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US policing is far less about fighting crime than controlling the poor

Creeping militarisation has made it ever easier to oppress – and kill – those like George Floyd

US police vehicles outside the Capitol building, in Washington DC.

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'Lower-class culture is pathological." So claimed American political scientist Edward Banfield in his 1970 book *The Unheavenly City*. For Banfield, unlike the middle class, "the lower-class person lives from moment to moment... unable or unwilling to take account of the future or control his impulses". Poverty was the product of people "not troubled by dirt and dilapidation" or by "the inadequacy of public facilities such as schools, parks, hospitals and libraries".

In many ways, Banfield was a voice from the past, echoing the arguments of early 20th-century eugenicists and racial scientists. But he became influential in shaping conservative thinking about law and order, particularly in the attempt to present social problems as the fruit of individual pathology rather than a failure of policy. Last year, on the 50th anniversary of *The Unheavenly City*, conservative social theorist Thomas Sowell celebrated it as a "demolition derby of fallacies that continue to dominate thoughts and actions in our own time".

As we ponder policing in America after the guilty verdict on Derek Chauvin for the killing of George Floyd – and why during the course of that trial at least 64 people died at the hands of law enforcement – Banfield is a good place to start. Rather than waste money on social policies, he believed, the government should be "creating an

armed force... independent of the town population and able to repress its excesses". That is precisely what has been created.

Banfield's student James Quinn Wilson became the godfather of the "broken windows" approach. The smallest infraction – loitering, drinking, jaywalking – should, he insisted, be aggressively restrained. The police must target not just criminals but also "disreputable or obstreperous or unpredictable people". This became the heart of the "zero tolerance" policy of police chiefs such as New York's William Bratton. Meanwhile, presidents from Ronald Reagan to Bill Clinton and beyond sought to turn social issues into matters of law and order. It was less a case of combating crime than of managing the disruptive effects of the social inequalities.

Three major features have marked this process. The first is the militarisation of the police. Most of the extraordinary arsenal American police possesses, from grenade launchers to armoured vehicles, comes from the Pentagon through the "1033" programme, under which surplus military equipment is handed over at no cost. Since 1997, the police have received $7.4bn (£5.3bn) of hardware this way. Unsurprisingly, the more tooled-up the police are, the more likely they are to kill civilians – and even pets.

Second, there has been the extension of militarised policing into new areas, such as schools. In 1975, police were stationed in 1% of US schools; by 2018, that figure was 58%. These are not friendly neighbourhood cops. In her book *Lockdown High*, Annette Fuentes describes a talk by a trainer to school police: "You should be walking around in school every day in complete tactical equipment, with semi-automatic weapons... You must think of yourself as soldiers at war." Social and medical issues, from mental illness to homelessness, are also seen as issues for "warrior cops", often with tragic consequences. If you're poor or black, it is likely that much of your life is lived in the shadow of the police.

Then there is mass incarceration, a product primarily of Clinton-era policies. In 1970, there were 200,000 people in US prisons. Today, that figure is 2.3 million. Of a population of 328m, 77m have a criminal record.

Inevitably, in a nation in which fault lines of race run so deep, the policing of the "lower orders" has become racialised. African Americans form 13% of the population and 39% of prisoners. Apologists for the system suggest that this is the result of black people committing more crime. But look at the issue of drugs. Study after study shows similar rates of illicit drug use among black and white people. The former, however, are far more likely to be arrested, charged and convicted. The justice system itself creates the racial disproportionalities in drug crime.

While racial biases are clear, studies suggest poverty and class best correlate with police killings and mass incarceration. African Americans, more likely to be working class and poor, are also more likely to be imprisoned and killed. It is, however, an issue confronting all "lower-class" people.

Many policing reforms are urgently required, from demilitarisation to greater community oversight. But until the police stop seeing themselves, and being seen, as "an armed force to repress" the poor, until they stop being used as a means of managing inequality, and that inequality is challenged at its roots, little is likely to change.

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