This episode does contain some expletives in rough language. So now, you know, before listening.

Miranda: Since the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police at the end of May, the United States has been rocked by weeks of nationwide protests against police brutality. And it doesn't look like they're going anywhere anytime soon. So is this movement different from protests in the past? What brought us to the current situation and how has our understanding of the nation's police system affected Black and brown people's lives in our democracy?

And what do calls for changes, such as a policy abolishing the police, actually mean? Hi, I'm Miranda Cawley, and this is the Scholar Strategy Network's No Jargon. Each week, we discuss an American policy problem with one of the nation's top researchers without jargon.

For this week's episode, I spoke to Professor Vesla Weaver. She is the Bloomberg distinguished associate professor of political science and sociology at Johns Hopkins University. And she's also the co-author of the books, *Arresting Citizenship, the Democratic Consequences of American Crime Control* and *Creating a New Racial Order: How Immigration, Multiracialism, Genomics, and the Young Can Remake Race in America*.

Here's our conversation.

Miranda: Professor Weaver. Thank you so much for coming on No Jargon.

Vesla: Thanks for having me.

Miranda: So I'm not a scholar of social movements or policing in America, obviously, but the current moment feels really different to me than previous protests. I'm thinking specifically about the first way of a Black Lives Matter protests that happened in 2015. How do you see this? Like, is this current moment different than what we've seen in the past?

Vesla: That's a great question. And something I've been thinking a lot about is, what stands out in the current movement. And there are, you know, probably dozens of things that you could name. This movement feels more widespread. It's happening in places that don't normally protest it's drawing in segments of the electorate they don't normally engage in unconventional action. The media is covering it differently, but I don't want to focus on those things. I actually think that I've been, I've been thinking about this moment as an iceberg and the tip of course is what we're seeing all around us. But below the tip is this massive things that form the foundation for what comes above.

So the first is that we've had years of criminal justice reform that largely left police power and funding and capacity intact that largely left police predation and violence, untouched. And so you get this sweeping moment where you know, everything from the closing of youth prisons to cash bail reforms, to, you know, calls to close Rikers in New York, to just this emerging bipartisan consensus that what we've been doing is no longer tenable.

And yet, very little of those waves of reform, at any level national state or local. Really transformed what we were doing in policing. That's the first thing. The second thing is that we've, we have years of footage now since the protests of just a few years ago. Of police maiming, choking, kicking, you know, shooting Laquan McDonald, over a dozen times in the back, dragging kids from suburban pools, slamming them on the sidewalk, shooting Philando Castile as his young kid looks on. Sandra Bland, you know, these images are now paired with an, and several years of them with, what we're seeing now, in the city protests and suburban protest, where police are bedecked in gear suitable for combat raining down on many protesters, engaged in, sometimes, you know, peaceful or civil disobedience.

Then you have the vocal expressions of white supremacy that were happening in Charlottesville followed by just a month or two ago, armed, white protesters, you know, angrily yelling for their right, not to have to wear masks, and their right to get a haircut, et cetera. And then you have years of a steady across almost every city crime decline. Then you have Black political organizing and activism growing, at the local level and developing new frameworks and new analyses, you know, a new calls that safety can't be done by police that protection, you know, that police oppression itself is criminogenic.

And so, and you know, all those factors that I just mentioned, and of course more, but those are the main ones that come to mind, set up a situation where there is now very little room in public discourse. And I think in media responses for the typical law and order backlash or front lashes, I've called it.

So in other words, what I mean by that is, this time, saying that protests for Black liberation were both cause and consequence of a rising tide of lawlessness or that police brutality and discrimination weren't a legitimate grievance, or that protests were acts of common criminality, all of which was the prominent argument in the 1960s. We're saying that outside agitators were leading to these protests, that they weren't actual true grievances this time. Given all of the factors I just mentioned this time, those kinds of arguments rang really hollow and they just weren't as prominent or as favorable as in the past,

Miranda: Yeah. Thank you so much for that. And I wanted to get into the first thing. You mentioned a little bit about like the change in policing that we've experienced. So to start, how did we get here? Like on a basic level, how did we get this massive police presence in America that we know today and that these protesters are calling to like change or abolish?

Vesla: So there's, you know, literally hundreds of changes that I could point to, but I want to focus in on two very big changes that undergirded a very substantial shift in policing that intensified and routinized police involvement in the daily lives many citizens and particularly, what Joe Soss and I have called race-class subjugated communities.

Miranda: Do you think you could give us like a quick description of what a race-class subjugated communities is, just cause that's a little jargony and that's what's the name of the show? Unfortunately.

Vesla: Totally. You know, the reason why I use that and not poor and Black communities is that it gives a sense that, you know, these communities aren't just poor and marginal and vulnerable because they exist that way. Subjugation is an active verb. It positions the government as a key actor in that subjugation, right? These aren't communities that just sort of exist but they are subjugated.

Okay. So, the key thing to know is that over the past several decades, both the authority and capacity and remit of policing transforms; basically, we refashioned policing in American communities in in several key ways. Just to give you a sense of this, our federal government poured financial resources into new policing, infrastructure throughout the seventies, eighties, and continuing on into the nineties.

And it was during this time, and you know, this moment where we start to really heavily invest in policing infrastructure. It comes, I should note, just on the heels of one of the biggest, Black, and political challenges to police power, right? Many of the uprisings in the 1960s were about police violence. They were about police that occupied poor Black communities. But in the aftermath of that, we passed several pieces of legislation that directed that channeled ever more resources to local police forces.

So just to give you a sense of this, American cities spent just $82 per capita on police in 1951. And today in constant dollars, they are spending $286. And over this time, by investing so heavily in policing infrastructure, we also positioned police as the first resort to every manner of problem in places that were enduring safety deprivation and all kinds of other deprivation.

It would have been unthinkable in 1950 or even 1960 that we would have police involved so heavily in schools, involved in neighborhood disputes, involved in moving people from around urban space. And so many of us, myself, Elizabeth Hinton and others have shown that these new federal resources coming first through the law enforcement assistance administration, and then later through Byrne grants and then later through cops grants basically substantially enhanced the power to arrest, detain, and surveil.

And so during this time from the seventies to the nineties, you see police agencies locally growing, in manpower, they're adopting new technologies, new tactical patrols. There's this incredible institutional expansion that remains with us today. That's the first bucket.

The second big factor that I want to bring to bear that really helps us understand the transformation in policing is broken windows. Broken windows theory gave new justification for many, many more police contacts with citizens than before. And for those of you who don't know what broken windows is, this was the theory that, small trivial violations should be stopped and should be enforced before they lead to violence. It was the theory that if police didn't ensure, and get involved with, you know, fair beading and drinking out in public, out of open containers and selling loose cigarettes, which was what led to Eric Garner’s fatal chokehold. If police didn't get involved there, then those smaller infractions would be the foundation for later, later violence.

And it was really this idea that crime was emanating from decay, from social decay, or that poor places themselves were threats to disorder. And that police were supposed to seek out the mere possibility of crime. So let's crack down on the violations of order and not the structural conditions. And the new policing discourse depicted the residents of race, class, subjugated communities, not as citizens facing social barriers or as victims needing protection from slum landlord predation, and violence, and this aligned service provision, but as potential or likely, or already active criminal targets in need of surveillance.

And so in a matter of years after the embrace of the theory of broken windows policing, and some call it proactive policing, it's also known as quality of life policing, zero tolerance policing, there's a range of different names for it, but in a matter of years, you're you begin to see misdemeanor arrests shooting up. Almost every police agency in the country adopt some manner of these practices. And you begin to see the broad criminalization of poor and Black communities being enacted by frontline police. Policing during this time becomes the way that we address social problems. And on every indicator, police power and involvement in urban, you know, the fabric of urban life and communities grows. And while at the same time that we're doing less and less to protect citizens and create the conditions for wellbeing.

So this is this moment in broken windows is also intersecting with years of disinvestment, years of shifts in the urban economy, that means that the drug market is, you know, thriving. And ironically, you know, even as broken windows policing becomes this, you know, broad, intensified expansion of state authority, and social control in the lives of the poor, at the same time, one of the theories supports was that it would improve community relations, right? More officers on the beat patrolling for the small stuff meant, or at least they expected that they would get to know the communities better. And that's not in practice.

What happened instead, it becomes this way of policing and surveilling people that never would have been policed, right? Never would've asked, that never would've raised alarm, you know, would have commanded the attention of official authorities before.

Miranda: So, out of this environment that you've described here, came this project called the portals policing project, which you've worked on. So to start, can you tell me about the idea behind this project?

Vesla: Sure. the idea behind the project really came out of the Ferguson and West Baltimore moment. When several academics realized we really needed to listen to communities of concentrated state violence, that we really needed to hear, hear their experience of policing, but also hear their experience of democracy from the ground up.

And so what we did is we paired up with a public artist and a tech entrepreneur named Amar Bakshi, and Amar had these gold shipping containers with immersive audiovisual inside of them. And the point of the containers was to connect people and communities across big distances. So, sometimes connecting them across different zip codes, some times across different time zones, sometimes across the globe. And so we asked Amar if we could put these portals in several communities within the United States and let different communities talk to each other about how they were experiencing police in their communities.

And over the course of two or three years, we ended up placing portals in six different cities, five in the United States: Newark, Milwaukee, Chicago, Baltimore, and Los Angeles. Many of these communities had long histories of uprisings against police, long histories of police violence, and sort of the broken windows style policing that I just spoke about. And, over the course of these years, we just listened. We let people talk in real time to one another and share their stories and share their lived experience and share how their responses to police in their communities.

And if I were to say, if I were to sum up the biggest thing that came across was that the hallmarks of our democracy, the core things that make American democracy what it is—equality, freedom to speak and assemble, and be left alone, rule of law—bore such little resemblance to what was being described in the portals narratives. And that by unearthing this, we were trying to, you know, there's been lots of different investing and there's been lots of academic discussions of policing, but instead of stopping short at how people describe their experiences with police, we took the additional step, and began to argue that this is how they described state action. And therefore, we need to refill your eyes, what American democracy is.

Miranda: Yeah, I think you do make a really important point there about how these interactions just give you access to so much data about what people think about, about their experiences with the government and in the United States. And if you don't mind sharing some examples, I would be really curious to learn like what people are thinking about the U.S. government and about democracy because of these experiences with police.

Vesla: There's so many examples in these conversations. But I'll give you a few. This person was actually in conversation with Mexico City, or with somebody in Mexico City, the portal was in Mexico City. And he says, well, I think that most real people will understand the United States Constitution protects the people from the government. It says what the government cannot do to you. Okay. And what you can expect the government to leave you alone and not do certain things. They can't take your land away from you. They can't come into your house, your home. They can't do certain things.

But when you tell the police that. I have a right not to answer because the Constitution says so, they don't care, laughs that doesn't matter to them. They need that information. And if you don't give it to them, they're going to make your life miserable. There was a lot of discussion about, you know, sort of the freedoms people have in theory, and then they would quickly say, but we don't really, that's not our reality. If you come to my neighborhood, this is how it actually works, right? The Constitution may say that you can get, you know, the police can't stop you unless they have probable cause. They might say that you can have freedom of assembly, but in practice and here I'm quoting, “We ain't got no privacy. They just stop and frisk you for no apparent reason. You try to walk in the house, they pulling that motherfucker behind you. They don't give no fuck that's their job. They job is to lock you up and they not going to stop. They don't give a fuck about us. You gotta govern yourself.”

And there was this real understanding, and it was such a broad understanding in these narratives, that we began to question whether there was almost an unofficial set of laws that they were actually living by. So yes, I know that I have freedom to go where I please and congregate how I want to, but in actuality, if I do that, I am bound to get hemmed up by police, I'm bound to attract the attention of the police car.

Many people saying, you know, this might not be a written policy, but this is what happens. And there are so many examples of how people discuss very specific experiences within their own lives. And, oftentimes, you know, when we sampled, when we surveyed people before they went into the portal, we asked them, you know, how many times have you been stopped by police, and when was the most recent occurrence, and at what age? What was so striking is that among black men, for example, in Milwaukee, over half of them said in the last week or a month. Okay, that's an incredibly high, you know, can you imagine running a sample of the broad American public? And half of the American public saying yes, in the last week or month, I was stopped by police involuntarily.

And so there's just a whole trove of different experiences people have, either when they call police for help. And most often when they're being approached by police in their own lives. And this particular conversation, he was so proud that he had made it this far in his life without being fingerprinted, without having police interactions, without having a conviction. And he described how things actually work. And this is what he says, “But the police looking at it like, well, everybody else that we got already felons.” So the police had stopped a group of young men. And he was in that group and he doesn't have a record. “We don't want them. But him right here,” speaking of himself, “Oh, you ain't got no cases. So we fit in to send him up the river. Cause you ain't got no cases. You got a good job. Come on. Let's fuck your life up. You know what I'm saying? That's basically, you know what I'm saying? And that's how they look at it. That's how they look at a lot of us because we young and we Black. They'd be like, shit, you ain't gonna do nothing with your life, so let's fuck your life up.”

And what was interesting and, this came up a lot, that police would actually, when they stopped a group of men, they would look for those that didn't yet have a record, and, you know, put their attention on them so that they could kind of bring them into the system. There are many other examples like that of what the lived experience of policing is.

Another big one that comes up a lot is just youthful encounters and how normal kind of ordinary acts of youth playing on a playground, walking together, to the store, throwing a ball around became, you know, rendered them suspicious to police, and those are the most chilling I think to read because it's a very orally, we don't tend to assume that police are stopping 12 year olds and yet in our data, and in nationally representative data, it tends to be that people who are stopped by police they're stopped, for the first time in early adolescence.

Miranda: Wow. Yeah. Thank you so much for sharing these stories to really illustrate what the conditions are like for folks, and how they're feeling about it. I want to talk a little bit about change because that is what is on the forefront of everyone's minds right now, with this current movement, bringing forward an idea that used to not be very mainstream has become very mainstream, which is the abolition of the police.

So to start, can you just tell us what people mean when they're talking about abolishing the police? And I know that's like a loaded and complicated question, but I'm curious about like how your research helps you understand calls for police abolition.

Vesla: How my research helps us understand this better, long before, you know, in the Portals Dialogues, I wouldn't say that police abolition is even a term to them. You know, that feels jargony at least back when we were doing these grassroots narratives. But you will see threaded throughout the narratives and understanding that safety does not come from policing, that in some ways it made them more unsafe.

And you do see, articulations of needing something else, needing to engage in. And many of them did engage in several efforts to collectively protect their neighborhoods. Several of them engaged in efforts to police the police, several engaged in efforts to undermine the safety deprivation that they were experiencing. And many of them theorized this in very insightful ways.

And I'll give you one example. It's interesting because this example is a conversation between Los Angeles and Chicago, and they're talking about the movie *Black Panther*, and then it leads into a broader articulation of what it would mean to be truly protected and what it would mean for the community to play a role in that and what policing abolition would look like though, they don't use that term. And the Los Angeles side says we wouldn't need to police ourselves with violence because we would police ourselves with love and compassion. And his interlocutor says, that's the key right there. That's definitely key right there, right? So we wouldn't need, we wouldn't need you. See, we need the police because we are in need. We wouldn't be in need. They don't really need police. They don't really do nothing. We understand our excellence begets prosperity. So if you build excellence, you'll build prosperity. You don't build disparity. You don't build need, you build abundance and wealth.

And then, the person in Chicago says, okay, so, so, okay, so you just said free access to resources. So what if we just throw away the whole policing system and we start like actually training people how to police they own selves and they own neighborhoods, you know, like the Black Panthers were actually doing like back in the day and stuff like that. Instead of having this like whole different entity. See, it's also showing us this pathway of excellence where you can have self-determination self-reliance, self-defense, and autonomous control of your resources. They don't know what freedom looks like. That's why it looks like a superhero. And there they come back to the Black Panther movie. Freedom has to look like a superhero for it to be like this extraordinary attempt in life to succeed.

And there were many other examples like that where people were calling for the community to have a greater role in protection and in the institutions engaged in safety in their own lives. And you can see it, you know, in calls, oftentimes it's not, you know, we need to defund the police or we need, it's not a specific sort of abolitionist agenda. But it is this idea that we can provide safety to, we know what's going on in our communities, we know a different way we can provide some of the alternatives alongside this immediate imperative of not enlisting the police.

So that's another really, really key theme that comes out is how often people will say I could be on my deathbed. I don't care. I won't, I won't call the police. because I'll end up a suspect. I'll end up being humiliated. I'll end up with little control over the situation and they come, when they come, they come angry, they come ready to shoot.

So you get a lot of people saying, you know, I avoid the police. I stay to myself. I don't really make use of them. I'll call the minister instead, I'll call my neighbor if I'm having a problem. and so in some ways, in these Portals

Dialogues, there already was a significant movement away from enlisting the police as the first line of defense in protecting their neighborhoods.

Miranda: I have one last quick question that's a little more personal. I'm curious, what changes do you think are achievable out of this current moment? What would you like to see happening policy-wise and culturally, in the next, in the coming weeks and months?

Vesla: That's a great question. I think the biggest, the biggest thing for me is in every single example, I literally cannot name you an example of a past moment of where there was widespread resistance to police authority that did not itself give rise to expansions in police authority. Every single moment when Black freedom fighters said the police are imperiling our lives. The police are occupying our neighborhoods. We have no democratic control over the police. We have no way we have no input. Every single time you get that call has been followed shortly thereafter with an expansion in police manpower and resources for police in a broader commitment that we need to expel lots of funds for policing, to improve it.

And that's one of the tragic ironies is that every time we engaged in a moment of procedural reform, it often ended up expanding the system and expanding the warrant for police to be all over the lives of poor Black and brown communities. So what do I want for this time, for this moment? Policy-wise, I would like us to avoid that historical pattern. I would like for the call not to be, yet again, well, to improve policing, we have to send them funds so that they can train their people in how to respect Black life. I think that it has been one of our biggest historical policy failures. And I hope that we don't repeat it. I hope that we, I think it's one of the reasons why we're getting such a clarion call to defund the police is that it's recognized by the social movement activists today.

They know this history, they know that when we infuse more funds into policing, it often does not yield more safety in their communities. It often yields the control of Black spaces and the protection of white spaces. It often yields, preserving racial, racial boundaries, and preserving police power to control their lives.

And so policy-wise, I think that we need to take those calls very seriously. And I think we need to recognize as many activists and social scientists have done that. Policing created its own problems. It created a range of demonstrably bad outcomes in communities, particularly for youth. I've shown some of these in my own work, yeah, I'll end there. That's a, that's a, that's a good place to end.

Miranda: Professor Weaver, thank you so much for sharing your research with us today.

Vesla: You're very welcome. Thank you for asking such incisive questions and for having, taking the moment to create this conversation.

Miranda: And thank you to our listeners for listening. For more on visually diverse work, you can check out our show notes at Scholars Strategy Network slash No Jargon. A reminder that No Jargon is the podcast of the Scholar Strategy Network, which is a nationwide organization that can externalize policymakers and civic leaders with America's top researchers to improve policy and strengthen democracy.

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