

Lessons from Northern Ireland: Policing, Polarization, and Moving Forward

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The murder of George Floyd by a White police officer prompted a national conversation in the United States about policing and the racism embedded in law-enforcement institutions. The country can learn from abroad when it comes to police reform, in particular from the experience of Northern Ireland.

During the “Troubles,” Northern Ireland had a highly militarized police force operating in a context of widespread violence and relatively easy access to weapons. Since the Good Friday Agreement, it implemented a series of effective reforms that dramatically raised community trust in the police. These included renaming and rebranding the force, aggressive affirmative action, creating a representative police oversight board, and an emphasis on community policing. However, the reforms did not heal deep-seated sectarian divisions, which still contribute to fears of renewed violence.

U.S. policymakers should note the challenges faced by Northern Ireland and remember that rebuilding trust between communities and the police cannot be the responsibility of the latter alone. To create a peaceful, functional society, underlying racial and political divisions also need to be addressed.

The murder of George Floyd by a White police officer in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020 prompted a national conversation in the United States about not only policing, but also the racism embedded in institutions and even interpersonal relationships. The questions that the country is being forced to grapple with range from the pragmatic to the philosophical, and calls to abolish and defund the police have gained significant momentum. Some have been looking abroad for inspiration as they struggle to come up with an appropriate response. At this moment in U.S. history, when all solutions are on the table, it is worth examining the successes and failures of other countries' attempts at policing reform to understand what they did well, how their approaches can be adapted to the U.S. context, and what challenges they continue to face so these can be avoided or their impact softened.

This policy brief looks at the process of police reform in Northern Ireland, its challenges in addressing the lasting legacy of the "Troubles," and the lessons that the United States can learn from its successes and shortcomings. Unlike most of the European countries being used for comparison, Northern Ireland during the Troubles had a highly militarized police force operating in a context of widespread violence and relatively easy access to weapons. Though the state of chattel slavery experienced by Africans taken to the United States and the impact of that legacy on their descendants is fundamentally different from the discrimination faced by Catholics in Ireland over centuries (a fact that has been emphasized by Irish historians),¹ and though the scale of today's conflict in the United States does not approach the level of intensity of the Troubles, it is still possible to draw critical lessons from Northern Ireland's case.

Northern Ireland is held up as a success story in transitional justice and conflict-resolution discourse. It managed to emerge from a thirty-year sectarian conflict with a new set of institutions that have prevented a resurgence of violence. Police reform was

key in this. It included renaming the force, instituting aggressive affirmative-action policies to address the perception of widespread bias, and introducing an independent oversight board to monitor human-rights complaints and to develop effective community-policing strategies. Police reform was absolutely vital to rebuilding trust between the institutions of power and the marginalized Catholic community, and Northern Ireland's effort was quite successful.

A Brief History of the Conflict

Northern Ireland has experienced centuries of sectarian strife in which religious affiliation and national loyalties became increasingly intertwined with political goals. Institutionalized discrimination against Catholics living in Ireland began as early as 1534, after Henry VIII converted to Protestantism. Over the next two centuries, "Penal Laws" were put in place to encourage religious conversion by denying basic rights to those who remained faithful to the Catholic Church. These banned Catholics from voting, holding public office, openly practicing their religion, and owning land. Though the Penal Laws were relaxed over time, an increasingly organized nationalist movement formed among Catholics who wanted to form an independent Ireland. In this context, Protestantism came to be associated with allegiance to the British crown.

There were many unsuccessful uprisings against British rule until the 1919-1921 war of independence led to the partition of the island and the creation of the largely Catholic independent Republic of Ireland in the south. Meanwhile, Northern Ireland, which is more evenly divided between the two denominations, remained a part of the United Kingdom. Because Catholics in Northern Ireland faced discrimination in many areas—facilitated by gerrymandering that kept them from gaining meaningful political power—peaceful protests, inspired in part by the U.S. civil rights movement, began around the country in the late 1960s. This coincided with a renewal of the nationalist and republican movements, as well as a countermove-

¹ Shawn Pogatchnik, "[AP FACT CHECK: Irish 'slavery' a St. Patrick's Day myth.](#)" The Seattle Times, 16 March 2017.

ment of unionists who wished to remain a part of the United Kingdom. There were also riots and violent clashes between the police, civilians, and Catholic and Protestant paramilitary groups.

Against this backdrop, on October 5, 1968, the majority-Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) used batons and water cannons on Catholic civil rights marchers in Derry/Londonderry—including women and children—injuring 30. This incident not only cemented the perception that the police force was hostile toward Catholics but is also considered by many to mark the official start of the Troubles. Though some half-hearted reforms were attempted by the U.K. government in response, the situation continued to worsen. The army was eventually deployed to Northern Ireland, and on January 30, 1972, soldiers opened fire on civil rights demonstrators, killing 13, on what is now infamously known as Bloody Sunday.

Years of bloodshed followed in which the RUC served as the primary peacekeeping force and became the de facto face of the British state in what many considered to be an occupied territory.² The job of the RUC officers was dangerous as they were under constant threat from the paramilitary Irish Republican Army (IRA). According to official records, more than 300 of them were killed and many thousands were injured.³ However, there was also widespread, legitimate cause for distrust of the RUC from the Catholic side, which questioned the impartiality of the police. Stories of discrimination—backed up by official reports regarding the mistreatment of suspects, detainees, and prisoners—contributed to the tension. In 2013, an investigation into historical records alleged that senior RUC officers had “cover[ed] up a series of sectarian killings and attempted murders by rogue officers” and that there was “collusion between loyalist paramilitaries and security forces” throughout the Troubles.⁴

In 1998, after decades of a civil war that claimed more than 3,500 lives (in a country with just over 1.5 million people), all parties to the conflict signed the Good Friday Agreement.⁵ With this, state and non-state actors agreed to find a peaceful way forward that recognized the cultural identities of all citizens and was ratified in a referendum with the approval of 71 percent of the Northern Irish population (though the agreement was approved by 96 percent of Catholics but only 52 percent of Protestants).⁶ A critical part of the Good Friday Agreement was the promise of a review of policing in Northern Ireland.

From the RUC to the PSNI

The Good Friday Agreement promised a “new beginning” to policing, but it did not explicitly state what that would look like. Instead, the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland, headed by Christopher Patten, a former U.K. minister, was formed to draft a report on the situation and lay out recommendations for a way forward. The report, released in 1999, included data from the Community Attitudes survey that showed striking differences in perceptions of the police force by Catholics and Protestants. In terms of general attitudes towards the RUC, 81 percent of Protestants expressed overall satisfaction with the police in Northern Ireland, compared with only 43 percent of Catholics. More than 75 percent of Catholics said there were too few Catholics on the force, a view also expressed by over 60 percent of Protestants. This was not entirely because the police was not trying to recruit Catholics; when asked, 70 percent of Catholic respondents cited intimidation or fear of attack by radical members of their own community as the main reason why Catholics were reluctant to join the force.⁷

2 Police Service of Northern Ireland, [A History of Policing in Ireland](#).

3 Ibid.

4 Henry McDonald, [RUC commanders covered up killings by rogue officers, inquiry files allege](#), The Guardian, 23 October 2013.

5 Ronan McGreevy, [A history of Ireland for outsiders: From Henry VIII to the Troubles](#), The Irish Times, 6 March 2019.

6 Jeff Wallenfeldt, [The Troubles](#), Encyclopaedia Britannica, 14 May 2019.

7 Christopher Patten, [A New Beginning: Policing in Northern Ireland: The Report of the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland](#), Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland, September 1999.

The Patten Report led to the transformation of the RUC into the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). This not only meant a complete change of name, symbols, and branding—which provoked a bitter backlash from some RUC officers—but also a strong recommendation that a goal be set of 50/50 representation. In practice, that meant the implementation of a temporary affirmative-action plan that stipulated that half of all new hires had to be Catholic. The result was that the police force went from being 8.3 percent Catholic under the RUC in 1999 to nearly 30 percent Catholic by 2011. Once a 30 percent “critical mass” was reached, the U.K. government allowed the affirmative-action policy to lapse, stating that it had served its purpose.⁸

Today, the PSNI is 32 percent Catholic and 67 percent Protestant,⁹ even though the 2016 labor force survey of working-age adults showed that 44 percent of respondents identified as Catholic and just 40 percent were Protestant.¹⁰ Despite this discrepancy, this demographic shift in the force has correlated with a significant improvement of the Catholic population’s perceptions of the police. When asked in a 2017 survey¹¹ how satisfied they were that the PSNI treated members of the public as a whole fairly in Northern Ireland, 73 percent of Catholics said they were “very/fairly satisfied.” Compared to the 43 percent of Catholics who expressed overall satisfaction with the police in 1999, this represents a seismic shift in attitudes. Protestants’ perceptions of the force also improved, with 85 percent reporting satisfaction with the police in 2017. The survey data offer two important points. First, the shift in attitudes among Catholics demonstrates the positive correlation between representation

of minorities and their confidence in institutions of power. Second, the fact that the Protestant community’s perception of the police also improved demonstrates that improving the rights of one group need not come at the expense of the other if reform is done well.

Beyond Affirmative Action

Affirmative action, while important, did not happen in a vacuum. At the same time as the RUC was undergoing internal transformation, the independent Northern Ireland Policing Board was established to provide oversight, guarantee human rights, and develop community-engagement strategies. Though there had been a police oversight board in the past, it was not representative of the Catholic population, and changing the composition of the board was among the recommendations of the Patten Commission. Today, the board includes ten members of the Northern Ireland Assembly (including nationalists and unionists) and nine appointed by the minister of justice following open competition.¹² In addition to providing oversight, the board has also established Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs), which directly consult and engage with communities, prioritize their concerns, make plans to tackle them based on local context, monitor the performance of local officers, and work to establish a good working relationship between officers and the community so they can effectively reduce and prevent crime.¹³ This commitment to including the officers and the communities they serve in the policing process, along with making the police force more representative of the communities served, has helped to build trust over time.

One of the biggest milestones for the Northern Ireland Policing Board came in 2007 when members of Sinn Féin—the most prominent Irish republican party with a long history of paramilitary involve-

8 Shawn Pogatchnik, [N. Ireland police to stop Catholic affirmative action](#), *Police1*, 22 March 2011.

9 Police Service of Northern Ireland, [Workforce Composition Statistics](#), 1 May 2020.

10 Gareth Gordon, ‘Catholic majority possible’ in NI by 2021, *BBC News*, 19 April 2018.

11 Northern Ireland Policing Board, [Public Perceptions of the Police, PCSPs and the Northern Ireland Policing Board Based on the Northern Ireland Policing Board Module of the April 2017 Omnibus Survey](#), April 2017.

12 Northern Ireland Department of Justice, [Justice Minister appoints six independent members to the Policing Board](#), 11 March 2020.

13 Policing & Community Safety Partnerships, Northern Ireland Policing Board, [What do PCSPs do?](#)

ment—voted to join it for the first time. This was critical in the peace process because, with this decision, Sinn Féin was formally acknowledging the legitimacy of the police, which it had long viewed as a tool of oppression. Party leader Gerry Adams’s speech at the time about his hope that participation would mean the “beginning [of] a real dialogue, an anti-sectarian dialogue” represented a massive shift in attitudes and indicated a level of trust in the other side that would have been unthinkable a decade before. This change was only able to occur because of intentional institutional change and policies that ensured representation and transparency.

Beyond the police force itself, there was also a major shift in the national context. In 1999, after 27 years of direct rule from London, Northern Ireland was again given its own parliament. For the first time, however, it was set up based on a power-sharing agreement between the major nationalist and unionist parties, guaranteeing that Catholics and Protestants would be equally represented. Members of paramilitary organizations simultaneously began a years-long process of decommissioning their weapons, with the last IRA fighters not complying until 2005. Nothing about the transition happened easily or quickly, and the whole process occurred in combination with sustained international attention that was critical to holding all parties of the conflict accountable to their promises.

The Shortcomings of Police Reform in Northern Ireland

For all its successes, the transition in Northern Ireland has been imperfect. Affirmative action helped balance the composition of the police force but the number of new applications from Catholics has been steadily declining since that policy has ended. This has led to calls for the reinstatement of affirmative action, though claims that it amounts to “reverse discrimination” has prevented this from happening. Yet the problem is deeper than a lack of affirmative action. When Catholics join the police force, they risk having themselves and their families targeted for violence and harass-

ment.¹⁴ This is a symptom of the difficulties, despite progress made, that come with changing a community’s perceptions of an institution that has for a long time been a tool of their oppression. Thus, while changing the composition of the force is an important first step toward change, the process of building trust takes time, patience, and sustained effort.

The importance of truth telling is not to be underestimated, particularly in Northern Ireland where the divergent narratives of the conflict have been instrumental in keeping the two sides from finding common ground.

A related, controversial issue that still plagues Northern Ireland is whether or not to prosecute those who committed crimes against civilians during the Troubles. This would include not just members of the paramilitaries, but also those of the state security forces. There has been an ongoing political battle over whether they should be granted amnesty in the interest of moving forward or brought to trial so that the victims and their families can get justice.¹⁵ There are strong opinions on both sides of this issue. Some U.K. government ministers have called for a compromise in the form of a South African-style truth commission.¹⁶ In this scenario, participants would be granted immunity from prosecution if they agree to tell their stories publicly. It is hoped that if perpetrators openly admit to their wrongdoing, victims might find some measure of peace, personally by finding out the truth about what happened and at a societal level because history would record those crimes.

14 BBC News, [Catholics ‘must be encouraged to join PSNI’, says George Hamilton](#), 1 June 2019.

15 Peter Taylor, [Amnesty for Troubles killings is a political conundrum](#), BBC News, 11 December 2018.

16 Dan Sabbagh, [Troubles proceedings: Mandela-style truth process may be set up](#), The Guardian, 23 October 2019.

The importance of truth telling is not to be underestimated, particularly in Northern Ireland where the divergent narratives of the conflict have been instrumental in keeping the two sides from finding common ground. Symbols of identity like flags, memorials to participants in the conflict, and events to commemorate polarizing historical events keep these divisions at the forefront of the public consciousness and revive tensions. It is important to realize, however, that while events celebrating these historical narratives are often flashpoints for conflict (for example, Protestant “Orangemen” marching through or near Catholic neighborhoods each year), the legacies of the discrimination and segregation go much deeper than that and need to be addressed.

Historically, segregation and the exclusion of Catholics from institutions of political power contributed to the outbreak of the Troubles; police brutality was a symptom of these larger problems. While there have been major institutional changes aimed at correcting this imbalance, these have often focused on coexistence rather than cooperation. Sectarian divisions persist and often determine where people live and learn, and how they vote. In Belfast, 116 “peace walls” (built in the 1970s in an attempt to limit sectarian violence) continue to divide neighborhoods despite government plans to remove them all by 2023.¹⁷ Statistics from the U.K. Department of Education show that just 7 percent of Northern Irish children attend integrated schools.¹⁸ The power-sharing agreement between the major political parties, which divide along sectarian lines and are deeply polarized on many issues, has led to political deadlock, with the majority of citizens voting for a party that aligns with their sectarian affiliation.¹⁹

Political polarization, controversy over identity expression, and ongoing de facto segregation of schools and neighborhoods all come together to create a sense

that even during a period of relative stability, a shift in the political climate could trigger a rapid unraveling of the past twenty-two years of progress. Brexit, for example, has thrown into question the future of the border policy on which the Good Friday Agreement was based. The agreement focused heavily on the demilitarization of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, which were both in the EU at the time. With the United Kingdom leaving the EU, the possibility of the establishment of a “hard border” between the two countries has resulted in the threat of renewed violence and fears of more widespread conflict. Though things remain peaceful for now, the fact that Brexit has caused so much anxiety is a testament to the fragility of that peace and how much work still needs to be done.

Lessons for the United States

Policing

The change in attitudes toward the police in Northern Ireland demonstrates the importance of representation, oversight, and accountability. As a starting point, U.S. cities would benefit tremendously from closely examining the process there and thinking creatively about how they might adapt it to their local context. While they will face different obstacles due to the decentralization of policing in the country, the role of unions, the legal context, American gun culture, and the size and composition of the population served, the fact that Northern Ireland managed to take an institution that was deeply mistrusted by more than half of the population and transform it should attract the attention of U.S. cities.

One of the areas that deserves particular attention is the importance of diversity within the police force. In the long run, more aggressively hiring minority officers will be an important part of this process since in many police departments officers are not representative of the communities they serve.²⁰ This will require

¹⁷ Steven Grattan, [Northern Ireland still divided by peace walls 20 years after conflict](#), *The World*, 14 January 2020.

¹⁸ Northern Ireland Department of Education, [Integrated Schools](#).

¹⁹ BBC News, [Northern Ireland results](#), 2019.

²⁰ David Hughs, [I'm a Black Police Officer. Here's How to Change the System](#), *The New York Times*, 16 July 2020.

each department to take an in-depth look at the entire hiring process—from recruitment of applicants to the final job offer—to see why there are fewer officers of color on their force. In Chicago’s case, one such investigation²¹ showed that lack of interest was not the primary factor driving the lower number of minority officers; 33 percent of applicants to the force were Black, though only 23 percent of officers were (the city is approximately one-third African American). The problem was that various factors were causing Black applicants to self-select out of the process, including the informal preference given to applicants with family members already on the force, who were more likely to be White or Latino. Though it may be difficult to pinpoint the exact cause of underrepresentation, unraveling the problem should be a priority.

Changing the way that police officers are trained to perceive civilians will require fundamental changes to police training itself.

The importance of diversity within the police force should also be emphasized in discussions of “defunding the police.” Proponents of defunding in the United States argue that some of the resources allocated to the police should be redistributed to social and mental health services, addiction treatment, and government agencies that are better equipped to handle nonviolent offenses. The idea is that sending a professional other than a police officer to handle nonviolent encounters will reduce the risk of a situation escalating into violence while allowing the police to focus its attention on serious crimes where its intervention is necessary. While this is generally a good idea, an unintended consequence of defunding the police could be a reduction of the number of Black and Brown officers on the

force. As Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot explained in a recent interview:

In our Police Department, about 90 percent of the budget is personnel. When you talk about defunding, you’re talking about getting rid of officers. Most of our diversity lies in the junior officers. So when you’re talking about defunding the police, you’re talking about doing it in a context of a collective-bargaining agreement that requires you to go in reverse seniority, which means you’re getting rid of the younger officers. Which means you’re getting rid of Black and Brown people.²²

The Northern Ireland case demonstrates the importance of representation, so figuring out a way to keep diverse officers on the force while also empowering complementary services to handle nonviolent offenders will be one of the main challenges facing U.S. cities. The African American Mayors Association is already leading the charge in this regard, having developed the Mayors PEACE Pact for Community Centered Policing.²³ The acronym “PEACE” stands for: provide transparency, evaluate all policing related contracts, policies, and cultural norms, advocate for federal action, create robust community engagement, and enact budgets that reflect community values. The emphasis on transparency, accountability, national action, and community engagement are aligned with the policies that drove change in Northern Ireland and it is an excellent starting point for institutional reform. Though these mayors explicitly reject the idea of literally “defunding” the police,²⁴ the plans they present are aligned with the spirit of that movement, with a focus on finding funding from other areas of the city budget to invest in mental health, addiction recovery, and other services. At the same time, they also discuss

21 Kevin Stark and Darnell Little, [More African-Americans apply to become cops, but few make it to finish line](#), Chicago Reporter, 2 February 2018.

22 David Marchese, [Lori Lightfoot, mayor of Chicago, on who’s hurt by defunding police](#), The New York Times, 22 June 2020.

23 African American Mayors Association, [Mayors PEACE Pact for Community Centered Policing](#), June 2020.

24 Tom Jackman, [African American mayors lay out plan for police reform without ‘defunding’](#), The Washington Post, 27 July 2020.

the importance of changing police culture, such as emphasizing the “duty to intervene” when officers see other officers violating laws or policies.

The PEACE plan, while a promising start, arguably does not go far enough in terms of getting to the root of the toxic culture of violence that has been stubbornly pervasive. Though recognizing these flaws is admirable, simply having de-escalation and bias training will not be enough. Changing the way that police officers are trained to perceive civilians will require fundamental changes to police training itself, though the prevalence of guns in the United States has stymied these efforts in the past.

Training police officers to react to civilians as though they are enemy combatants in a war zone is one of the first things that needs to stop if the United States is going to restore confidence in the police.

In Northern Ireland, the police and the military during the Troubles often treated civilians as the enemy, and the suspicion was not entirely unfounded. It was only with the decommissioning of weapons by paramilitary organizations in concert with numerous other trust-building compromises that this police mindset began to change and there was a shift toward productive community engagement.

A wartime mindset is also present in the United States today. “Police are taught that the enemy is ‘out there,’” Major David Hughes,²⁵ a Black officer from Newport News, Virginia, said. “When they arrive at work with that mindset, they don’t know who wants them in the community, and who wants to kill them. It’s no different than troops in Afghanistan or Iraq. We are patrolling the streets of our own cities as an occupying force.” Training police officers to react to civilians as though they are enemy combatants in a

war zone is one of the first things that needs to stop if the United States is going to restore confidence in the police. This approach not only makes the people living in the community suspicious of officers’ intentions, but also increases the likelihood of an officer misinterpreting a situation with lethal consequences. As former officer and scholar of policing Seth W. Stoughton said, “Officers’ actions are grounded in their expectations, and they are taught to expect the worst. [Officers who have mistakenly shot unarmed civilians] saw what they were trained to see. And they did what they had been taught to do. That’s the problem.”²⁶ Evidence from police forces throughout Europe²⁷ demonstrates that requiring more education and emphasizing de-escalation tactics over weapons training is strongly correlated with a lower number of violent confrontations between officers and civilians.

However, the prevalence of guns and the strength of American gun culture makes the context critically different than that of Europe. According to Pew Research Center, about four out of ten Americans either own a gun or live with someone who does, and 44 percent claim to personally know someone who has been shot.²⁸ The prevalence of guns in combination with the short training period for officers²⁹ explains a great deal about why police training emphasizes the use of force. Therefore, figuring out how to lower the prevalence of guns in the civilian population will be a necessary component to any serious conversation about defunding and reforming the police.

Addressing Underlying Problems

As U.S. cities move forward with changes to policing, they should also take a lesson from the shortcomings of the Northern Ireland process. Rebuilding trust

25 David Hughes, [I’m a Black Police Officer. Here’s How to Change the System](#), The New York Times, 16 July 2020.

26 Seth Stoughton, [How Police Training Contributes to Avoidable Deaths](#), The Atlantic, 12 December 2014.

27 Yasmeen Serhan, [What the World Could Teach America About Policing](#), The Atlantic, 10 June 2020.

28 Ruth Igielnik And Anna Brown, [Key takeaways on Americans’ views of guns and gun ownership](#), Pew Research Center, 22 June 2017.

29 The Institute of Criminal Justice Training Reform, [Not Enough Training](#).

between communities cannot be the responsibility of the police alone. The impact of police reform will be limited by the extent to which other reforms that get to the root of the oppression faced by marginalized communities are effective. Many of the problems facing the United States can be traced back to one central issue: the inability to agree on a historical narrative is impeding policymakers' efforts to overcome legacies of inequality and agree on a means to repair historical damage, which has made it impossible to move forward as a united country.

Historical facts about everything from the cause of the Civil War³⁰ to the economic impact of 'redlining,'³¹ have been distorted and politicized. Americans have created competing historical narratives³² and even competing textbooks,³³ many of which have white-washed the severity of the long-term impacts that slavery, segregation, and related policies have had on Black communities. The results of these differences can be seen in opinion surveys. Despite the fact that each Confederate state's Articles of Secession—the documents that they drafted to explain their reasons for rebellion—unambiguously declare that states were fighting to preserve the right to own slaves,³⁴ only 52 percent of Americans surveyed in 2019 cited slavery as the main cause of the Civil War.³⁵ More importantly, another 2019 survey³⁶ found that only 43 percent of Republicans believed that the legacy of slavery affects

the position of Black people in American society today, compared to 79 percent of Democrats. And 84 percent of Black respondents agreed, compared to 58 percent of Whites.

As U.S. cities continue to consider police reforms, they should keep in mind that the underlying racial and political divisions in the country need to be addressed if the goal is to create a peaceful, functional society.

The implications embedded in some narratives (for example, that personal failure, not structural inequality, is the sole culprit behind disparate outcomes for Black and White people) have seeped into modern-day political discourse, personal prejudices, and ultimately, the criminal justice system. The fact that water fountains are no longer segregated does not mean that the legacies of racist systems no longer impact minorities today; it simply means that proving their impact is harder, and the work needed to right the imbalance is more complex. The fact that such an imbalance exists is obvious across the board, in terms of the wealth gap,³⁷ the nature and frequency of interactions with the police,³⁸ and even the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.³⁹ In order to make smart policy decisions, those making them at all levels should be educated about the historical context in order to gain a fuller understanding of the roots of today's problems so that they might address them in a nuanced and effective manner.

As U.S. cities continue to consider police reforms, they should keep in mind that the underlying racial and political divisions in the country need to be

30 Pew Research Center, [Civil War at 150: Still Relevant, Still Divisive](#), 8 April 2011.

31 Tracy Jan, [Redlining was banned 50 years ago. It's still hurting minorities today](#), The Washington Post, 28 March 2018.

32 Nikita Stewart, ['We are committing educational malpractice': Why slavery is mistaught — and worse — in American schools](#), The New York Times Magazine, 19 August 2019.

33 Dana Goldstein, [Two States. Eight Textbooks. Two American Stories](#), The New York Times, 12 January 2020.

34 John Pierce, [The Reasons for Secession: A Documentary Study](#), The American Battlefield Trust.

35 Emily Guskin, Scott Clement and Joe Heim, [Americans show spotty knowledge about the history of slavery but acknowledge its enduring effects](#), The Washington Post, 28 August 2019.

36 Pew Research Center, [Wide racial and partisan gaps in views of impact of slavery on black Americans' position in society today](#), 17 June 2019.

37 Tracy Jan, [White families have nearly 10 times the net worth of black families. And the gap is growing](#), The Washington Post, 28 September 2017.

38 National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), [Criminal Justice Fact Sheet](#), 2020.

39 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [Health Equity Considerations & Racial & Ethnic Minority Groups](#), 24 July 2020.

addressed if the goal is to create a peaceful, functional society. Until that happens, the continued presence of competing historical narratives, the refusal to acknowledge that the legacy of discrimination continues to impact people, and the increasing polarization of political parties that prevents productive dialogue is going to severely undercut the impact of any attempts at reform. Looking at the pieces of the problem in isolation might lead to measurable improvements in specific areas, but this is never going to be enough. As the case of Northern Ireland shows, to move from a state of strained coexistence to positive collaboration, the United States will have to take a step back and take an honest look at the whole picture.

Conclusion

Northern Ireland has ended a decades-long period of high-intensity violence, instituted major political and policing reforms, and began the long and difficult process of truth and reconciliation. However, its case also shows that police reform, while critically important, is not enough on its own to heal deep-seated divisions. While Catholics and Protestants coexist, divisions surrounding identity stand in the way of true cooperation.

Likewise, the solution to the problems with policing in the United States is complicated. Each level of government, from the federal to city level, will need to simultaneously take steps to reimagine policing, hire diverse officers, debunk harmful false narratives while educating the public about historical fact, and address the underlying inequalities that drive the negative relationship between officers and communities in the first place. The rollout of such an ambitious, multi-pronged initiative will not happen quickly or easily. However, if the energy of protestors and the renewed political will of committed governments can be properly channeled into concrete solutions, the current upheaval could present a tremendous opportunity for positive change.

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