



Written by [Emma Freire](#) on October 27, 2020

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What Life Is Like Without Police

This year, the phrase “defund the police” became a rallying cry. Activist progressives capitalized on public outrage over the death of George Floyd in police custody in Minneapolis and racked up substantial wins. Liberal politicians in cities across America — from New York to Los Angeles — imposed deep budget cuts on their police departments, called defunding. The phrase “defund the police” can mean very different things depending on which activist progressive you talk to. But this much is certain: Police departments will not be able to do the important job of protecting law-abiding Americans if this movement continues to gain ground.



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Minneapolis went further than anywhere else by voting to disband its police department altogether.

The city established a commission to study the issue and propose an alternative. However, a spike in crime in Minneapolis after the initial riots is likely to ensure the police department’s continued existence, albeit in a diminished form. “The police department in Minneapolis will probably remain the same, but they will rename it something like ‘crisis and public safety advocates’ and hire more mental health professionals,” says Nick Bieter, a lifelong resident of Minnesota, “I’m not sure there is long-term stomach to get rid of the police in any substantive way.”

However, the Minneapolis police department will be far less effective because officer morale has been so deeply depressed. “If it is such a thankless job, I don’t see anyone wanting to do it,” says Bieter.

Unfortunately, the same thing could be said of police departments across America. Police officers are violently attacked. Police chiefs are harassed at their homes. Elected officials vilify the police in public and order them to “stand down” during rioting and looting. This, coupled with the budget cuts, will have the effect of crippling local police departments.

Law-abiding Americans are not going to sit around while far-left groups engage in riots, looting, vandalism, and violence. The *New York Times* reported in August that moving companies in New York City are turning away customers because so many residents are fleeing. Americans are also buying guns to defend themselves. The National Shooting Sports Foundation reported that from January through July 2020, more than 12 million background checks for the purchase of firearms were processed. That is an increase of 71 percent from the same period a year earlier.

Americans are also likely to start relying on private security firms as a partial substitute for the protection their local police departments used to provide. This is already happening in places such as Seattle, where far-left groups essentially kicked out the police and briefly established a six-block autonomous zone called the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest, or CHOP. According to the *Seattle Times*,



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businesses located around CHOP turned to private security for protection from looting.



When politicians don't let police protect people: Americans are buying guns to defend themselves. From January through July 2020, more than 12 million background checks for the purchase of firearms were processed. *(Photo credit: AP Images)*

In Detroit, private security has been a booming business for years. According to a report in *Vice* in 2019, Securitas, Detroit's largest private-security firm, has reported 25-percent year-over-year growth since the city filed for bankruptcy in 2013.

In some foreign countries, private security is already a fact of life for middle-class citizens. South Africa and Brazil are good examples of this. Crime rates are astronomical, and the local police fail miserably at protecting the public. As a result, private security firms have stepped in to offer their services at affordable rates.

In America, private security is still usually perceived as a service for the wealthy. However, if police departments continue to be defunded and demoralized, it will become more common among middle-class Americans as well. Private security firms will see opportunities in the market and offer lower-cost options. South Africa and Brazil give Americans a glimpse of the future we can expect if progressive activists get their way.

I am an American who lived in South Africa between 2015 and 2017. Today, I live in Brazil with my husband and our three children. The thought of life without a well-functioning local police department is frightening to most Americans — and rightfully so. But it is amazing to me how quickly I got used to living in high-crime, low-police countries.

I grew up in a very safe neighborhood in northern Virginia where houses didn't have fences, and basic security was taken for granted. When I first moved to South Africa, I was horrified by the big electric fence around our new apartment complex. However, soon enough, all the fences, CCTV, and guards started to feel normal. Planning my schedule so I would never be out late became second nature.

Americans should not assume we would never tolerate the extreme levels of crime seen in Brazil and South Africa. The unthinkable can become your normal way of life much faster than you might expect.



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South Africa

South Africa has one of the highest crime rates in the world, with an average of 58 people murdered every day. “In South Africa, you never truly relax. In the evening, you lock all the windows and doors,” says Michael Heyns, the vice-rector of a private college in Pretoria, South Africa.

“There is a complete culture of lawlessness,” says Guido Urlings of AfriForum, a civil rights organization that focuses on Afrikaners, a white subgroup in South Africa. “People are convinced that if they commit a crime there is no chance the police might catch them. The police don’t even have enough vehicles to drive in.”

South Africa has a national police force. But it is so underfunded as to be essentially non-existent. “The ANC [South Africa’s ruling party] has to juggle very little tax money. They have been reducing police funding for years,” says Urlings. This trend is not likely to be reversed anytime soon since South Africa’s already weak economy was further devastated by one of the strictest COVID-19 lockdowns in the world.

The police are not only underfunded but also incompetent. For example, in 2018, their cybercrime unit dropped hundreds of investigations because they had forgotten to pay for licenses for relevant software.

“You are always a bit scared when the police are close, even the traffic police,” says Anneke van der Walt, a stay-at-home mother in Potchefstroom, South Africa. “They don’t have good training. They lack education. They don’t know what they should do.”

Van der Walt says that if her home were to be burgled, she would call the police but wouldn’t expect any outcome. “They take fingerprints and then you never hear from them again,” she says.

The police are also corrupt. According to Urlings, “The police are considered the most corrupt organization of state by the public.” Heyns concurs, “People say that if a police officer asks you for your driver’s license, you should offer it to them together with 100 Rand [South Africa’s currency]. That is the expectation.”

The South African government makes it difficult for law-abiding citizens to protect themselves. The laws for purchasing guns are stringent, but so are the laws for using them. In America, we see how Mark and Patricia McCloskey of St. Louis are facing charges because they held their guns at the ready after rioters broke in to their private property. Those types of charges have been common practice in South Africa for some time.

White South African farmers are frequently attacked or murdered, but when they defend themselves, they land in legal hot water. “If you act in self defense, there will be a huge judicial investigation,” says Urlings. “The farmer is usually accused of behaving badly. They are accused of being ‘cowboys’ who shoot innocent people. A person must really be inside your house threatening you with a gun or knife before you can shoot them.”

The high rate of crime combined with the obstacles to legal gun ownership have created massive demand for private security. An article in the *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* called South Africa the world’s “absolute champion” for private security.

South Africans who employ private security typically pay a monthly fee that can be as low as 200 rand



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(12 U.S. dollars) a month. Firms offer a wide variety of services. An alarm system with a panic button is usually the minimum. If a client suspects a burglar, he can call his private security firm and a highly trained armed response team will arrive within minutes. “Private security gives people the ease of mind that someone will show up when they call,” says Urlings.

Van der Walt says her neighborhood pools money to pay for CCTV and patrol cars. They even have a joint Whatsapp group with the private security firm they employ. Recently, the group was swapping messages about an event nearby that violated noise ordinances. The private security firm dispatched agents to deal with it.

This is an example of private security providing services that go beyond basic protection of clients. In South Africa, private security has become the face of law and order. Agents regularly intervene in situations they encounter in the streets even though no clients may be involved. People call on private security whenever they need assistance. For example, Tessa Diphoorn, an academic at Utrecht University in the Netherlands, wrote in the *British Journal of Criminology* about a situation she witnessed during a ride-along with private security in South Africa. A man flagged them down by the roadside, saying he had just witnessed a car being stolen. He hopped into the back seat and they pursued the stolen vehicle. After they failed to catch up to it, they gave the man a lift back to his workplace.

Private security firms offer excellent service where they can — but their powers are limited. “They can arrest a person who is caught in the middle of committing a crime. But then they still have to wait for the police to arrive,” says Urlings. Only the police can file charges. They have a monopoly on the gateway to the criminal justice system. Thus, ultimately, private security is only a Band-Aid on South Africa’s huge crime problem.

Heyns has a warning about the corrosive effect incompetent policing has had on South African culture. “It increases racism in this country,” he says. “People stereotype each other. White people have a stereotype that people of darker skin are not to be trusted. If there were better policing, people would trust each other more. In America, people want to defund the police because of racism, but I believe it will have the opposite effect. Racism will increase because people will distrust each other more based on skin color.”

Brazil

Brazil also has astronomical crime rates. In 2018, there were 57,956 reported hom-icides in a country of around 210 million people. By contrast, America, with a much larger population, had 16,214 reported murders in the same year.

And sadly, the 2018 figure represents an improvement for Brazil. Previous years had seen even higher murder rates. Police are woefully incompetent at dealing with such extreme levels of violence and criminality. The University of São Paulo recently took a sample of 1,195 violent death cases in Brazil and found that 48 percent of them were still being investigated after two years. “I don’t feel 100 percent safe even though I live in one of the richest neighborhoods in São Paulo,” says Allan Antonio, a lawyer.



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Violence begets violence: Brazilian police are ineffective at curbing the country's sky-high rates of crime, and at the same time they are extremely violent. *(Photo credit: AP Images)*

Brazil has several different police forces that perform different functions. The Federal Police force are reasonably competent at tackling white-collar crime. They were behind the massive corruption investigation known as *Lava Jato* (Operation Car Wash) that sent Brazil's former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva to prison. The Federal Police are less corrupt than Brazil's other police forces, though that may not be saying much.

Some police forces are truly local, both at the state and city level, and there have been instances of governors ordering their state police forces to defy to edicts from the national government, but corruption is deeply embedded into Brazil's police forces. According to Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer, the percentage of people in Brazil who believe most or all members of the police are involved in corruption went up from 31 percent in 2017 to 39 percent in 2019. Brazil's traffic police are seen as particularly corrupt. "When you are driving in your car and they pull you over, it is common to bribe the police. In the conversation you will understand what the person wants," says Bruna Shimabuko, an English teacher in São Paulo. Bribes are convenient for both sides. The driver is spared a larger fee and the possible impoundment of his car. The police officer is spared a great deal of paperwork. "Everyone is happy if you pay a bribe," says Shimabuko.

The low salaries paid to police officers are one of the biggest drivers of corruption. Police engage in corruption to make ends meet. "The vast majority of cops are involved in crime — like taking bribes. They are not paid well so they feel compelled to be corrupt, and they can't work right in an institutionally corrupt framework," says Antonio.

Brazil's dysfunctional political institutions and frequent financial crises make it difficult to remedy even the fairly simple issue of insufficient pay. Police in Brazil are civil servants. Thus, if the Brazilian government wanted to raise their salaries, they would be legally required to raise salaries for many other types of civil servants as well.

Right-wing President Jair Bolsonaro won election in 2018 in part because of his tough stance on crime. On the campaign trail, he often said, "A good criminal is a dead criminal." However, he has done little to crack down on police corruption. There are political obstacles to this, but Bolsonaro also does not want to risk alienating the police officers who voted for him. "The police and military are his voting base



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so he is unlikely to reform them,” says Antonio.

Brazilian police are ineffective at stopping crime, but at the same time they are extremely violent. Brazilian police killed 5,804 people in 2019, mainly in the course of skirmishes with drug gangs in *favelas* (Brazilian ghettos). By contrast, American police killed 1,146 in the same year. Activist progressives who paint America’s police as recklessly violent ought to give some consideration to the contrast.

Brazil’s police are occasionally capable of protecting the law-abiding public — but it may require someone powerful to pull some strings. Josue Freire, my father-in-law, who lives in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, says that several years ago, a gang from another city started robbing houses in his neighborhood on a nightly basis. The police did nothing — until the gang robbed the home of the girlfriend of a high-ranking government official. Then the police got involved and the nightly robberies came to an end. “They need pressure from someone high up to take action,” says Freire.

In Brazil, the gun laws are even stricter than those in South Africa. President Bolsonaro has succeeded in loosening them a little, but the laws are still prohibitive for most people. “It’s extremely bureaucratic. The red tape is enormous. It is much easier and cheaper to buy a gun on the black market,” says Natan Cerqueira, a financial manager in Fortaleza, Brazil.

Cerqueira also says legal gun owners are treated with suspicion by the police. “Criminals use war-quality guns. They can bring down police helicopters. You might have a little .38 caliber. But the police will come knock on your door and say, ‘You are the only person here with a gun. Where were you when this shooting happened?’” he says.

Brazilians are left with no choice but to pay for private security to protect themselves, their families, and their property. In Brazil, private security is less visible in public life than in South Africa, but that does not make it any less critical.

The market has adapted in response to the massive demand. “In Brazil, there are options for all tiers of budgets,” says Cerqueira. “We have 24-hour-surveillance, an electric fence, and high walls. That is pretty much the norm around here. If you can’t afford an electric fence, you break bottles and then cement the glass bits to the top of your fence so that anyone who tries to climb will hurt their hand.”

Antonio’s house has an electric fence. Next to that, he says, “all the people who live in the street cooperate to pay a *vigilante*. That’s a guy who rides a motorcycle up and down the street. He blows a whistle to let you know he is there and keeps an eye on things.” Antonio would prefer to hire more security, but he cannot afford it.

Shimabuko also joins the other houses in her neighborhood to pay a guard to patrol via car or motorcycle. “In college, I got home very late, like around midnight or later, so my mom told him to be aware of the time.” The guard checked to make sure she entered the house safely each night.

America

Private security firms enable middle-class citizens in Brazil and South Africa to live a semblance of a normal life. Some protection is better than no protection at all.

A well-functioning police force would be vastly preferable, not least because of the cost. In South Africa and Brazil, citizens pay for their protection twice. Once in the form of taxes for police who do not



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protect them and then again for private security that does. A similar situation is likely to eventuate in America. The progressive activists who want to defund the police are certainly not proposing returning police budgets to taxpayers. Rather, they see those budgets as piggy banks to raid for their own pet causes. In New York City, Mayor Bill de Blasio is cutting \$1 billion from the NYPD's \$6 billion budget and redirecting the money to things such as youth summer programs and public housing.

In the meantime, crime is rising in American cities, thus spreading anarchy. In the July 6, 2020 print edition of *The New American*, C. Mitchell Shaw wrote: "Anarchy, after all, is never a permanent situation. It is a transition phase from the old order to the new (and planned) order. That new (and planned) order will mean national or even worse — international control over America's cities."



A tried-and-failed plan: New York Mayor Bill de Blasio cut \$1 billion from the NYPD's \$6 billion budget and redirected the money to things such as youth summer programs and public housing. *(Photo credit: AP Images)*

The far Left wants to use this anarchy to establish a federal police force, and they are not subtle about how they intend to accomplish their aim. While the trappings of local police departments will likely be retained, these departments will take directions from the federal government, via measures such as "consent decrees."

Consent decrees are agreements between the federal government and a local police department that are enforced by a federal court. They were invented in the wake of the Los Angeles riots in 1991, when Congress gave the Department of Justice (DOJ) authority to investigate state and local law enforcement for racism.

Consent decrees cripple police officers in their efforts to protect law-abiding citizens. After the DOJ found the Baltimore police to be racist, the City of Baltimore accepted a 227-page consent decree that affects nearly every aspect of police work. Heather Mac Donald wrote in *City Journal* that consent decrees "cost police departments millions of dollars to implement and take dozens of officers off the street to fill out reams of paperwork within rigid deadlines."

Former Attorney General Jeff Sessions drastically curtailed consent decrees in 2018, arguing that they take "decisions, and the accountability for them, away from the people's elected representatives." Under President Donald Trump, the DOJ has not imposed a single consent decree. However, under President Obama, the DOJ opened 25 investigations into law-enforcement agencies and imposed 14



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consent
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In a Biden-Harris administration, consent decrees are likely to make a major comeback. Activist progressives will use their claims that the police are systemically racist to force the DOJ to open more investigations into state and local law-enforcement agencies, with the goal of turning them into agents of a de facto federal police force.

If consent decrees fail to get the job done, legislation is also an option. In June, a group of 400 progressive organizations, led by the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, which receives funding from George Soros, sent a letter to congressional leaders asking them to impose heavy regulations on police officers. The letter argues this is needed “to swiftly rectify the legacy of white supremacy and anti-black racism that has led to police violence against Black people across our country.”

In the meantime, crime rates will continue to rise, and more Americans will pay for private security to protect their families, homes, and businesses. This may solve the immediate crisis. However, as South Africa and Brazil illustrate, private security is only a Band-Aid on a much deeper problem.



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