

## Interview – Alex Vitale

Written by E-International Relations

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# Interview – Alex Vitale

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, OCT 13 2023

Alex S. Vitale is Professor of Sociology and Coordinator of the Policing and Social Justice Project at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center. He has spent the last 30 years writing about policing and consults community based movements, human and civil rights organizations, and governments internationally. Prof. Vitale is the author of *City of Disorder: How the Quality of Life Campaign Transformed New York Politics and The End of Policing*. His academic writings on policing have appeared in *Policing and Society*, *Police Practice and Research*, *Mobilization*, and *Contemporary Sociology*. He is also a frequent essayist, whose writings have been published in *The NY Times*, *Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *The Nation*, *Fortune*, and *USA Today*. He has also appeared on CNN, MSNBC, CNBC, NPR, PBS, Democracy Now, and The Daily Show with Trevor Noah.

### **Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?**

In the arena of public safety, the most interesting research involves assessing the effectiveness of community-based violence reduction strategies such as Cure Violence, Advance Peace and other trauma informed approaches. These programs are still small scale and mostly developing, but we need research on how they operate, including what the specific mechanisms of causation are, and how to make them more effective and accountable to local communities.

### **How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?**

When I started working on policing issues in the 1990s while at the San Francisco Coalition on Homelessness I was involved in efforts to reduce abusive police practices through improvements in police training, procedural changes to policies and pressuring oversight bodies. Over time I realized that this was mostly fruitless. Since then, I came to realize that the abusive policing I was witnessing was intentional and a direct response to political imperatives created by elected leaders. This led me towards a more abolitionist analysis of policing rooted in the understanding that policing is an inherently violent and abusive institution and plays a central role in enabling systems of exploitation.

### **In your book *The End of Policing*, you argue for the abolition of the police, to be replaced by other mechanisms. Can you explain why this is necessary?**

We need to get the police out of our lives in as many ways as we possibly can, because policing is primarily a tool to maintain an ideal of social order that enables profound exploitation and immiseration of the most vulnerable people in society. It is being used to put a lid on social problems, not fix them, and we should demand real solutions to things like mental health crises, drug overdoses, and underfunded schools, that don't rely on the violence work of policing. For each of these issues and so many more, we know there are evidence-based alternatives that we should pursue instead to directly solve those problems. Some of these are housing first initiatives, better funded schools, community mental health services, and trauma informed violence reduction strategies.

### **Your critics have argued that fewer police will lead to an increase in crime rates. How do you respond to this?**

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I am advocating the development of new infrastructures of public safety that will be more effective at keeping people safe than policing and won't come with the tremendous negative costs of policing and mass incarceration. The evidence that "policing works" is incredibly thin, and systematically refuses to calculate the costs of policing into their models. Policing doesn't accomplish what most people think it does and we should move to draw down their functions and numbers as we put new infrastructures in place. Much of the world already does this and the US needs to catch up.

### **Highly-publicized episodes of police brutality against members of the Black community in the US have reinforced demands for reform. Why is substantial police reform so slow to happen in the US?**

Because elected officials rely on police violence to maintain a notion of social order that is inherently exploitative. Therefore, these powerful actors don't actually want to see significant changes to how police do things. They want police to be free to mobilize violence and coercion more or less at will so that they don't have to address the profound inequalities and injustices at the heart of American society.

### **Could the role of the police be "rethought" to better suit the current social climate in the US?**

Yes, to some degree. We could look more like other developed countries that don't use police to manage school discipline, address mental health crises, control drug and sex work markets, etc. But we need to go further than this. The vast majority of what police in the US currently do is either ineffective or counterproductive and we have alternatives that we could put in place instead.

### **You argue that policing cannot be separated from issues such as racial inequality, poverty, lack of opportunity, and the criminalization of marginalized groups. With rising calls to reimagine public safety, how do we ensure vulnerable groups are still protected during a transition to new approaches?**

We start by building up new infrastructures of public safety. Newark's Office of Violence Prevention and Trauma Recovery is an example. They are giving communities resources to aid young people in crisis so that their lives are stabilized, which in turn reduces the level of community violence making everyone in the community safer. Violence levels in Newark are at a 60-year low. In Denver, the STAR program provides street outreach and crisis response to people having a crisis related to mental health, drug use, or homelessness. These teams help stabilize people on the street and connect them to services. This has meant a dramatic reduction in the role of the police and has produced significant crime reductions in the areas in which they currently operate versus those that don't have them yet.

### **You are the coordinator of the *Policing and Social Justice Project*. Can you explain it and its impact?**

The Project is a public policy shop that supports organizing and policy development on alternatives to policing in the development of public safety. We have ongoing projects in several cities including opposing gang suppression policing in New York City and calling for alternative community-based strategies, advocating for alternatives to police-based traffic enforcement and the elimination of abusive specialized police units in Memphis, and supporting a campaign for police free schools in Northern LA County.

### **What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?**

There is a large heavily funded industry of police reforms internationally that attempt to fix policing through procedural reforms designed to better instill the rule of law and professionalize policing based on Western standards. This is a mostly failed endeavour that has very little to show for the millions of dollars it spends. It has also primarily served to advance US and European geopolitical interests rather than improve the safety and quality of life of those in developing societies. Real safety is a product of greater economic equality, true democratic decision making, and the rise of independent civil society power, not more money for police training.