City, Missouri](#), found that patrolling police cars in neighborhoods did not help reduce crime, nor did it ease people's fears. In fact, it [increased the community's dissatisfaction with police forces](#).

In response to these findings, some departments attempted a return to community policing. This form of policing placed minority officers in minority neighborhoods. This model also incorporated the community in helping police the neighborhood. The police officers were meant to become close and familiar with the residents in the community. This became increasingly popular in the '90s. By the early 2000s, two-thirds

of police forces across the US implemented community policing policies.

In the 1990s, crime rates in the US started to decline, so that it had roughly halved by 2015. While the exact cause is not known, research cited by the Brennan Center for Justice found that hiring more police officers helped decrease crime — in fact, according to the research, up to 10 percent of the decrease in crime in the 1990s was due to hiring more police. Another theory is that technology used by police, such as their crime tracking system, improved in the 1990s, helping them recognize and address trends more effectively.

In 1999, the police's response to the Columbine school shooting changed policing forever.





Police at Columbine High School during the 1999 shooting. [Ed Andrieski/AP](#)

On April 20, 1999, two students opened fire at Columbine High School, killing 13 people. At the time, police responded by setting up a perimeter before going after the suspects. The response was widely criticized because of the amount of time the police took before moving into the school.

Since then, the police have listened to the critiques and transformed their response to mass shootings. Now, one to four officers rush into a mass shooting site and follow the sound of the gun to confront the shooter.

This technique has been successful in a string of US school shootings over the past few years. In fact, 75% of mass shootings since Columbine have required police to confront and shoot the suspect at the scene. Some police forces have been lauded for

how they've handled active shooters, such as officers who were celebrated for their quick response to a shooting at a Republican congressional baseball practice in 2017.

In 2001, after 9/11, policing changed yet again as departments shifted their focus to counterterrorism.



NYPD counter-terrorism. Kathy Willens/ AP

On September 11, 2001, 2,000 NYPD and Port Authority police officers responded to the scene when two planes flew into the

World Trade Center in New York City. First responders were called heroes for risking their lives and running towards danger.

The terrorist attack also affected the future of policing. The National Criminal Justice Reference Service found that departments "have evolved to include not only counterterrorism but also the adoption of an all-crimes approach, with the goal of striking a balance between criminal intelligence and intelligence related to terrorist threats." These forces created counterterrorism units that worked directly with state and federal agencies.

Immediately after 9/11, police work was emphasized and revered in some communities. Other communities, however, experienced racial profiling as a result of 9/11.

Throughout the 21st century, police have been called out for their unfair treatment of Black people and other minorities.





A police officer administering a stop-and-frisk. New York Daily News / Getty

"Since September 11, our nation has engaged in a policy of institutionalized racial and ethnic profiling," [US Rep. John Conyers](#) said in 2002. "If Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were alive today ... he would tell us we must not allow the horrific acts of terror our nation has endured to slowly and subversively destroy the foundation of our democracy."

The American Civil Liberties Union agreed with Conyers in [a 2009 report](#).

"The practice of racial profiling by members of law enforcement at the federal, state, and local levels remains a widespread and

pervasive problem throughout the United States, impacting the lives of millions of people in African American, Asian, Latino, South Asian, Arab and Muslim communities," the ACLU wrote.

Police departments also began tactics like New York City's stop-and-frisk, in which police officers stopped anyone on the street they deemed suspicious and patted the person down. But critics said the tactic was a form of racial profiling because the majority of people detained were young Black and Latino men. Evidence showed that police were disproportionately targeting minorities in these cases. In 2013, the mayor announced to reform the controversial policy.

In 2014, a New York City police officer put Eric Garner in a chokehold while arresting him, leading to Garner's death.



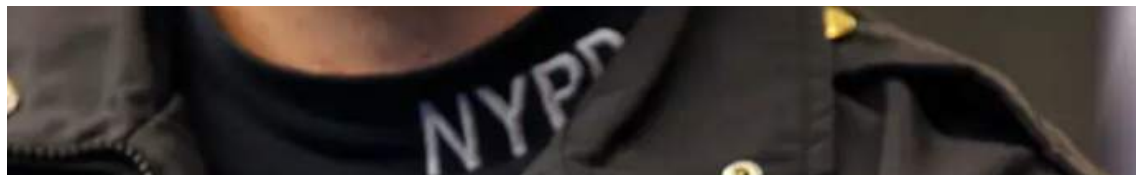


Eric Garner. YouTube

On July 17, 2014, [New York police officer Daniel Pantaleo](#) attempted to arrest Eric Garner on suspicion of selling illegal cigarettes. The officer put Garner in a chokehold and wrestled him to the ground. Garner said "I can't breathe" 11 times. He was pronounced dead at the hospital. The entire incident was caught on camera, sparking a national outcry. People all over the country highlighted the disproportionate treatment of Black people in the US by the police.

It sparked protests all over the country, demanding the firing and arrest of Pantaleo. A grand jury [did not indict Pantaleo](#), and federal authorities declined to bring civil rights charges against him. He was fired in 2019 and [lost a bid to get his job back last year](#).

Some departments attempted to make changes, like implementing body cameras.





A police body camera. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton

After the death of Eric Garner and another case the same year — the [shooting of Michael Brown](#) — the public called for mandatory body cameras. The hope was that police would reduce racial profiling and could be held accountable for their actions. On the flip side, [departments hoped body cams would increase transparency and help solve crimes quicker.](#)

In 2016, [almost half of the police forces in the US implemented policies that required body cameras for police officers.](#) Only

Nevada and South Carolina require all officers to wear the equipment. However, studies show that wearing a body camera does not significantly change an officer's behavior, [according to Pew](#).

While body cameras have captured violent and contentious moments between police and civilians, they have also caught acts of community work carried out by officers. In March 2020, for example, a supervisor in Gwinnett County, Georgia, was [auditing body cameras](#) and found footage of two officers taking a birthday cake to a little girl after finding out her mom couldn't afford one.

In 2020, a police officer was caught on camera kneeling on George Floyd's neck in Minneapolis.





A chain portrait of George Floyd. [Jim Mone/AP](#)

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was arrested on the suspicion that he used a counterfeit \$20 bill in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Officer Derek Chauvin said Floyd resisted arrest. Chauvin put his knee on Floyd's neck for eight minutes as Floyd said "I can't breathe." He was unconscious when he was taken to hospital, where he was pronounced dead. Video of the incident went viral.

Chauvin was charged with third-degree murder and manslaughter.

During the summer of 2020, protests erupted all over the US, demanding institutional change in police work, and some people called for the police to be defunded.





Protesters in Minneapolis. AP

The protests started in Minnesota, where Floyd was killed, but unrest broke out in cities all over the US. These protests led to arson, looting, and violence. Some police officers responded with tear gas, by running cruisers through crowds, and with riot guns, while others stood in solidarity with the protesters.

As tensions rose across the country, people demanded changes with policing in the US.

In 2021, officer Derek Chauvin was found guilty of the murder of George Floyd, and many hope it will spark change in policing.





Derek Chauvin watches as his attorney gives his closing argument. CourtTV/Pool camera

On April 20, 2021, Chauvin was found guilty on all three counts: second-degree murder, third-degree murder, and second-degree manslaughter.

As Black communities around the country celebrated the verdict, many were cautious to call it a victory or justice.

"This case has set the bar on what holding a police officer accountable in America should look like," Chanda Smith Baker, the chief impact officer and senior vice president of the

Minneapolis Foundation, [told Politico](#). "This verdict brings closure to our community in this case. However, it should inspire us to continue to push for significant change in our criminal legal system and the system of policing."

Likewise, Cynthia Lee, a professor of criminal law at The George Washington University Law School, [told Politico](#) "this verdict is historic."

"The verdict can be seen as the first step in a long road to recovery," Lee said. "We need to hold officers accountable when they cross the line and abuse their authority. This verdict shows that is possible in America."