

## Chapter 13

# DATA BURDENS: EPISTEMOLOGIES OF EVIDENCE IN POLICE REFORM AND ABOLITION MOVEMENTS

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In the summer of 2020, the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin widened an already old and painful rift around systemic inequality grounded in racism, made more pronounced by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Prior to Floyd's murder, racial health disparities put people of colour at 5.3 times the risk for contracting and suffering acute complications from the COVID-19 pandemic than whites (CDC 2020). Even as pandemic conditions slowed commerce and shut down schools, medical facilities and businesses, the rate at which police killed citizens remained at pre-pandemic levels. In the first few months of the pandemic, police also murdered Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Tommie McGlothen in Shreveport, Louisiana, and Daniel Prude in Rochester, New York, to name just a few of the cases that contributed to a summer of civil unrest across the country and the world.

While this rift had long been clear and palpable, the social and institutional breakdown in the face of the pandemic heightened the urgency of addressing structural inequality wrought by centuries of practices mobilised to sustain white supremacy and capitalism. While COVID-19 had physically isolated people for the most part, activists used online platforms to organise demonstrations, virtual teach-ins, legislative petitions and community mutual aid work around the abolition of policing, many focusing at the grassroots, city-level scale of reform. At the same time, surveillance technologies proliferated, not only to quash these acts of protest (Díaz and Levinson-Waldman 2020; Fowler 2020) but to monitor and control parts of life that the pandemic had forced online (Chin 2020; Cohen 2020; Koonin 2020; Rodriguez and Windwehr 2020; US Courts 2020; Vitak and Zimmer 2020). In

online spaces, with their attendant data capture, storage and obfuscated data-sharing practices, Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Muslim, immigrant and LGBTQIA communities, as well as women and minors, are, as Tuck and Yang (2014: 1) note, 'often over-coded, that is, simultaneously hyper-surveilled and invisibilized/made invisible by the state, by police, and by technological design and deployment'. Contemporary technologies' simultaneous overcoding and surveillance of minoritised communities extend epistemic injustices and harmful social structures that authors of social epistemology and critical race theory have been writing about for over a century (Wells-Barnett 1892; Du Bois 1903; Lorde 1984; Collins 1990; Delgado and Stefancic 1993; Solórzano and Yosso 2002; Alcoff 2007; Fricker 2007; Mills 2007; Medina 2013). In this tradition, we use the term 'minoritised' to describe groups oppressed and pushed to the margins by existing social hierarchies that are maintained by the privileged (Muñoz 1999; Crooks and Currie 2021). Critical analyses of the deployment of these 'captivating technologies' in minoritised communities contend that they are primarily used to surveil and control citizens and normalise practices of oppression (Benjamin 2019a). Meanwhile, policy makers, journalists, academics, technologists and other powerful shapers of society too often demand statistical evidence of the disproportionate challenges facing communities of colour as a foundation to enact change; without credible data, those who are oppressed have been discredited, blamed for their own misfortunes or simply ignored, to name a few of the ways epistemic burdens exert their influence (Lorde 1984; Fricker 2007; Noble 2013; Pierre et al. 2021).

Our previous work deals with data around policing as part of the production and performance of power, as city-level police agencies play a major role in controlling the collection, classification and dissemination of data around police homicides of civilians, all while having a vested interest in drawing public attention away from police brutality (Currie et al. 2015, 2016). In this previous work, we noted a significant gap between those most vested in the public dissemination of this data and those having the authority over the data. Additionally, we described a variety of differences in the measurement and attributes of data on police violence, such as scale, granularity and semantics, which greatly affect the consistency and breadth with which this data can be appropriately collected and understood. Though we do not mean to discredit the value and necessity of statistical data and tools,

we advocate for a more nuanced understanding of the contextual constraints, power dynamics and perspectives at play in data on policing. The aim of this chapter draws from our previous work, but is distinct. Rather than studying processes around the production of local police data, with this chapter we offer a meditation on using data about police violence to bring about meaningful social change in the context of the city; to this end, we argue that reform-minded data efforts may be well meaning but do not offer the transformation so desperately needed. And although data about police violence in the US are not exclusive to cities, as the following examples will demonstrate, urban spaces are sites of particular intensity, both in the sense of the production of data about police violence as well as the city-level focus of civil society and advocacy-focused groups who collect and analyse them.

In what follows we reflect on efforts by local police agencies and civil society to bring greater transparency around police brutality, now five years from the date of our original study. In the next section, we give an overview of ten of the most populous American cities and nine civil society groups now doing this work. We explore the motivations of these reform-driven efforts around data production. We then propose that data gaps are not the problem, and creating better data will do little to end the harms of the neoliberal, white supremacist, carceral structure of society. After we work through these data-driven, accountability-focused reform efforts, we discuss how they disregard and undermine other types of evidence that abolition groups wield to defund or abolish policing. We conclude that though data-driven efforts to end harmful policing practices are a laudable step, unless they are followed up with meaningful structural change, they serve as little more than a pressure valve that continues to uphold the status quo of police brutality in the US and its disproportionate effects on communities of colour. We suggest that social problems like those of the carceral structure of society can only be truly addressed by the mobilisation of popular struggle around refusing and dismantling policing and carceral infrastructures, as seen in the abolition movement.

#### REFORMS IN OFFICIAL OPEN POLICE DATA

Government-led data projects have grown significantly in the last five years in response to ever-present evidence that police surveil, brutalise and seek to control minoritised communities at disproportionate rates.

Civilian deaths at the hands of police throughout 2014–15 sparked a national conversation around racist policing and exposed the alarming incompleteness of data on officer violence across the US – a failure long known to many scholars and activists (Sherman and Langworthy 1979; Loftin et al. 2003). In order to access data on police violence, citizens have traditionally had to file onerous Freedom of Information requests to specific agencies, or obtain county-level details through the FBI's Supplementary Homicide Report (SHR), which keeps agencies' self-reported records on 'Felon Killed by Police Officer' (code 81) (Sherman and Langworthy 1979; Federal Bureau of Investigation 2021). The SHR remains an inadequate account of these statistics, however, because it only publishes police homicides declared 'justified' (Fischer-Baum 2014), and many law enforcement agencies across the country are still not required to report these deaths. Data transparency policies remain specific to local law enforcement agencies and vary widely, and there is no legal nation-wide mandate for police agencies to report on these incidents.

To address the lack of transparency around police brutality, the FBI in 2017 launched a National Use-of-Force database to catalogue actions that resulted in the death or serious bodily injury of a person or the discharge of a firearm at a person (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2019). Like SHR, submission to this data collection effort remains voluntary; as of 2020, only 5,030 out of 18,514 law enforcement agencies throughout the United States have submitted. Also at the national level is the Police Data Initiative, begun by the Obama administration and now managed by the non-profit Police Foundation, but only 130 US law enforcement agencies provide data to this effort (Police Data Initiative 2021).

Since 2015, several US cities have also passed open data policies to make it easier for citizens to access data on police violence directly. These data typically tally 'use of force' (also called 'response to resistance' in some cases), 'officer-involved homicides' or 'officer-involved shootings'. Use of force reports typically offer data on incidents of struggle or violence between civilians and police, including the name of the people killed, their race and gender, whether they were armed or unarmed, incident location, and the agencies and race and gender of the officer responsible. Some departments have also begun publishing data on civilian complaints against police forces, as well as on vehicle and pedestrian stops. The data sometimes comes in downloadable files;

other times it is displayed on dashboards and digital maps for citizens to use to locate time- and place-specific information.

Police violence data reporting, however, still remains highly variable from city to city. Some, including those among the US's most populated cities, such as Houston, Phoenix and San Diego, do not publish any use of force data. Other cities report use of force because they are required to. The Chicago Police Department (CPD)'s dashboards detailing use of force and complaints against the CPD members, for instance, exist thanks to a 2018 consent decree, formed after the Illinois attorney general's office sued the CPD in reaction to documented patterns of excessive use of force by its officers (Chicago Police Department 2020).

In cities that publish use of force data, the data may remain aggregate, as with the New York Police Department's Use of Force dashboard (NYC Open Data 2020), made public on 1 January 2020 (NYPD 2020). The dashboard offers no contextual details for incidents, though since 2016 the NYPD also publishes annual Use of Force Reports as PDFs that give further details on weapons use (NYPD 2020).<sup>2</sup> The Los Angeles Police Department's Use of Force webpage, in contrast, has granular, incident-level details (LAPD n.d.) listing officer involved shootings and critical incidents from 2012 to 2017, with links to a page detailing a narrative of each incident,<sup>3</sup> and, in most cases, links to footage posted on YouTube from available video – often bodycams, but also surveillance cameras or aerial footage – as part of a 2018 video release policy (Los Angeles Police Department 2018).<sup>4</sup>

The Philadelphia Police Department website goes further, devoting a major section of its website to 'Accountability', with downloadable Police Reform reports, civilian complaints against police, and lists of officer-involved shootings going back to 2007,<sup>5</sup> including descriptions of the incident detailing the reason the officer was in the area and their interaction with the subject (Philadelphia Police Department 2021). The department also publishes an interactive map showing the geographic relationships between violent crime, sociodemographics and police activity, including officer-involved shootings and car and pedestrian stops, to show the department's increased training, oversight mechanisms and 'rigorous scrutiny to achieve the highest level of accountability'.

Some agencies explicitly link their use of force webpages to ideals of public trust, transparency and accountability (San Jose Police Department n.d.). The Chicago Police Department's Use of Force

**Table 13.1** Shows the US top ten most populated cities and whether they publish use of force and other police transparency data.

City	Publishes Use of Force data?	Publishes other types of accountability data	Source URL	Source of Use of Force policy
New York City	Yes		<a href="https://www1.nyc.gov/site/nypd/stats/reports-analysis/use-of-force.page">https://www1.nyc.gov/site/nypd/stats/reports-analysis/use-of-force.page</a>	NYPD Patrol Guide
Philadelphia	Yes	Complaints against Police, vehicle and pedestrian stops	<a href="https://www.phillypolice.com/accountability/index.html">https://www.phillypolice.com/accountability/index.html</a>	Use of Force directives
Los Angeles	Yes	Body cam footage	<a href="http://www.lapdonline.org/use_of_force">http://www.lapdonline.org/use_of_force</a>	Policy on Use of Force
Houston	No			
Phoenix	No			
San Diego	No			
Chicago	Yes	Complaints against police	<a href="https://home.chicagopolice.org/statistics-data/data-dashboards/use-of-force-dashboard/">https://home.chicagopolice.org/statistics-data/data-dashboards/use-of-force-dashboard/</a>	Use of Force Policy
San Antonio	Yes		<a href="https://www.sanantonio.gov/SAPD/Officer-Involved-Shooting">https://www.sanantonio.gov/SAPD/Officer-Involved-Shooting</a>	General Manual Procedure 501 – Response to Resistance
Dallas	Yes	Police response to resistance	<a href="https://www.dallaspolice.net/ois/ois">https://www.dallaspolice.net/ois/ois</a>	Texas HB 1036
San Jose	Yes		<a href="https://www.sjpd.org/records/crime-stats-maps/force-analysis-data">https://www.sjpd.org/records/crime-stats-maps/force-analysis-data</a>	Use of Force analysis reports

dashboard describes how the agency draws on the data to design its use of force practices, then subjects this process to public scrutiny. The Dallas Police Department also links the transparency around its officer-involved shooting data to citizens' trust and improved officer training, in order to review best practices in managing officer-involved shootings (Dallas Police Department n.d.).<sup>6</sup>

Table 13.1 shows the diversity of use of force, transparency and open data practices among the police agencies of the top ten most populated US cities, listed here from most to least populated, based on the design of their websites as of January 2020.

These official efforts reflect the belief that increased data transparency will lead to accountability and reforms in policing, which would then reduce discriminatory policing practices. The next section details how community entities, grassroots organisations, university-affiliated groups and media outlets have amplified this call for accountability through data production and use efforts.

#### CIVIL SOCIETY EFFORTS TOWARDS TRANSPARENCY AND DATA-DRIVEN POLICING REFORM

Over the last two decades, civic efforts to collect and track data on police interactions and killings have developed alongside federal and city-level initiatives. In many cases, including some highlighted in our past research (Currie et al. 2016), such citizen projects provide more thorough and consistent data collection than governmental local, state and federal efforts. These initiatives' core goals range from identifying and resolving gaps in the data, to data collection and access, to increasingly loftier goals such as policy advocacy. Recently, scholars and activists have critiqued the data centredness of some of these projects and have highlighted the potential mismatch between the policy work associated with many of the data-centred projects and anti-police brutality grassroots movements' long-term goals (Komer 2020; Levin 2020; Murray 2020; Roy 2020). In response, a new wave of grassroots projects seeks to focus on data related to alternative methods for community safety and protection to remain more grounded in the goals and motivations of long-term anti-police brutality community movements. This section will outline work from the last two decades of data projects on police-civilian interactions to trace the growing critique of data-centred solutions to police violence.

*Data Access and Transparency-Focused Projects*

Grassroots-run projects comprise the bulk of civic police violence data collection work done over the last several years. Some of the most comprehensive collections of data, such as Fatal Encounters and the U.S. Police Shootings Database,<sup>7</sup> are grassroots-run. Many of these efforts began with the end goal of collecting and providing access to data to help inform the public and provide potentially useful data to community members.

Journalist D. Brian Burghart created one of the earliest civic police data projects, Fatal Encounters, in 2000. Beginning as a modest early online database of police killings, the website now holds over 28,000 records, and provides a primary searchable and downloadable database along with visualisation tools, public records tools for collecting and providing further data, and memorial pages. The site is impressively comprehensive, with search features allowing queries by name, state, county, gender, city, race, agency, date and unique ID, and visualisations by state, county, race, trends, cause of death and details surrounding death. The site remains one of the most comprehensive by also broadly defining police fatal encounters, striving to collect data on deaths caused by police regardless of on- or off-duty status, intentional and accidental circumstances, and similarly nuanced details. Groups within the project home in on specific focuses, including police-involved suicides and teen deaths. The group has maintained a consistently broad mission: ‘to create an impartial, comprehensive, searchable national database of people killed during interactions with the police’ (Fatal Encounters 2021). The site was critical in providing early evidence of the scale and magnitude of police killings and continues to promote the need for collecting the data around deaths occurring for any reason within any context.

The U.S. Police Shootings Database claims to be similarly agnostic in its approach. This project is much more bare bones, consisting of a spreadsheet of crowdsourced police shootings. Sources for the spreadsheet entries are largely taken from popular media, but are occasionally sourced from other non-profit or grassroots efforts. Entries are organised with categories covering the date the entry was searched for, the date of the shooting, the state, county and city, the agency name, the victim name, the victim’s age, gender and race, whether shots were fired, whether the shooting was legally considered justified,



whether the victim was armed, hit or killed, any weapons involved, and the source of the shooting. The database includes entries from 2011 to 2014. Despite the thorough nature of the entries for the collected years, details of the context and origin of the project are sparse and largely unavailable. Focusing on complaints of police interactions with the public, the Citizens Police Data Project provides access to records gained through Freedom of Information requests that would otherwise be cumbersome to obtain. The project is run out of the Invisible Institute in Chicago, a non-profit dedicated to advancing communities through collaborative efforts.

Alongside purely grassroots, civic efforts, universities and news organisations have also contributed to the collection of police data for increasing transparency and accountability. On the university end, the Police Crime Database run by Bowling Green State University collects data on crimes committed by law enforcement officers. The *Washington Post's* 'Fatal Force' and the *Guardian's* 'The Counted' are both notably thorough collections of data on killings across the US, drawing on local news reports, social media and the grassroots efforts just described. The *Salt Lake Tribune* and the *Tampa Bay Times* provide police data on specific cities and counties to serve as more localised information sources.

These projects serve as important forays into public data collection and accountability processes, with detailed methodological descriptions and notes on their limitations and constraints. However, these projects do not use this data to propose any specific policy reform. Indeed, with transparency as the focus, the question of how to bring about change in law enforcement, or indeed how to foster greater civic participation in the development of alternative systems of public safety, is largely unaddressed by these projects.

## POLICY AND ADVOCACY-FOCUSED PROJECTS

Mapping Police Violence describes itself as 'America's most comprehensive database of killings by police' (Mapping Police Violence 2021). This project differentiates itself from older citizen-led projects, which focused on filling gaps in the public record, by using the data to design frameworks for policy reform. Mapping Police Violence provides a searchable database, a city comparison tool, a collection of information on national trends, a police scorecard tool, and a 2017 report highlighting insights from the founding team. Through the data, Mapping Police

Violence seeks to contextualise patterns of police violence in agencies across the US, and then promote data-driven accountability efforts.

Campaign Zero represents an entry into the data-driven police reform sector of grassroots police data projects. Originating from President Obama's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, the project includes research and community collaborations to provide a 'package of policy solutions to end police violence in America' (campaignzero.org). Following the murder of George Floyd, the campaign released a set of policy demands grounded in a study the group conducted in 2016. The central argument of the campaign consists in the claim that if eight policy shifts are made at the city level, these can reduce police killings by 72 per cent. These eight solutions are most notably summarised in the 8 Can't Wait campaign:

- banning chokeholds and strangleholds
- requiring de-escalation
- requiring warning before shooting
- requiring exhausting all alternatives before shooting
- duty to intervene
- banning shooting at moving vehicles
- requiring use of forces continuums
- requiring comprehensive reporting.

Founders of Campaign Zero include data scientist Samuel Sinyangwe and organiser DeRay McKesson. The organisation's goals and founding ideals centre heavily on aggregate data and statistical analysis, in contrast to the heavy reliance on journalism sources from previous initiatives. Local efforts that mirror this central focus on police reform include the Cop Accountability Project, or CAPStat, based in New York City, which collects and provides access to civil rights lawsuit data between 2015 and 2018 with the aim of improving police misconduct. The Stanford Open Policing Project also contributes to policy change by collecting law enforcement traffic stop data to help policy makers, journalists, researchers and other stakeholders improve interactions between the police and the public.

These advocacy projects to some extent represent a step towards more rigour around police data collection practices and are part of a larger push for meaningful change for those represented in the data. However, by moving away from journalistic sources and focusing on

statistical data divorced from contextual details, these projects become further entrenched in data-centring. These efforts form a feedback loop of data production and use among reform-minded organisations: urging police to produce data, different stakeholders use the data to push for police accountability, which is demonstrated, or not, by more data, and so on – a loop that threatens to enact the sort of post-political data fetishism that data justice and social justice scholars warn about.

These campaigns have come under scrutiny and criticism by some abolitionist activist organisations, who highlight the fundamentally different ends envisioned by police reform initiatives versus abolitionist groups. Reformist efforts largely grant legitimacy to policing with the implicit argument that the carceral structure can be meaningfully reformed by drawing on comprehensive data collection – that if there were no data gaps, police would be more easily indicted for racist practices and held meaningfully accountable, or else can demonstrate successful reform. However, the evidence to date shows that policy reforms of policing practices do not yield meaningful change – many police agencies with a record of violence, such as Minneapolis’s, have already adopted several of the 8 Can’t Wait proposals (Bergengruen and Berenson 2020; Brown and McHarris 2020). Also, this approach leaves out solutions generated by community organisations that best reflect their needs and more holistically address root causes of police violence, as we discuss in the next sections.

### *Abolition-Centred Projects*

A final category of projects around police killings and police brutality data include those that resist reforming or rehabilitating policing or supporting the need for carceral systems; they are sceptical of the use of data and statistics for understanding the problem of police brutality in the US. Their critique comprises two main concerns, namely the misuse and misinterpretation of statistics about police violence and possible interventions, and the collection of data for surveillance and unethical research practices. Abolitionist groups are responsible for a rival category of projects involving police data that fundamentally decentre the data and critique statistical methods of other data-driven reform groups.

Within this category is the Youth Justice Coalition (YJC), a youth-run activist organisation based in Los Angeles, dedicated to supporting

current and formerly incarcerated people started in 2003 (Youth Justice Coalition n.d.). YJC maintains an internally collected database sourced through community interviews as a community resource and narrative tool (Youth Justice Coalition 2014a, 2014b). The work of this project is encapsulated in a graphic on a website (Youth Justice Coalition 2014a), but the work exceeds the information available online. YJC focuses on community care, an approach that aligns closely with the Database for Police Abolition, a national database that tracks proposals for defunding and diminishing police agencies so that activists can draw on tactics used around the country. The goal stated on the website is 'avoiding contributing to the legitimacy of policing'; rather than endorsing any of the policy or activist proposals the website tracks, they aim to 'encourage public engagement with local politics and to assist organizers with their goals' (Database for Police Abolition n.d.). Though they recognise the power of data as evidentiary sources, these databases are access points to community resources and narratives; they are not used as the basis for policy.

Abolition groups were particularly vocal in criticising the research and statistical applications of #8CantWait campaign in support of police reform that arose in the 2020 summer of unrest (8 Can't Wait n.d.; Illing 2020). In response, abolitionist activists and researchers Cherrell Brown and Philip V. McHarris published a public letter arguing that the #8CantWait campaign was based on 'faulty data science' and demanded that the campaign be recalled (2020). Brown and McHarris found 'irreconcilable issues to the data and study design'. In particular, the authors point out issues of generalisation, biases in the research design, and faulty and partial data collection. For example, the study is based on 18 months of data and 91 police departments to argue the policies will lead to a 72 per cent reduction of killings by police; Brown and McHarris say this interval does not offer enough time to achieve causality. The authors also argue that the study includes a limited and insufficient set of control variables and a 95 per cent confidence interval, which they deem to be inappropriate for a study that has life and death implications. Instead, they suggest, the group should have used a 99 per cent confidence interval, as often used in medical sciences. At such a level of confidence, the authors explain, the 8 Can't Wait research findings would not have been statistically significant. The following sentence makes clear the abolitionists' take on the campaign and its use of statistics:

The use of statistics is largely a matter of interpretation. When people invoke data and statistics it can serve as a veneer of empirical proof that renders something difficult to critique. Police also use statistics and interpret them in a way to justify their actions. (Brown and McHarris 2020: n.p.)

While Brown and McHarris's critique is grounded in accusations of faulty statistics, other groups critique the positivist, statistical approach to policy making from a different epistemological perspective, questioning the necessity of data collection altogether. An alternative campaign, called #8toabolition, for instance, focuses on the gap between reform efforts and abolition, arguing that data-focused reform makes oppressive systems 'just bearable enough' and undermines efforts to reimagine what a society with reduced or no policing might look like (#8toAbolition 2022). 8toabolition critiques private-public schemes that pair universities, start-ups and civil society groups with police departments and carceral agencies to develop surveillance technologies, data-sharing arrangements and predictive analytic tools that are disproportionately deployed on vulnerable communities already plagued by the problems of the carceral state. Instead, 8toabolition focuses on diverting energy and funds to community collaborations, emphasising notions of citizen participation and struggle over the very definition of public safety, as well as studies that support minoritised communities' self-determination.

#### EPISTEMOLOGIES OF EVIDENCE: POLICE ACCOUNTABILITY AND ABOLITION

We now contrast the epistemological bases of data-driven reform efforts we initially reviewed with those of the police abolition groups just mentioned. In what follows, we uncover the narratives of data as evidence in pushing for justice and social change around racist policing. We then connect these epistemological practices to calls for reform and abolition.

Data have long served as forensic evidence encapsulating true processes of the world, both for bureaucratic and sometimes progressive purposes (Hacking 1987; Desrosières and Naish 2002; Bruno, Didier and Vitale 2014). This view belies a positivist belief that data encapsulates the reality of the world that can be acted upon (van Dijk 2005;

Kitchin 2014; Milan and van der Velden 2016; Crooks and Currie 2021). However, data production is a process of collection, classification and storage (Star and Bowker 1999; Bowker 2007; Gitelman 2013), and those processes are often messy. Our previous work around data on police-perpetrated homicides found that decisions about what processes to encapsulate in data, and what to leave out, reveal interpretations and biases about how to represent police practices, and that police agencies exert an outsized influence on how official data on these instances are collected, recorded, stored and made accessible (Currie et al. 2016). This chapter builds upon that previous work to argue that data collection, even if it were completely transparent, does not adequately address the problem of racist policing, because it overlooks and circumvents the lack of dominant groups' political will to change or end policing. Standing beyond the issue of the authenticity and reliability of these automated assessments is the fact that racist policing cannot be fixed by data or data-driven technology, nor by perfect data on these problems. These problems result from a lack of political will within urban, state and federal governance structures to change the balances of social, economic and political power that enable harmful social arrangements and remove the possibility of self-determination. Political problems require political solutions, and, following Lefebvre's (1968) writing around the right to the city (see Lefebvre 1996), inhabitants should be able to collectively shape the processes of dwelling within a city to envision more liberatory outcomes. While the locus of the carceral state extends everywhere, it is in large part enacted through policy developed in cities and other sites of local sovereignty and control, such as the media and education.

Tech abolitionists argue that statistical representations and technological interventions are predicated on an epistemological tradition that values monitoring and control of populations and is disproportionately deployed on minoritised groups (Benjamin 2019a, 2019b; Muigai 2019; Mukharji et al. 2020). As Eubanks (2018), Broussard (2018), Benjamin (2019a, 2019b), Costanza-Chock (2020) and others have shown through their research, the existence and use of data-driven technologies shape user behaviours in ways that are often coercive, as they seek to control users rather than provide meaningful services or care. Consider global concerns by activists and scholars that data-driven policing initiatives, whether facial recognition cameras or predictive database policing, do not rein in crime but rather reinforce discrimination and hyper-visibility

of over-policed areas (Ferguson 2017; Stop LAPD Spying Coalition 2018). Moreover, the majority of these technologies are predicated on faulty inputs; logics of colour-blindness, neutrality and resource scarcity; or datasets that produce incorrect assessments (Noble 2018; Cifor et al. 2019; D'Ignazio and Klein 2020). Oftentimes, data collection and algorithms based on these data are not transparent.

In our first iterations of this work around police brutality data in 2015, we were cognizant of the idea that data-driven police accountability efforts, which called for statistical evidence to prove racist policing despite overwhelming evidence from lived experience and narratives of those most affected, are racist (Lanius 2015; Paris and Pierre 2017). But data is not just a tool of oppression; it can also be a means of undermining and foreclosing meaningful critique. Subsequently, we have drawn from critical race theory and social epistemology to argue that this demand for statistical proof of racism disproportionately places an epistemic burden on people who are oppressed by these practices to do the tedious work that will be considered accurate and reliable by the dominant group – but that doubly takes away from time that could be spent on a number of more productive activities, such as building power for political mobilisation within or among urban communities (Paris and Pierre 2017; Pierre et al. 2021). Critical race scholars and cultural studies scholars both note that counter-narratives, or stories from those most affected by racist policing, can be particularly effective in changing discourse and opinions on racist surveillance and law enforcement brutality through grounding more affective ties to the issue (Paris and Pierre 2017). A good example of this is the grassroots research carried out by Los Angeles-based anti-police surveillance network, Stop LAPD Spying, which writes up in-depth case studies of police violence and holds focus groups to collect narratives of citizens' experiences with the police (Stop LAPD Spying Coalition 2015, 2018).

The next section highlights how these conventions around the epistemological bases of data-driven evidence intervene in calls for reform and refusal of policing and policing technologies.

#### DISMANTLING TECHNOLOGICAL HARM: REFORM AND REFUSAL

The questions we ask are when technocratic solutions are and are not useful, when they might be harmful and, in the case that they are

harmful or not useful, how we might dismantle them, ranging from abolition or refusal to incremental change or reform (Pierce 2012). These discussions require us to attend meaningfully to issues of the politics of evidence: whose knowledge, needs and power are currently privileged and how can we create appropriate spaces to adopt counter-practices and self-determination without generating or compounding harm.

The technocratic fix assumes that if we solve problems through analytics or algorithms, fed by data positioned as neutral by elite and benevolent technical experts, society would function perfectly. Necessary critiques of technological solutionism must consider whether existing systems merit repair or revitalisation, for what reasons, and by what means. Technologies do not stand alone, but rather exist in and as infrastructures that become hidden and obfuscated as possible objects of critique even as they permeate daily life (Bowker 1994; Star and Ruhleder 1994); thus, when these systems cause harm, or become otherwise exposed, many in government and civil society promote reform or repair as the obvious answer (Jackson 2013). This obviousness often overrides or obfuscates the need for more critical interrogation of the serious implications of reforming systems, requiring us to ask: who calls for the reform? Who undertakes it? Who benefits from the maintenance of a system, and who remains subjugated by it?

Alternatively, carceral abolition is a practice of refusal. Abolition advocates understanding policing not as a 'broken institution' that can be reformed with more community or technological oversight, police force implicit bias training, or diverse representation in law enforcement, but one that is ineffective in protecting the public from harm, as it is and always has been predicated on violently maintaining the oppressive order of racial capitalism. As such, police abolitionists, while they vary in practices and perspectives, generally advocate that carceral systems must be defunded, dismantled and even replaced by completely different systems that promote community wellness, foster civic participation in producing alternative systems and, among other things, take systemic oppression into account (Gilmore 2002; Critical Resistance 2012; Kaba 2020). Refusal is a stance that is, as Tuck and Yang note, often exercised by those who are most oppressed in society and who are seen as objects that require carceral control and capture to ensure racist assumptions of social cohesion. Here, police abolition is a code of ethics, a resolute stance: 'It is the posture of an object that will



not be removed nor possessed' (Tuck and Yang 2014: 814). The abolition groups' refusal to engage with reformist data-driven technologies and data collection as a mechanism of rehabilitating and justifying policing is part of refusing policing and carceral institutions in their current forms.

## CONCLUSION

Our review shows how police data transparency and data-driven police accountability efforts have grown since 2015. But we have to ask ourselves, what end does this transparency serve? We argue that these data efforts contribute to performances of bureaucracy in which transparency is wielded as a solution, rather than meaningful political restructuring. As we've followed data projects focused on police reform over the last six years, we see little evidence that these data reform efforts have meaningfully improved the state of racist police brutality and murder, or that more data will necessarily drive any improvement to the situation (Brown and McHarris 2020; Peeples 2020). Quantitative data collection is not just used to reform historically oppressive social structures, but, as an outcropping of this function, to avoid action, through the expectation that more and more data is required in order to act. Data can be a barrier to doing things, and other forms of evidence of police oppression are overwhelming even when not datafied.

Lacking social and political action, these data reform efforts may bring some superficial form of police accountability, but they only offer ameliorative redress to harms and are not enough to produce transformative change. Instead, as argued by 8toAbolition, data-driven efforts should root epistemological bases of evidence in traditions that are critical of carceral structures and aim to rehabilitate these harmful structures. We end with a question: what if the energy put into data-driven efforts focused on ameliorative or rehabilitative police reform were instead directed towards abolition of carceral structures? This abolitionist stance could well include the abolition of technocratic goals and, sometimes, data and technologies themselves. We argue that such projects are necessary if we are ever to begin reimagining and building capacity for a better future.

Such efforts can take the form of refusal, both within the tech industry and outside it. The mobilisation of refusal will require actionable critiques, movement building and, importantly, envisioning the future

we want to take the place of the things we refuse. This movement is already underway, as with the success of #TechWontBuildIt, an organisation of tech workers who mobilised to stop Amazon's contracts with the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Abolition groups across the country, such as Critical Resistance and the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition, have long been engaged in critique of carceral institutions; the latter, along with the LA Community Action Network, has ended the LAPD's gang database and stopped its use of drone surveillance. With the impetus coming from anti-carceral and civil society advocates, municipalities across the US have voted down the use of facial recognition technologies in public places. Many of these civil society, abolitionist groups have a clear vision for the future – one in which law enforcement money is spent on communal health and wellness, and in which the right to the city includes those who build solidarity in this mission.

#### NOTES

1. While our 2015 study used 'police officer-involved homicide' to describe all deaths at the hands of police, here, in cases such as the killing of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, we use the term 'murder'. The common term 'officer-involved homicide' is how law enforcement agencies frequently classify police acts that result in death, regardless of the circumstances or intention (Pierre et al. 2021). We use the term 'murder', as police abolition advocates sometimes do, to highlight that these deaths are not blameless accidents or self-defence, but the result of intentional structural decisions that overwhelmingly justify and exonerate police for their deadly practices (Gilmore 2002; Critical Resistance 2012; Pierre et al. 2021). These semantic classifications matter – these terms are associated with particular communities and actors, as well as moral and structural obligations.
2. These reports update the NYPD's Annual Firearms Discharge Report going back to 2007. These documents catalogued all shooting incidents, including the number of subjects killed and wounded, the number of innocent bystanders killed and wounded, animal shootings, accidental discharges, unauthorised uses of department firearms, and police suicides with firearms. The also catalogue firearm and electrical weapon discharges, use of impact weapons and pepper spray, and foot or hand strike.
3. The database also has columns with the location, division, and name of the harmed subject.
4. The videos are part of the City's Board of Police Commissioners Critical

Incident Video Release Policy from 2018, which requires video evidence of critical use of force incidents be released to the public within 45 days of the event.

5. The data includes incident details such as date, location, whether the offender was wounded or killed, whether the offender was arrested, whether the officer was wounded or killed, the District Attorney's action, and the Use of Force Review Board's determination.
6. Dallas also publishes 'Police Response to Resistance' data on the city's open data dashboard: <https://www.dallasopendata.com>
7. <https://fatalencounters.org>; <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1cEGQ3eAFKpFBVq1k2mZIy5mBPxC6nBTJHzuSWtZQSVw/edit>

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