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Inside the Fight to Abolish Police in Philadelphia

YahNé Ndgo and other local activists have been advocating for years to get police out of Black communities. Now, is the rest of the city ready to listen?

by **ROBERT HUBER** • 11/21/2020, 8:58 p.m.

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YahNé Ndgo, one of the activists working to abolish Philadelphia police, at Malcolm X Park in West Philadelphia. Photograph by Drew Dennis

It's an incredible idea, one that's been percolating for a long time in Philadelphia and other cities. Certainly, all of YahNé Ndgo's life.

A 48-year-old organizer, Ndgo grew up mostly in West Oak Lane, which was solidly working-class in the 1980s, when she was a child there. "But even in that community, we'd watch cops shake people down on the



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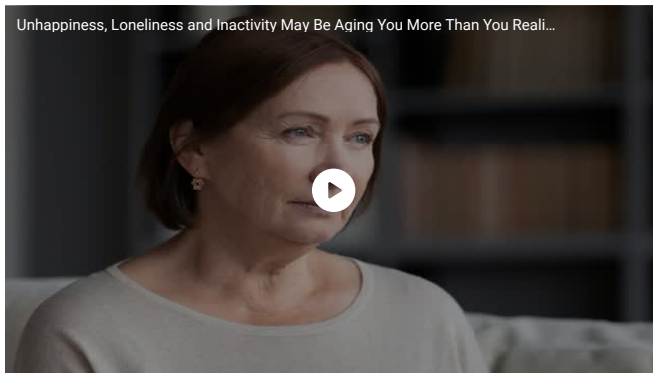
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corners,” she says. This is what police looked like to her then: “The cops would take their drugs and then sell them to people on other corners. But sometimes they’d come as enforcers [arresting dealers], so you didn’t have a certainty *how* you were engaging them. Police would get guns off the street and then drop them in alleys, so that the guns would recirculate on the street — cops had an interest in maintaining violence. That gave them purpose, impetus for taking a military approach to our community. Trust in police was not even an idea in the community I was a part of.”



In October, I had two long conversations about policing in Philadelphia with Ndgo (pronounced “Indigo”), along with Krystal Strong, another organizer, on the front porch of the Mount Airy house where Ndgo rents an apartment. Strong, 35, grew up in the city’s Francisville neighborhood and has a similar take on policing.

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“I don’t think there’s ever been a point where I saw value in police,” she says. “I have older brothers, and I grew up hearing stories — it’s a rite of passage for most Black people to have horrific and traumatizing encounters with police, and I was never socialized into believing that police were there to protect me.”

Ndgo and Strong are members of **Black Lives Matter Philly**, which is part of the **Black Philly Radical Collective**, a coalition of a dozen activist organizations formed after George Floyd’s murder in May. The coalition is making demands now about changes it wants to see in this city — especially changes in policing. And what its members are talking about is pointedly *not* reform of the department.

Which brings us to that idea: to remove police entirely from Philadelphia. Ndgo and Strong are calling for the total abolition of policing; they and other activists want all cops out of city neighborhoods within five years. And it’s more than an idea — it’s a demand.

“Police are such an important point to apply pressure,” Strong says, “because, number one, police kill us. Number two, police don’t help us. They come after things have happened, or they cause the problems. We’re spending upwards of a billion dollars a year on police who don’t do shit for us.” Even as the police budget keeps rising — to some \$750 million this year — the rate of violent crime in the city has exploded. “So those resources are better spent benefiting communities in ways that we determine.”

The recent national uprisings, Strong says, created an opening, and it’s high time “to try to push that conversation to a more radical place.”

IN JUNE, the Black Philly Radical Collective made **13 public demands**, three of which required immediate action from the city. The first went right at policing: *We demand an authentic defunding of the police budget!*

The collective accused the city of subterfuge when it claimed to have reduced the police budget by \$33 million. In reality, the city canceled a planned \$19 million increase and then moved \$14 million that had been earmarked for crossing guards and public safety enforcement to another part of the budget. More pointedly, what the collective wants is this: “We demand an immediate and authentic reduction in the police budget by 20 percent. We want public funds to enrich our communities, not the police.”

And they want the planned increase to be augmented and put toward remediation of environmental hazards in Philly public schools, estimated to cost \$25 million a year.

The second demand: *Immediately cease the criminalization of Black resistance!* And the third: *Immediately and permanently remove all symbols of state violence!* (For example, the statue of Frank Rizzo, hoisted from its downtown perch, shouldn't be stored, but destroyed.)



Ndgo and Strong come at the abolition initiative with long experience themselves: A writer and singer, Ndgo has been an activist and organizer since she started working with elementary students when she was still in middle school herself; she went to Bennington College and NYU and travels all over the country and abroad, speaking at seminars and workshops building Black and indigenous solidarity and advocating for Black liberation. Strong, with a doctorate in anthropology, is an assistant professor of education in Penn's literacy, culture and international education division and has a book forthcoming: *Apprentices to Power: Students and the Professionalization of Politics in Nigeria After Democracy*.



Activists Krystal Strong (left) and YahNé Ndgo. Photograph by Drew Dennis

It's not possible, in Ndgo's and Strong's view, for an institution that was racist in its founding and practice to be remade; modern policing has antecedents in fugitive slave patrols. “When we talk about the formation of police, we're talking about a colonial apparatus, with the specific mission of capturing Black people,” Strong says. The state's need to control Black communities set an agenda that never fundamentally changed, which is why, Strong says, “There is no reform that will make a cop not kill Black people.” On a more recent legacy from the Clinton era, she says, “Mass incarceration relies on police to protect property, to protect capital, to capture Black people. Mass incarceration in the prison industrial complex requires police to be foot soldiers, to fill prisons. ...

The only way to break out of the cycle is to enact a world that doesn't require police."

Changing the nature of policing, and even the idea of abolition, has been building among Philly organizers for a long time. But what's most fundamentally needed, they argue, is community-building, given that the deep problems of many neighborhoods in Philadelphia — poverty, poor education, a lack of jobs, deficient health care — are what lead to crime in the first place. Organizers are advocating for on-the-ground solutions from within, a self-determination Black communities have never been in position to generate. Even when it comes to violent crime, Ndgo says, the goal is to train community members to deal with the most dangerous situations.

Ndgo and Strong know, of course, how this will strike many people, including in the communities they want to rebuild: that abolition is a grand overreach, and that it's not doable, especially at a time of increased violence in Philadelphia. But the moment is ripe, and the necessity for large-scale change, they say, isn't negotiable. "I will admit there was nothing about this summer that I expected," Strong says, laughing wryly, "but organizers organize for these moments."

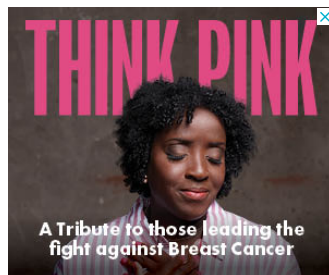


To that end, of the additional 10 demands Black Philly Radical Collective presented to the city in June, five deal directly with policing: *swift firing of killer cops and community response [meaning a convicted officer's pension would be transferred to a victim's family]; abolition of the Fraternal Order of Police and the police advisory committee; ending military occupation of the black community; disbanding all private police departments; and funding communities, not cops.*

IS IT POSSIBLE to actually tear apart the police department and start over?

No. No, that is, if we listen to the city's official power brokers, even left-leaning ones: Mayor Jim Kenney, DA Larry Krasner, and progressive City Council members.

Ndgo and Strong and other police abolitionists met with the Mayor and staff for about an hour in July. On the table were those first three demands of the Black Philly Radical Collective. The organizers pushed the Mayor to take money from the police budget to fund lead and asbestos removal in the city's schools. It went nowhere.



"They pointed out how the administration had invested more in education even prior to this moment," Strong says. "So they tried to fall back on their prior efforts."

A city staffer at that meeting with Kenney says now that the organizers presented their demands as if they simply had to be met, eliminating dialogue and compromise. Which is exactly what Ndgo and Strong aren't interested in. To them, political blather about solving community problems has proven empty for half a century; it's time to move. "Our demands are clear, and now it's up to them," Ndgo says. "The Mayor's Office invited us to navigate the bureaucracy ourselves. They did not step forward as partners."

"City mayors are in a bind," says Alex Vitale, a Brooklyn College sociologist and author of *The End of Policing*. "They're caught up with massive social problems — violence, mental health, etc. — which they basically have turned over to police, and they're committed to that approach. But communities are increasingly saying they'd like to solve those problems instead of police. There's not a good pathway of how to do it, which seems terrifying for mayors in upsetting political relationships."

Organizers demonstrated outside of DA Krasner's office over criminalizing protesters — demand number two — and he came out to meet with them; that didn't go well, either, despite Krasner's well-publicized bona fides on sensitivity to the city's struggling neighborhoods.

"Krasner is very arrogant and self-important and behaves as if he is above criticism and direction," Ndgo says. "You cannot be a comrade to a community if you don't take direction, if you don't hear what those priorities are. If you think it is up to you to decide what they are ... that's a white supremacist standard, for people in these leadership positions in the city."

Krasner responds to Ndgo's critique in an email: "My office has been clear: We will not stand for the criminalization of protest or dissent, period. But small business owners whose properties were burglarized and damaged during the unrest deserve access to justice, like all victims to crime."

Strong, though, warns that it's wrong to pin the blame on individual officials. "This isn't about Krasner," she says. "I like Krasner — he's better than Lynne Abraham, better than his predecessors, but that's actually not the point. He is a functionary of the state, a state structure we are trying to dismantle, so we have to have this adversarial relationship."

Even left-leaning City Council members have a tricky road to navigate on fixing policing.



"I do support the movement to defund the police and reimagine what that looks like," says Councilmember Jamie Gauthier, who represents parts of West and Southwest Philly, "but I do see a need for police in our society. Although I like the vision — one day having no need for police — it would take a long time for us to get there. I don't want to minimize where [the call for abolition] comes from — it comes from the fact that police are a racist institution."

But to Ndgo and Strong, getting rid of policing certainly isn't about the established power structure leading the way, though the \$750 million that now goes to policing would help enormously if earmarked for communities. The solution, again, is really in communities themselves taking on those big problems — poverty, education, health care, jobs —

from the ground up. That's the best path to lessening crime and making police obsolete.

It's a far-reaching vision. Again, can that happen?

On Ndgo's porch, both she and Strong are taken aback: *Of course it can happen!*

"Everybody thinks things are impossible until they're done," Ndgo says. "The thing is just to decide! If ruling forces said, 'In five years, you all, there isn't going to be police, so figure out your shit,' everybody would pull their shit together, because they know they have to."

"It's not that things can't be done," Strong says, "it's that they won't be done. There's not the political will. Cuba after the revolution, in a matter of months, transformed its literacy rate, empowered everyday people to teach and learn with each other. Europe after World War II was completely decimated — the Marshall Plan rebuilt Europe, while also leaving the colonies [that the U.S. and Europe] were extracting from in a state of disarray. So we've seen when these power systems want things to happen, they can happen. Look at Notre Dame, when it was on fire. Look at Jeff Bezos, making millions during the pandemic. The idea that things are impossible is actually propaganda — the issue is political will for change."

With other organizers, Ndgo and Strong have been setting up marches, workshops and trainings to spread the word and build that will. And much has been happening in communities for some time, Strong says, with community gardens to help with food insecurity, collective labor initiatives, organizations to teach children outside of underfunded public schools, and a push for communities to keep themselves safer: "Many groups are doing the frontline work around police violence and intra-communal violence, really doing the house-by-house, block-to-block work to reimagine and reestablish safety in our community."

Ndgo says that their work on policing is really about, first and foremost, persuading struggling communities themselves, where police have long been the go-to for help. As fraught as the relationship with cops can be, when there's trouble, they do show up, and abolition requires something of a leap of faith within communities: *No cops?*

Part of the solution is getting police to stop taking on problems better handled by others. And while Strong says she isn't aware of any U.S. city where police abolition is in the works, *End of Policing* author Vitale points to shifts in police responsibility that are helping: Denver and Portland have created mental health crisis teams outside of police departments, for example; Oakland and Minneapolis have gotten police out of schools.

In this atmosphere where there's so much need for change, it's strange to hear, say, Councilmember Allan Domb in June weigh in with: "The flavor of the day right now is to blame police. I don't think police are perfect, but I think in general they do a very good job."

Domb's opinion comes off as outrageous to Councilmember Gauthier. "If you don't live in a neighborhood that is Black and brown, where you deal with the police constantly," she says, "you are not equipped to make that judgment."

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“What matters is our children stop being killed in the street,” says Ndgo, “that our children feel safe, that a brother or uncle won’t be harassed or beaten or murdered by police officers.”

In late October, police were called to the Cobbs Creek home of 27-year-old Walter Wallace Jr. by his family. Two officers found Wallace, who had a history of mental health problems and was well known to police, outside

brandishing a knife. As his mother begged the cops not to shoot him, Wallace walked toward the officers on the street, who backed up and — without Tasers that might have subdued Wallace — opened fire from some 15 feet away, video of the killing reveals.

“We heard from police [during the summer protests in the city] that they would have a more community-oriented approach to policing,” Strong says a few days after Wallace’s killing. “That we would not have any more George Floyds. But here we are.” Ndgo and Strong took part in West Philly demonstrations over Wallace’s shooting. “And in the middle of our march,” Ndgo says, “during an expression of our anger, which was not being expressed violently, police suddenly began to billy-club people.”

Strong and Ndgo ran from the police; some of their fellow protesters were beaten, they say. “A policing system that responds to a perfectly reasonable request for the end of police brutality with more police brutality,” Strong says, “cannot be trusted to reform itself.”

No one knows, of course, how far the push to abolition can go. But at least one thing has happened: The window has fully opened on the crisis of how our most vulnerable neighborhoods are policed.

POLICE COMMISSIONER Danielle Outlaw shared in June that in the wake of George Floyd’s murder, her 19-year-old son told her “he was in fear for his life” in any possible interactions with police. “My knees buckled,” Outlaw admitted.

“What matters is our children stop being killed in the street, that our children feel safe, that a brother or uncle won’t be harassed or harmed or beaten or murdered by police officers,” Ndgo says at the end of the second long conversation on her porch. “That people won’t be hungry, and not criminalized because they’re hungry, and won’t lose their children because they couldn’t pay the electric bill when the city shut off electric and then the city decides they don’t have adequate space for children, so they kidnap the children — those are the things that drive the work that we do.”

“We recognize abolition for a lot of people sounds radical, sounds unrealistic,” Strong says. “For many people, it’s hard to imagine a world without police. ... Okay, what do police offer that is worth preserving? And our answer is, absolutely nothing. We are also shifting toward — what will actually keep us safe? We know that it is community that keeps us safe. *We keep ourselves safe.*”

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