

Reforming Policing Institutions:

A Closer Look at EndSARS and BLM

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In 2013, three women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, founded the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. BLM was created to bring awareness to the dehumanization of Black lives in America, which is often exacerbated by the lack of justice in policing incidents pertaining to innocent young Black men (BLM n.d.). In the first half of 2020, following the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd at the hands of Kentucky and Minnesota police officers, the BLM movement galvanized nationwide support as more Americans marched and demanded accountability from policing institutions than ever before. As tensions rose, incidents of violence increased the divide between protestors and the police.

In October, while American lawmakers debated policies from reform to abolition, more extreme civil unrest broke out in Nigeria over the country's Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). The unrest in Nigeria can serve as a reminder to Americans that quick solutions to long-term policing problems can result in drastic consequences. As American policymakers introduce new legislation aimed at reforming policing and accountability, a look to the evolution of the EndSARS movement in Nigeria may prevent similar mistakes.

Policing creates a form of power that can oppress and victimize vulnerable communities, with no real consequence for abuses of that power (Kelly and Nichols 2019). Both the EndSARS and BLM movements bring attention to this lack of accountability and call for reform within policing institutions. To move toward sustainable and effective change, these governments must reform their criminal justice systems to create a more equal structure of power between policing institutions and the people.

UNDERSTANDING SARS

To address violent crimes terrorizing Nigerian communities, specifically robberies and kidnappings, the Nigerian Police Force created SARS in 1984 (Ogbette 2018). While the unit succeeded in decreasing violent crime, members of the unit soon became key players in perpetuating the violence that they once worked to disband. The SARS unit participated in

organized crime that stereotyped, tortured, and murdered members of the community (Ogbette 2018). In some cases, Nigerians were harassed for carrying iPhones or wearing modern day clothing. When asked why these individuals were stopped, SARS members claimed that the clothing in question indicated an association with larger crime groups (Busari 2020).

On October 3rd, a viral video on social media displayed the unjustified killing of a young man by a SARS officer (Busari 2020). In response to his death, thousands of people took to the streets of Lagos in protest of SARS brutality. Demonstrators, mostly young people, demanded the government disband the SARS unit. Protestors used hashtags such as #ENDSARS and #ENDPOLICEBRUTALITY to promote support of the movement on social media (Busari 2020).

By October 12th, President Muhammadu Buhari announced the dissolution of SARS and the global community viewed this action as a step toward ending police brutality. However, despite success in demanding the disbanding of SARS, the victory was fleeting. The new policing units continued to recruit and redeploy officers from the previous SARS units (Gladstone and Specia 2020). Today, protests against the continued injustice have been diminished due to government involvement (Gladstone and Specia 2020). Allegedly, activists claim the government is now targeting members of the movement, while proactively banning protests in Lagos all together and censoring social media posts. Although the government is actively suppressing the Nigerian protesters, they are supported by a worldwide mobilization of attention to the abuses of SARS and continue to speak against police brutality.

SIMILARITIES TO THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT IN THE US

The Nigerian community's response to police brutality and the disbanding of the SARS unit have led American organizers and activists to discuss how elements of the EndSARS movement resemble the BLM movement (Ogala 2020). Like the EndSARS movement, thousands of people—also mostly young people—took to the streets to protest the excessive use of force in policing African American individuals. The killing of George Floyd led to protests demanding that public officials defund or abolish the police, similar to Nigerians demanding the abolition of the SARS unit (Siegel 2020). In both of these movements, social media outcry led the world to stop and pay attention to the brutality of policing institutions.

Additionally, these two movements expose ongoing societal concerns, as protestors of both BLM and EndSARS continue to challenge the status quo of complex policy issues such as policing institutions and criminal justice reform. Both movements add to the growing use of civic pressure to enact policy change as a means to create an equitable society that many Americans and Nigerians seek.

CURRENT US POLICY INITIATIVES TOWARD POLICING REFORM

As local and state governing bodies look to make small steps toward reform, a recent push for eliminating qualified immunity and banning no-knock warrants has pervaded the national conversation. Federal legislators proposed The George Floyd Justice in Policing Act of 2020—

H.R. 7120—which seeks to remove automatic immunity for state and local police officers (US House 2020). If passed, H.R. 7120 could lead to legal ramifications for police officers. The bill would nullify the Good Faith Exception, an officer’s ability to justify their actions if they believed their actions were in accordance with the law at the time (Legal Information Institute n.d.[a]). A few states have pushed to remove no-knock warrants as well; the no-knock warrant allows officers to legally enter certain residences without knocking or making their presence known beforehand (Legal Information Institute n.d.[b]). Leading the effort, Virginia Governor Ralph Northam recently signed into effect legislation banning no-knock warrants (Major 2020).

All in all, both the BLM and EndSARS movements showcase the power and will of the people. These public movements have led to small steps toward reform through policy initiatives and have provided people with hope that real change can happen on the ground. However, if nothing else changes to address larger policing issues in America, the US could follow the fate of Nigeria—solving one problem only to create another.

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