

PART II

In the Wake of Rebellion

George Floyd Is Still Dead

As far as I'm concerned, they could burn this bitch to the ground. And it still wouldn't be enough. And they are lucky that what Black people are looking for is equality and not revenge.

—AUTHOR, ACTIVIST, AND FILMMAKER,
KIMBERLY LATRICE JONES¹

IN JUNE 2020, for a moment, anything seemed possible in Minneapolis. In the midst of a deadly global pandemic, much of the country had gone on “lockdown,” radically reorienting work, family, and community life. We had witnessed a horrific murder committed by a police officer, filmed by a teenager and broadcast to the world. The largest protests in the country’s recorded history erupted, spreading the Black Lives Matter (BLM) rallying cry across the globe.² The Minneapolis Police Department (MPD) had tried to implement the police reform playbook, and yet, George Floyd was still dead, the city still burned.³ If the department could not be reformed, perhaps then it must be reimagined. In the wake of the rebellion, nine city council members took to the stage at Powderhorn Park, festooned with giant letters that read “DEFUND POLICE.” Standing next to activists fighting for police abolition, the elected officials pledged to “begin the process of ending the Minneapolis Police Department,” developing “a new transformative model for cultivating safety.” Media headlines across the country blared that the city was poised to “end,” “dismantle,” or “abolish” its police force.

That process of dismantling, however, would quickly become a tedious, contentious, and years-long political struggle over amending the Minneapolis city charter to change the section on the MPD, a protected department in the city’s governing document. Advocates would argue for striking out

all of the text on the MPD (including the provisions about a mandatory minimum number of officers and the mayor's executive control), replacing it with a description of a new department oriented around holistic public safety (which *could* include the police). And, because of the mayor's opposition, to pass this charter amendment the council members would need the support of a majority of city voters.

This proposal to "end" the MPD faced the expected opposition, as downtown business interests sided with the mayor, police chief, and officers union in deriding the "radical" proposal. But it was not simply the mayor's bloc opposing the charter initiative. Indeed, on this particular issue, downtown business leaders, the police union, and some Black community leaders, including a few prominent radical anti-police-violence activists, agreed: the charter amendment to end the MPD was a dangerous path for Minneapolis. As a *Star Tribune* article in July 2020 blared: "Egregious, grotesque, absurd, crazy, ridiculous. These are a handful of the words that some local African American leaders are using to rebuke the Minneapolis City Council's moves toward dismantling the Police Department, even as they demand an overhaul of law enforcement."⁴

Though these groups' critiques of the proposal varied, a core throughline was the idea that city council members had been led astray by abolitionist activists, who did not represent the interests of many (Black) city residents or their ideas about safety in the City of Lakes. These critics included Nekima Levy Armstrong, former president of the Minneapolis NAACP and arguably the most high-profile organizer associated with BLM in the city, whose interruption of the Northside community forum opened chapter 3. After the vote on the charter amendment in 2021, Levy Armstrong would pen a castigating *New York Times* op-ed, concluding: "We expected a well-thought-out, evidence-based, comprehensive plan to remake our police department. Instead, what we got was progressive posturing." Echoing the findings reported in the previous chapter, Levy Armstrong explained that police violence and community violence had to be addressed together: "Black lives need to be valued not just when unjustly taken by the police, but when we are alive and demanding our right to be heard, to breathe, to live in safe neighborhoods and to enjoy the full benefits of our status as American citizens."⁵ They needed, in other words, responsive police protection.

To understand how and why such disparate groups came to share opposition to the charter amendment, in this chapter we finally return to the murder of George Floyd and its aftermath, culminating in the historic election of November 2021. As we'll see, the divide across activist

coalitions, and between activists, city leaders, and residents, witnessed in earlier years had by 2020 ruptured, producing starkly different ideas about safety. As a result, while the fires that blazed a path through the city reshaped Minneapolis politics, much stood unchanged in the ashes of rebellion.

The Murder of George Floyd

Heading into May 2020, Minneapolis was weeks into a “lockdown” designed to slow the spread of the new COVID-19 pandemic. In Minnesota, as across the country, Black Americans faced higher viral exposure in the workplace and mortality rates.⁶ These statistics prompted a flood of media stories about the burdens of structural racism and Black Americans’ disproportionate exposure to premature death. And as spring turned to summer, a new slate of racist violence across the country reignited the BLM movement that had flagged during the Trump presidency, in part because many Americans were increasingly glued to their screens while stuck at home. In early May, video emerged of some of the last moments of Ahmaud Arbery’s life, murdered by three white men who saw him jogging in Georgia. Early on May 25, a white woman called the cops on birdwatcher Christian Cooper in New York’s Central Park. By that night, George Floyd had been murdered. And the unrest his murder prompted would spotlight media attention toward the fatal police shooting of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky, two months earlier. Together, these cases precipitated a national reckoning about race in America.

George Perry Floyd Jr. was a forty-six-year-old Black man with a life story that all too clearly illustrated the toxic combination of racism and poverty in America. Floyd grew up poor in Houston’s Third Ward projects. Entering high school tall and broad-shouldered, Floyd excelled at both basketball and football, eventually landing a college scholarship. But he struggled with the academics, ill-equipped to succeed off the field, and was eventually pushed out without a diploma. Floyd turned to side hustles and a budding rap career under the stage name “Big Floyd.” But by then, he had begun a disastrous relationship with illicit substances, eventually spending more than a decade moving in and out of jails and prisons as his addiction ebbed and flowed and the legal system found reasons to stop, search, and punish men who looked like him.⁷

In 2014 he moved to Minneapolis, part of an effort to “get right” for his young daughter back in Houston. Here, he worked a series of jobs, including as a truck driver and club bouncer,⁸ but the COVID-19 pandemic

disrupted what little stability he'd found. On Memorial Day, 2020, Floyd was spending time with a friend who dealt drugs. Both were using that day, getting high and running errands before a barbeque. Just before dusk, they stopped by Cup Foods, a small convenience store at the corner of 38th and Chicago that Floyd visited often, where his friend was picking up a computer tablet (the store was known for selling cheap used electronics, as well as a site for drug deals). Cup Foods sat at the intersection of several multiracial neighborhoods in South Minneapolis, some more gentrified than others. Though neighbors knew that the block was part of the local Bloods gang's territory, by 2020 the same corner boasted an art gallery and an upscale coffee shop I often visited.

Floyd went into Cup Foods to buy cigarettes as his friend talked to the staff about the tablet. And that's where the day turned. The teenage cashier, a recent immigrant from West Africa, noticed the \$20 bill that Floyd had used looked counterfeit. After checking with the store manager, he was instructed to go out with a coworker to ask Floyd, now in a parked car across the street, to return the cigarettes. But by then, Floyd was starting to nod off, and he was unresponsive to the clerk's request. Instructed to call 911, the teen told the call-taker that Floyd seemed "awfully drunk" and had used a counterfeit bill. Police were dispatched. Two rookie officers, both less than a week out of their on-the-job training period, arrived first: Thomas Lane, a thirty-seven-year-old white man, and J. Alexander Kueng, a twenty-six-year-old biracial man.⁹ Both had been hired under the promise of a "guardian" model of policing, holding bachelor's degrees in sociology and later telling reporters that they had joined the force to help people.¹⁰ As shown on officers' body camera footage, by the time they arrived, Floyd was sitting in the driver's seat of the car. After tapping on the window with his baton and not getting an immediate response to see Floyd's hands, Lane drew his weapon. Floyd put his hands up, though, and Lane reholstered his gun to pull Floyd out of the vehicle. The officers then cuffed Floyd, moving him to the sidewalk in front of the store for questioning.

Instead of resolving the conflict there, perhaps asking him to return the cigarettes or provide other funds and have someone sober drive the car home, the officers decided to arrest him for the attempted forgery. That meant getting him in their squad car. But Floyd was scared and claustrophobic, in part from his earlier stints behind bars. As officers attempted to shove him into the backseat, Floyd flailed and begged. It was during this tussle that Officer Derek Chauvin—a white man, nineteen-year veteran of the department, and Kueng's recent field training officer—arrived on the scene with Officer Tou Thao, a thirty-four-year-old Hmong American

man. Chauvin pulled the struggling Floyd out of the squad car, bringing him to the ground and pinning him down with the weight of his body. As Floyd repeatedly called out—“I can’t breathe!” “Mama!” “Don’t kill me!”—Chauvin held him firmly on the pavement, face-down. Soon, Floyd lost consciousness, and Lane twice asked whether they should roll him to his side (a far safer position for breathing). But Chauvin resisted, telling the rookie that they were waiting for the ambulance. By the time that ambulance arrived, Chauvin’s knee had been on top of Floyd for more than nine minutes, causing irreparable fatal damage.

As officers pinned him for those nine minutes, an increasingly distraught crowd gathered. The witnesses started filming and shouting at officers, with Officer Thao holding them at a distance and issuing derisive dismissals (“Don’t do drugs, kids”). A teenage girl named Darnella Frazier captured the indelible cell phone footage that shook the world. In it, plain as day, was a white police officer, seemingly indifferent, kneeling on the neck of a Black man as he lay dying. As Floyd stopped breathing, witnesses demanded officers look for a pulse. An off-duty firefighter pleaded with officers to let her assist the clearly dying man. A martial arts expert who saw in Chauvin’s actions a “blood choke” told the officer he was “trapping” Floyd’s breathing. “Get off of his fucking neck,” he yelled. But their pleas seemed not to register with officers, even after they tried and failed to find Floyd’s pulse. Chauvin remained in place, kneeling on Floyd, until paramedics arrived and made him move so they could load the man onto a stretcher and into their rig. Unresponsive, Floyd was declared dead at the hospital.

In the overnight hours between May 25 and May 26, two different reports of what happened at 38th and Chicago were released online. On the one hand was the MPD’s press release, which reported that Floyd’s death was the result of an unspecified “medical incident.” And on the other, Frazier’s video, which would by morning go viral, its visual evidence directly contradicting the MPD’s account. By then, the name George Floyd had begun to take on a new life. No longer just a man who had moved to Minneapolis to turn his life around and unabashedly declared “I love you!” to friends and family, Floyd was now a local, national, and international symbol of the horrors of structural racism and the urgent need for change.

The Minneapolis Uprising

What followed was an intense week of mass mobilization in Minneapolis and across the country. The volume of attention paid to the city felt like nothing I had ever experienced, before or since. It was summer, and

many of us who could afford to do so had spent weeks at home as a result of the pandemic. There was, it seemed, nowhere else to look. And what we saw was *horrifying*. The video of Floyd’s torturous nine-minute-long murder sent shockwaves across the globe, inspiring the largest protests in recorded US history. On June 6, crowd counters clocked the protests reached an all-time high, with more than 500,000 demonstrators coming out to the streets across more than five hundred cities and towns. By mid-June, estimates suggested that roughly twenty million people in America, or 6–10 percent of the country’s adult population, had gone to at least one demonstration honoring George Floyd—a shocking total to movement scholars. Half of those protesting on the streets told pollsters it was their first time doing so.¹¹

In addition to the first-timers, those numbers included dramatically more white protesters than in previous waves of mobilization for racial justice as protests erupted across small towns and big cities alike—prompting commentators to suggest that perhaps white America was finally “waking up.” More so than even in the most intense days of the Ferguson protests, it seemed like everyone, everywhere, was talking about police violence and racism. Across the country, newspapers, TV news, and social media feeds were dominated by coverage of the murder, including the officers’ histories and each of the pivotal moments in the fatal encounter, and the protests sweeping the nation. Op-eds by activists and scholars, and book sales for anti-racism tomes, surged. It was a *racial reckoning*. As one of the most influential social movements scholars, Douglas McAdam, concluded to a *New York Times* reporter: “It looks, for all the world, like these protests are achieving what very few do: setting in motion a period of significant, sustained, and widespread social, political change.”¹²

And Minneapolis was its epicenter. In the city, waves of protest became a new normal. All day and well into the night, crowds gathered at 38th and Chicago, which would quickly become the semi-autonomous George Floyd Square, producing an outpouring of protest art that commemorated the loss of George Floyd and others killed by police. Artists created a giant cemetery nearby too, commemorating George Floyd and others whose lives were cut short by police violence. Organizers also planned marches to the homes of political leaders, including rallies at the governor’s mansion and protests outside the home of the county prosecutor. Protesters marched en masse downtown, beseeching city hall. Minneapolis was showing up to fight for what was right. And nowhere was this mobilization clearer than outside the 3rd Precinct building, home base for the officers involved in Floyd’s murder and only a short drive from where

Floyd died. In addition to the mass mobilization on the streets, city leaders, community representatives, activists, scholars, and everyday residents alike shared their voices on social media spaces like Twitter, tweeting and retweeting to call out the violence of the MPD.

As in previous social movement struggles for racial justice, however, attention to the precipitating event—the murder of George Floyd—proved hard to sustain as public attention quickly turned to violence, both in the form of unrest (or “rioting”) and the violence meted out by law enforcement. Both types of violence held important lessons, which commentators would struggle to define for the public. Though nearly all of the demonstrations when the sun was overhead were peaceful, the situation grew more tense after dark. Conflict between protesters and law enforcement began as early as dusk on the first day of protest, as demonstrators and officers squared off in front of the 3rd Precinct. As protesters threw rocks and water bottles at officers and slashed tires on their cars, police in riot gear appeared on the streets and the roof of the precinct. Ignoring policy, officers sprayed tear gas and rubber bullets indiscriminately into the crowd without calling dispersal orders.¹³

Some council members, most vocally Northside’s Jeremiah Ellison, demanded the city’s police stand down, arguing their presence simply inflamed the situation. Police stayed, and the two following nights, conflict escalated. In addition to skirmishes outside the 3rd Precinct, arson and looting hit nearby AutoZone and Target stores, a housing complex under construction across the street, and a small business corridor nearby on Lake Street. By Thursday, fires had spread to blocks in St. Paul and seemingly random neighborhoods across Minneapolis (including far from the 3rd Precinct in North Minneapolis). That morning, Mayor Jacob Frey had ordered police to prepare to evacuate the precinct building in preparation for retreat, moving files and equipment to other locations. That night, with the precinct again under siege, the mayor made the call: *People over property*. The remaining officers, who had been preparing to deploy tear gas, fled the precinct on foot and in squad cars, to an eruption of cheers and threats from the crowd and the explosion of fireworks overhead. In the wake of the officers’ departure, the predominantly young, ebullient crowd torched the building, live-streaming videos with the feel of a raucous block party.¹⁴

The country’s most left-leaning voices framed what was happening in the city as a righteous uprising driven by police violence. Protesters had seized the cops’ house, in what was a *logical* response to the horror of George Floyd’s murder.¹⁵ As Atlanta-based writer Kimberly Latrice Jones would declare in a viral video explaining racism as a rigged game

of Monopoly, the fires erupting across the country were not just about Derek Chauvin and the rest—they were a fight against white supremacy and for equality.¹⁶ Some anarchist groups, too, hailed the siege of the 3rd Precinct, with one site publishing a detailed first-person narrative of how exactly the radicals laid siege to police headquarters.¹⁷

But it wasn't just radical leftists, racial justice activists, and anarchists joining the fray; the Boogaloo Bois and other far-right white militants had come to Minneapolis, too, bringing their tactical gear and AK-47s with them. These extremist groups were here to capitalize on the protests and incite violence as part of their broader efforts to attack what they understood as government oppression and, perhaps, foment a race war. Regardless of precisely who was setting which fires, the night after the 3rd Precinct burned, a post office station and a Wells Fargo bank location on Lake Street were torched, as looters also targeted pharmacies across the Twin Cities. Contentious late-night protests also coalesced around some of the remaining precinct buildings, now fortified with fences and barbed wire.

By then, though, there was a new force in town. The night South Minneapolis's flagship Target store had been looted, with police confronting protesters outside the 3rd Precinct, Mayor Frey called Governor Tim Walz to request assistance from the state's National Guard. But the troops arrived too late, just hours after the precinct went up in flames—a delay that the mayor and governor would each blame on the other in the following days. When they arrived, hundreds of soldiers took to the streets, alongside law enforcement brought in from across the region, deployed to key assets and sites of protest. In addition, Mayor Frey initiated an 8 P.M. curfew, turning protest after dark into an offense.

The curfew implicitly authorized law enforcement to “take back” the streets. At demonstrations all over Minneapolis, officers deployed aggressive crowd-control techniques, including tear gas, flash-bang grenades, and “less lethal” munitions, often without warning or sufficient cause.¹⁸ Hospital records would later reveal that police injured at least eighty-nine people in Minnesota so severely that they required medical attention; several would lose eyes or suffer serious head injuries from “non-lethal” rounds shot directly at the crowd.¹⁹ An MPD SWAT team would later be revealed to have driven down Lake Street in an unmarked van at night, with orders to “Fuck 'em up, gas 'em.” The “first fuckers we see,” their sergeant declared, should be “hammered” with rubber bullets. One of the men they would “hammer” was Jaleel K. Stallings, a twenty-nine-year-old Black army veteran. Thinking that he was under (real) fire from white supremacists, Stallings shot back, his bullets piercing the officers' van. Though

Stallings surrendered as soon as he realized they were law enforcement, he was beaten in retaliation.²⁰

As in decades past, this violence of the police worked, in part, to further demonstrate the message of the protesters: police were a threat. Residents and activists worked to spotlight this reality, as images of abuses of power by law enforcement spread rapidly on social media, including a video of law enforcement shooting marking rounds at people on their porch and several MPD officers indiscriminately spraying tear gas into protesters' faces. Journalists worked to broadcast these messages further, often radicalized when they themselves became the targets of police violence (despite the legal protections for media). And these images from Minneapolis joined those coming in from protests around the country, with one headline announcing: "The Police Are Rioting."²¹

Yet during this dystopian military occupation of the city and wave of state violence, there were also vibrant protests continuing during the daytime across the metro area. Neighbors came out together to clean up each morning from the night before and contribute to pop-up mutual aid centers helping others. A group of organizers even created a shelter for some of the city's vulnerable unhoused population, temporarily taking over an empty hotel.²² People also began to reach out to their neighbors, developing networks of care and protection. Some of these experiments would later take root in communities long after the fires went out, including in the space that would become George Floyd Square (as we'll return to in chapter 6).

Responding to Rebellion

During the week immediately following Floyd's murder, city and state officials made a series of public announcements, attempting to pacify the volatile eruptions across the city.²³ In an unprecedented move, on May 26, 2020, Chief Medaria Arradondo swiftly fired all four officers. This time, the department would not wait months for the results of an investigation into the officers' conduct. He also visited George Floyd Square to pay his respects and meet with the crowd. Mayor Frey backed the chief, saying the video we had all seen showed an incident that was "wrong on every level." However, in a precursor to the criminal trials, Frey also began to distance the department (and its reform efforts) from the behavior of these four officers: "This does not reflect the values that Chief Arradondo has worked tirelessly to instill. It does not represent the training we've invested in or the measures we've taken to ensure accountability."²⁴

Other key political players, however, further inflamed protests with their initial statements. These comments included Hennepin County prosecutor Michael Freeman's first announcement that he was not yet filing charges because "there is other evidence that does not support a criminal charge."²⁵ (Days later, he would announce charges against Chauvin, and later the three other officers, as detailed in chapter 5.) The pugnacious police union head, Lieutenant Robert "Bob" Kroll, who had long antagonized BLM activists in the city, entered the fray too. Insinuating a potential defense of the involved officers, Kroll released an incendiary public letter that castigated city leaders and charged: "What is not being told is the violent criminal history of George Floyd."²⁶ Perhaps most egregiously, President Trump intervened to threaten military violence. Unlike Kroll, the Republican president did not denigrate the victim—he criminalized the protesters, tweeting: "Those THUGS are dishonoring the memory of George Floyd, and I won't let that happen. Just spoke to Governor Tim Walz and told him that the Military is with him all the way. Any difficulty and we will assume control but, when the looting starts, the shooting starts." In response, Mayor Frey and Governor Walz tried to distance themselves from the president, whose message was censored by Twitter for "glorifying violence."²⁷

Local and state officials also attempted to shift the blame of the unrest on "outside agitators" who had come to Minneapolis to wreak havoc, symbolically separating residents' righteous protest with illegitimate violence by outsiders. Residents were instructed by their neighborhood associations to watch out for "suspicious" persons and vehicles, to bring in any outdoor furniture that could be used as projectiles, and to sweep the alleyways for incendiary devices. Some developed their own nighttime patrols or hired private police. While we would soon learn that most of the people arrested during those days of protest were from within the state, at least some of the destruction was in fact initiated by (white) outsiders. For example, according to videos taken by protesters, the first fire set on Lake Street at the AutoZone appeared to be committed by a white man in a gas mask. Some of the protesters had tried to stop him.²⁸ And at least one white man from out of state and affiliated with the Boogaloo Bois would later plead guilty for shooting up the 3rd Precinct.²⁹

Regardless of the degree of real threat, this rhetoric about outside agitators, white supremacists, and a potential race war succeeded in shifting attention. On Sunday, May 31st, the mass-scale protests of this week came to a tumultuous end after a near-miss. Protesters had gathered in the afternoon to block I-35W, a major highway that cuts across Minneapolis. Right at dusk, a gas tanker semi-truck came barreling down the

otherwise empty highway, careening toward a line of kneeling protesters. People fled, and thankfully the driver was able to come to a stop before causing any fatalities, but rumors spread that the truck had been coordinated as a right-wing assault on the protests (a claim that later seemed to be unfounded). The scare on the highway, however, would come to serve as a traumatic closure point for the more contentious public demonstrations that had marked a historic week in Minneapolis. Protests, and as we'll see soon, activists' demands on the city, however, persisted.

As the fires burned out, commentators attempted to take stock of the scale of the unrest in Minneapolis. One measure was mass arrests; the Minnesota Department of Public Safety reported that police made more than six hundred arrests in the Twin Cities alone.³⁰ Unlike the rebellions in Watts in 1965, Detroit in 1967, or Los Angeles in 1992, however, there were not mass casualties.³¹ But at least two people died during the unrest in the city, with one body found in the rubble of a burned-down pawn shop and another man shot in front of a different pawn shop by its owner. A third man died later from injuries sustained from a "less-lethal" projectile shot by law enforcement that left him with fatal brain damage. So too did commentators tally the damage to property. While less destructive than the record-breaking Los Angeles riots in 1992, there was an estimated \$500 million in damages across fifteen hundred properties in the Twin Cities (with less than half covered by insurance). The worst of it was concentrated in a corridor of Lake Street near the 3rd Precinct, home to many small minority-owned businesses. Some of those buildings would remain closed more than two years later, the scorched former 3rd Precinct building still ensconced in razor wire.³²

Yet there was a sense of hope on the streets, too. Minneapolis had come together to protest, defend itself, and rebuild. City residents were traumatized, yes, but the food banks, mutual aid and community-defense networks, and clean-up drives had shown that the city could care for its own. Change was in the air.

Do "Riots" Work?

Scholars have vigorously debated the benefits and costs of various kinds of disruptive tactics, like protest marches to block highways, that movements can deploy.³³ Rather than lean on moral suasion alone, disruption works by forcing the public and elected officials to pay attention to problems they are otherwise motivated to ignore.³⁴ Indeed, analyses of the early years of BLM protests found that they not only helped raise public concern over the persistence of racism in the country but also helped Democrats in

electoral contests in the 2010s.³⁵ And to the extent that peaceful protests garner brutal repression from law enforcement, that state violence on display can also further activists' message and shape legislative agendas.³⁶

Riots, the extreme end of disruptive tactics, however, have a more complex political history. These include not just protests, but setting fires, property damage and looting, and (in some cases) armed resistance. As historian Elizabeth Hinton argues, what Americans call "riots" in the context of urban unrest are better conceptualized as *rebellions*, or powerful cries against injustice from the voice of the oppressed. They are not simply "senseless" destruction, but instead a distinctly political claims-making process.³⁷ And, sometimes, they "work," at least in part. In Los Angeles, for example, the 1992 riots that erupted after the acquittal of the four officers who brutally beat motorist Rodney King were followed by a liberal shift in the next election.³⁸ Riots can also provide a direct attack on predatory institutions and businesses that extract resources from poor communities.³⁹

Yet violent resistance also carries a high risk of political blowback, potentially hardening public opinion *against* activists and their campaigns. The canonical example is the unrest that followed the civil rights movement, especially the rebellions of the "Long Hot Summer" of 1967, which helped to propel Richard Nixon (against Minnesota's own Hubert Humphrey) into the White House.⁴⁰ In other words, rebellion can prompt an intensification of state repression, potentially thwarting the movement's ultimate aims. As a result, within radical movements, there are often vigorous debates on the benefits and costs of such tactics.⁴¹ Would this kind of active resistance bring about the revolution, or spur another rightward political turn?

These complex historical lessons were top-of-mind for political observers during summer 2020, as pundits debated whether the unrest would help or harm the chances for Democrats retaking the White House from President Trump and the broader socio-economic transformations protesters demanded. And, in Minneapolis, the question was whether the rebellion would spell the beginning of the end of the city, paralleling the post-1960s decline of cities like Detroit, Michigan, or the beginning of a radical new transformation in public safety.

The Pledge to End the MPD

Regardless of the longer-term implications of the uprising, the immediate consequence was clear: Minneapolis residents had called for something to change. Abolitionists were there to answer, including the trio introduced

in chapter 2: MPD150, Reclaim the Block, and Black Visions. Drawing on the strength of the protests, on May 29 Black Visions and Reclaim the Block circulated a petition, demanding Minneapolis city council members defund the MPD by \$45 million, invest in “community-led health and safety strategies,” commit to never again increasing police funding, and work to end police violence against community members. “Our city is on fire, our people are hurting, and Black communities are crying out for health and safety in the midst of pandemic,” they concluded. It was time for real solutions—ones that would get the city closer to the “police-free future” activists had been dreaming of for years.

And they had help. With the national media spotlight trained on the city, donations poured into Minneapolis. After the Minnesota Freedom Fund, a community bail fund, was overwhelmed with contributions, they directed donors to Reclaim the Block and Black Visions, which garnered an overwhelming \$30 million (and, accompanying the funds, new community scrutiny about how that money would be spent).⁴² This funding would transform what was previously the trio of local police abolitionist groups—MPD150, Black Visions, and Reclaim the Block—from a small, local coalition to high-profile national leaders in a newly powerful demand to defund, and ultimately abolish, policing as we know it. Black Visions, led by young, Black, and largely queer organizers, took center stage, eventually leading the campaign to change the city charter. In addition, national organizers who saw Minneapolis as a possible test-case for more radical transformations in public safety, began conversations with both activists and city leaders about what to do next.

Activists were also bolstered by a series of public condemnations of the MPD. In the initial week of unrest, the Minnesota Department of Human Rights opened an investigation into the MPD’s pattern of rights violations. University of Minnesota president Joan Gabel announced that the university would cut (some) ties with the MPD, including no longer contracting with the department for event security. The Minneapolis Public Schools system distanced itself from the politically toxic department, too, ending its use of MPD’s uniformed staff as school resource officers. Even the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (an important body responsible for the city’s large parks system) and prominent downtown businesses made statements denouncing and seeking to end contracts with the MPD. The politics of policing in Minneapolis were shifting, creating an opening for change.

As the large public marches wound down, activists undertook more targeted demonstrations outside the homes of city council members, demanding that the city’s elected representatives come outside and answer

for their complicity in the murder. On June 6, less than two weeks after the murder, activists with Black Visions amassed a crowd of thousands to confront Mayor Frey, the final demonstration in a series of planned events that afternoon, including a march and “die in.” Organizer Kandace Montgomery held a mic to Frey’s face, demanding he give a yes/no answer to their demand to defund the MPD.⁴³ Clad in an “I Can’t Breathe” face mask, Mayor Frey declared that he did not support abolishing the police. He then walked away, to the cheers of protesters shouting: “Go home, Jacob!” Narrating the viral videos, the *New York Times* described the scene as “humiliation . . . reminiscent of the excruciating walk of shame from ‘Game of Thrones.’”⁴⁴

At the same time as they were pressuring the mayor, activists worked both publicly and behind the scenes to cajole the city council, including staging mock cemeteries on their lawns. It worked. The day after the crowd booed the mayor, nine of the thirteen council members joined abolitionist organizers at Powderhorn Park, just a mile away from where George Floyd was killed, to make a public declaration. It was a veto-proof majority, including the representatives for the two wards that intersected at 38th and Chicago (Alondra Cano and Andrea Jenkins), both Northside representatives (Phillipe Cunningham and Jeremiah Ellison), and council president Lisa Bender. Every person of color on the city council was on stage. Reading the pledge printed on a giant poster board and held aloft by organizers, the Powderhorn Nine declared their intention to begin to end the MPD.⁴⁵

In a surprising show of unity, the city council quickly approved a unanimous resolution, signed by the mayor, promising “a transformative new model for cultivating safety in our city.” While not quite as bold as the Powderhorn Pledge, the resolution was stunning. It declared that “police violence and the use of excessive force have led to community destabilization, a decrease in public safety, and the exacerbation of racial inequities in Minneapolis” and concluded: “No amount of reforms will prevent lethal violence and abuse by some members of the Police Department.” Instead, the city would “commence a year long process” to “engage with every willing community member” and “identify what safety looks like for everyone.”⁴⁶

Defund the Police?

Almost as quickly as Minneapolis came to dominate the national conversation about police violence and calls to reform, defund, or abolish the police, Americans on the political left began to fracture over the meaning of these calls to action. Some imagined “defund” as a kind of transformational reform: invest more in alternatives to police (including alternative

first responders) and “root causes” (e.g., housing, poverty, and health-care initiatives) while also reforming police departments—especially their use of force and oversight policies. Others, like the abolitionist organizers in Minneapolis, saw defunding as a path to full police abolition, a leftist vision of “starve the beast.” Still others, including presidential candidate Joseph “Joe” Biden, called for investing more money into policing while also supporting reform and alternatives to the police. Debate raged over the meaning of the defund slogan and whether it mobilized or alienated voters, a conversation that would continue among pundits, the public, and academics for years.

Often lost in this political discourse, however, was that the call to defund the police was never meant to be politically palatable. As traced in chapter 2, the campaign came out of *radical* organizing work. It wasn’t meant to reflect public opinion, but to *change it*, disrupting the public’s assumption that police (and the broader legal system) provided safety. By this metric, the movement succeeded wildly, at least for a time. Outrage over George Floyd’s death, and the protests sparked across the world, propelled police abolitionists into the mainstream conversation, radicalizing the public and generating unprecedented visibility for the idea of a police-free future.

In a landmark *New York Times* op-ed published on June 12, 2020, longtime organizer Mariame Kaba declared: “Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police.”⁴⁷ Tracing the long history of failed police reforms (including in Minneapolis), Kaba concluded that police reform “won’t happen” because “when you see a police officer pressing his knee into a black man’s neck until he dies, that’s the logical result of policing in America.” Under that understanding, the only *real* solution to police violence was to reduce the scale and power of police departments. Kaba’s op-ed was just one of hundreds in centrist and left-leaning outlets that began to take the idea of police abolition seriously (or at least serious enough to engage in critique).⁴⁸

The Powderhorn Pledge is hard to imagine without the years of movement-building that seeded the ground. Indeed, it was the work of these activists that made the statement possible—including, in a literal sense, the words city council members read, which reproduced nearly verbatim some of the opening lines from MPD150’s 2017 report described in chapter 2. The support activists had built in the community also mattered, as they turned to their networks to mobilize large-scale protests in those pivotal days. The question, with the world watching, was what would become of these new seeds for change in Minneapolis and elsewhere.

#ChangeTheCharter

By summer 2020, the Minneapolis city council seemed poised to “dismantle” the MPD and “transform” public safety in the city. Yet the council members faced a significant set of barriers. For one, the political risk of this plan, even in Minneapolis, was plain—and they already knew as much. As Councilmember Andrea Jenkins, a Black trans woman and representative for one of the wards that converged at what became George Floyd Square, speaking to the crowd on the day of the pledge, summarized: “There are 431,000 people in this city that call this city home. Everyone has to have a voice in this conversation. This is a very beautiful, very gorgeous crowd out here right now, but this is not the entirety of Minneapolis.” The entirety of Minneapolis, Jenkins implied, were not police abolitionists. Asked why she nevertheless supported the pledge, Jenkins replied to a reporter: “Because nothing has worked. We’ve got to change this. It’s possible to be conflicted and know what the right thing to do is.”⁴⁹

In addition, council members should have known the day of the pledge that the city council had little power to directly “end” or “dismantle” the MPD alone. The Minneapolis city charter, which, like a city constitution, outlines the organization and powers of Minneapolis’s government, is unequivocal: “The Mayor has complete power over the establishment, maintenance, and command of the police department. The Mayor may make all rules and regulations and may promulgate and enforce general and special orders necessary to operating the police department.”⁵⁰ Common in other cities, such stipulations typically mean the mayor is able to hire (and fire) the police chief as well as set department policies. City lawyers in Minneapolis further interpreted this language to mean that the city council could not legislate *any* MPD policy. The council’s power was instead the *purse*, responsible for negotiating the city’s budget with the mayor. Yet the scale of the MPD’s budget (like many agencies) is primarily determined by the number of staff, with the number of uniformed officers constrained by the charter as a minimum of 1.7 sworn officers per every 1,000 residents (a provision that officers fought to have included back in 1961).⁵¹

That meant that to “end” the MPD or even radically change its budget or staffing levels, the city council would need to change the city charter. Some of the Powderhorn Nine had even fought in the past to introduce this exact kind of amendment, which can be made in two ways: through a unanimous vote of both the city council and the mayor or through a ballot question decided by Minneapolis voters. In either case, a move to change the city’s charter had to be reviewed by the charter commission,

a fifteen-member volunteer group appointed by the chief judge of the Hennepin County District Court and tasked with providing recommendations. While the city council is empowered to override their recommendation, commission members are entitled to 150 days to review proposals before the ballot printing deadline in August. This meant that all charter amendments should have been sent to the commission in the spring, to be safe. And it was already June.

Coordinating with local and national organizers, five council members (led by Northside representative Jeremiah Ellison) pushed forward what would become the first proposal to “end” the MPD: an initiative to amend the city charter to strike out all of the text on MPD and instead write-in a Department of Community Safety and Violence Prevention. Since the mayor was *not* in favor of police defunding, it would have to go through the ballot. Consistent with its name, the proposed new department would be helmed not by a police chief but by a director with “non-law enforcement experience in community safety services, including but not limited to public health and/or restorative justice approaches.” And by striking out all of the language in the old MPD section of the charter, this initiative would delete the charter provisions about a mandatory minimum number of sworn officers and the mayor’s exclusive control.⁵²

While the proposal would “dismantle” the MPD, insofar as it would delete the MPD as a protected department in the charter and replace it with a new one, the council members stipulated that the new department “may” include a “division of law enforcement services, composed of licensed peace officers,” language the abolitionists initially fought to exclude. (As in other states, police have long been referred to as “peace officers” in Minnesota statutes—this language, however, in the ballot initiatives led some to believe, incorrectly, that the city would be developing a new model based on “peace” officers rather than “police” officers.) That division could have a police chief, but they would report to the new department commissioner. Exactly what a “public health” approach would constitute was left undefined, later becoming a source of political debate. But the theory behind it was to create a more holistic approach to public safety modeled off the Office of Violence Prevention (OVP), then housed among the city’s public health work. The new Department of Community Safety and Violence Prevention would, the logic went, subordinate police underneath this broader public health mandate, marking a true departure from policing as we knew it in Minneapolis. And it would, in theory, create a better structure for building out the kinds of supportive alternative models of public safety some abolitionists envisioned.

Crucially, though the charter initiative was framed as a “defunding” initiative in much of the press coverage (or even abolishment of the police among both its most ardent supporters and detractors alike), the measure actually said nothing about funding for law enforcement. Instead of dictating the shape or scope of the new department, the charter amendment changed the *terrain of the political struggle*—opening up the possibility of radical defunding (or even full abolition) by eliminating the mandatory minimum and shifting power away from the mayor, who (at the time) was positioned to the ideological right of the council. In addition, some council members argued that the proposal would make policing more democratic, by bringing the discussion of the MPD’s policies and practices out from behind the closed doors of the mayor’s office and into the public arena of city council hearings. If the measure passed, the devil would be in the details: as written, the proposal could have led to almost no changes in policing in Minneapolis other than an administrative restructuring and renaming, or a radical downsizing of the police force, or something else entirely. The outcome would depend on politics, or, more specifically, *who* was empowered to implement the changes after the vote.

And those politics were messy, even among the Powderhorn Nine. As Northside’s Phillippe Cunningham, the council’s primary architect for the OVP, would later tell a reporter, the meaning of the pledge to “end” the MPD was “up for interpretation,” and “it was very clear that most of us had interpreted that language differently.”⁵³ The most left-leaning council members envisioned the charter amendment as a meaningful step toward a police-free future. But many of the other council members envisioned something more moderate, and vocally supported Chief Arradondo, arguing that he should be involved in all efforts to reimagine public safety—even ones that meant ending the department he helmed. Some of the council members also envisioned “ending” the MPD by disbanding and rebuilding a new police force, much in the way Camden, New Jersey, had reconstituted its police department, in part to break the power of the officers union.⁵⁴

It was unclear if that was even legal in Minnesota. As sharp-eyed legal observers pointed out, a 2019 Minnesota Supreme Court decision involving a five-member fire department in Brainerd suggested that disbanding and reconstituting city forces to break a union violated the Public Employment Labor Relations Act.⁵⁵ This meant that using the charter amendment to end the federation’s hold on city politics could expose the city to a disastrous lawsuit. It would only be just before the November 2021 vote that the city finally made public whether officers would have to reapply for their

jobs if the measure passed. The waters were muddy, to say the least, as the political struggle over the charter amendment began in earnest.

Strange Bedfellows and the Pangs of Violence

The loudest opposition bloc to the 2020 charter amendment proposal initially was the city elites aligned with Mayor Frey, including downtown business executives. The group argued that what would provide *real* safety was more (and better) police reform, insisting that the council members' "radical" proposal would send businesses and tourists fleeing an ever-more crime-ridden city. As Steve Cramer, the chief executive officer of the Downtown Council, told a reporter: "Without a clear understanding that policing services will [be] reinvented but not eliminated . . . we can anticipate the desirability of Minneapolis as a community to live, visit, invest and create and maintain jobs will diminish."⁵⁶ Banding together under several coalitions, these same allies began to argue for bringing more police to the streets of Minneapolis (and, soon, for the reelection of Mayor Frey), drawing public attention to crime and disorder. This group also coordinated with Chief Arradondo, strategically deploying the first Black police chief's opposition to the charter amendment to bolster their cause.⁵⁷ By then, public opinion polling showed that Arradondo was more popular than either the mayor or the city council.⁵⁸

Meanwhile, city council members' ambiguity about the proposal at times hurt their cause. For example, Lisa Bender, council president and representative for a central Minneapolis ward, gave a live television interview with CNN in which the reporter posited that the language of "dismantle" made some people "nervous." She raised a hypothetical in which an intruder entered her home, asking Bender, "Who do I call?" Bender's response was not to outline how the new system would work to ensure residents' safety through holistic support, but instead to reply that the impulse to call the police "comes from a place of privilege." Reckoning with that privilege, Bender seemed to imply to the correspondent, had to come first.⁵⁹ This seeming indifference to safety concerns was then used as a wedge by those fighting against the proposal, who argued that the council wanted radical, reckless change and had little regard for individuals' or the community's collective safety.

The police union, predictably, went further still, explicitly stoking fears that a "police-free" Minneapolis would lead to anarchy and mayhem. Led by Lieutenant Kroll, who himself had long been accused of racist behavior (including a claim lodged by Chief Arradondo a decade prior),

representatives of the officers union sat down on June 23, 2020, with a reporter from Minnesota Public Radio to make clear their stance on the proposal.⁶⁰ Building on the letter he penned during the unrest, Kroll and his team declared that they had “no” confidence in the city’s chain of command; officer morale was at an all-time low. The lone Black officer in the room, Rich Walker, argued that Arradondo was in a “tough spot” after being “compromised by the overreach of our City Council,” including the city’s failure to approve the chief’s 2019 request to add four hundred officers by 2025 to build the “resources the department needs.” The union’s ire extended to the mayor, too, who had ordered the evacuation of the precinct even as he steadfastly pushed back against the city council.

It wasn’t the violent practices of the MPD, the union charged, but the failures of city leadership that were responsible for the unrest in Minneapolis—and for what the union characterized as a disastrous rise in crime. In fact, while various kinds of criminal offenses were trending in different directions during the pandemic in Minneapolis, as across the country, *homicides*, the most feared and costly form of crime, were indeed rising precipitously. During summer 2020, homicides were nearly twice as high as the previous summer (with thirty-nine homicides from May 25 to August 25, compared to nineteen in the same period in 2019),⁶¹ representing the start of a distressing surge in violence.

At the same time, the MPD’s force size was also shrinking rapidly. The MPD had not been defunded or dismantled, yet officers were deciding to retire early or leave on disability claims, largely for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from the unrest. Authorized to have a sworn officer count of roughly nine hundred officers, by mid-July 2020 the MPD had nearly two hundred officers out and filing for disability—a “staggering” level of claims that the city (not the police) would have to pay in the following months and years.⁶² Fueling the problem, the remaining officers appeared to be retaliating against city leaders and residents. In a series of media reports, both residents and officers themselves told reporters that the police, as a way of voicing their frustration at the city, were slowing responses or not responding at all to calls for service in certain neighborhoods—in essence, withholding services out of spite.⁶³ It turned out defunding and dismantling didn’t just have to happen through the budget; it could happen through a war of attrition and a suspicious outbreak of the “blue flu.”

Calling the city a “warzone,” Kroll insisted that things were only going to get worse: “The crime that you’re seeing . . . is a preview of what you would see if they actually go forward with this ‘defund the police,’ this is a snapshot.” Sitting next to Kroll was federation vice president Sergeant

Sherral Schmidt, a white woman (positioned to become the union's president after Kroll was pushed to retire in 2021). Schmidt argued that officers didn't have the support they needed for the "proactive" stops that would get "guns off the street," fueling the violence. The "failed politicians" had made it so that people would continue to shoot their guns at one another because everyone knew that officers' hands were tied. The failures of politicians (not police), the union argued, had caused the city to burn, making community members "fearful" and "furious." Those law-abiding residents *wanted* the police, the union representatives claimed.

The "community" that wanted the police, according to the union, was not just downtown elites or wealthy white residents in million-dollar homes along the chain of lakes, but also Black residents and business owners. And no one had to look hard to find these spokespersons. Indeed, by June 2020 many of the more establishment civic and religious Black community leaders, especially in North Minneapolis, were publicly deriding the city council for declaring the "end" of the MPD just as a spate of murders wracked the city and its poorest blocks. Reporters were eager to print this seemingly contrarian take on the city council's proposals, while white elites capitalized on this Black opposition to rebut charges that opposition to the charter amendment was racist.⁶⁴ As a result, Black residents who wanted more police presence in their neighborhoods became the public face of the opposition to the charter change.

The Black community leaders opposing the charter amendment were often middle-aged or older, representing a *generational* divide with the younger activists who preferred more radical changes. They also carried more social and economic status than many of the radical activists, enmeshed (at least in part) with the city's power structure. But, as we saw in chapter 3, such voices did in fact represent an important set of perspectives and preferences in Northside. They were not simply "out of touch" elite Black spokespersons but rather a representation of the real divides within the community on what to do about the scourge of both police and community violence.

In August, frustration about the rise in violence would lead a group of eight North Minneapolis residents (the "Minneapolis 8") to initiate a lawsuit against the city for inadequate protection, using the fact that the department was now well below the mandatory minimum staffing numbers to sue. This group's public face was a highly influential Black power couple, Don Samuels, a former member of the city council and Minneapolis Public Schools board, and Sondra Samuels, the CEO of a large nonprofit (the Northside Achievement Zone). In August 2020 the

couple published an op-ed in the *Star Tribune* decrying the rise of crime in Northside. On their block alone, they wrote: “A mother’s car was shot up with eight bullets, with her infant on board.” As a result, “Neighbors are leaving their Northside homes to stay with relatives to keep their children safe.” This violence, they argued, was a direct result of the wave of officer departures at the MPD—flight from what they characterized as “hostile working conditions” created by city leaders.⁶⁵ Casting the charter amendment proposal as a source of public safety problems rather than a solution, they called for transformative reforms that would create a city where “all citizens are treated as fully human by all cops.”⁶⁶ And real reform, they argued, could only happen with the MPD at adequate staffing levels—an approach they described as “both/and” rather than “either/or,” language that became a catchphrase in the unfolding political struggle.

Adding insult to injury was the fact that this historic move was happening after the appointment of the city’s *first* Black police chief—who, they argued, was already working toward police reform and better police-community relationships. Pushing out the chief was not a victory for racial justice, they said, but instead a way to disempower Black voices in the city. Steven Belton, president and CEO of the Urban League Twin Cities, for example, told a reporter: “Why now, when you have an African American chief who is highly regarded and trusted in the Black community? This strikes me as being passive-aggressive Minnesota Nice on steroids. This is a hit on Chief Arradondo.”⁶⁷ As a result of their support for the chief, this collection of Black community leaders would go on to back not only the MPD but also Mayor Frey, who had positioned himself as an ally willing to battle city council on behalf of the department and its chief.

These concerns were shared even by some BLM activists, including Nekima Levy Armstrong, whose op-ed opened this chapter. Levy Armstrong and many of the Black organizers she collaborated with understood themselves as radicals, tracing their political lineage back to the Black Panther Party. Their opposition to the charter amendment, however, was not primarily about its perceived attack on the chief. Instead, their worries were around the potential exacerbation of the accountability failures under the charter change. Recall from chapter 2 that Levy Armstrong and the other radical reform activists (groups like Communities United Against Police Brutality [CUAPB], Twin Cities Coalition for Justice for Jamar [TCC4J], Justice for Justine, and BLM Global Network chapters [Twin Cities Metro Area and BLM Minnesota]) believed that police reform had *not* failed. It was instead that the reforms enacted so far were “phony,” unable to address the root of the problem. As a result, these groups called for transformative accountability

reforms that would create meaningful change, including requiring officers to hold personal liability insurance, creating community control of the police department, and community input in union negotiations.⁶⁸

The charter amendment proposal did none of these things. Instead, it put more power in the hands of the same city council members who had continually failed to rein in the police. The “hastily drafted” amendment, they argued, would in fact *reduce* accountability, by diffusing supervision over the department and leaving it ambiguous as to who was ultimately responsible for the department.⁶⁹ In addition, despite some of the radical reformers envisioning police abolition as the final end-point of their ideal reforms, the coalition sharply critiqued language that said the department “may” include law enforcement officers, which they argued in the short term opened the door to contracted police forces in Minneapolis (which would be less democratically accountable than a city police force). Even for those in this coalition who desired a police-free future, in other words, the charter amendment as a whole seemed a poor vehicle for change.

Again, the devil was in the details—would the proposal reduce the city’s reliance on police, or simply shift policing work to different agencies and an ambiguous chain-of-command? At best, the radical reformers argued, the amendment was nothing more than a rebranding of the same violent department. At worst, it was a dangerous proposal that would expose people to more violence and less accountability.

Who Speaks for the People?

Amid all this jockeying by activists, elected officials, and community leaders to define the terms of debate, everyday residents’ actual voices were often left out. What would make all residents, especially Black Northsiders, “feel safe”? As described in chapter 3, there was no singular voice of residents across any racial group. This was as true in Northside as it was in other kinds of neighborhoods scattered across the city. And that meant there could be no one answer. Inadvertently, the city confirmed this after administering an online survey about public safety preferences as part of their community engagement process. Dryly, city staffers summarized the results at a city council meeting: “Some residents want more police; some residents want less police.”⁷⁰ Indeed, as we’d heard in our earlier interviews, city residents largely agreed that police violence was an issue. But they were divided both across and within racial categories when it came to how to best move forward, torn between the threat of police violence and the promise of state protection.

A summer 2020 poll conducted by local media similarly showed that city voters were roughly split on whether Minneapolis “should or should not reduce the size of its police force,” with 40 percent in favor of reductions and 44 percent opposed. Black voters’ *opposition* to staffing reductions was even slightly higher than for all voters (with 50 percent selecting “should not”). These attitudes sat awkwardly alongside quite negative perceptions of the MPD among white and Black voters and everyone else. The issue, again, was not support for this police department but instead the role of police in public safety. Yet fully 73 percent of those polled (and 76 percent of Black voters) supported redirecting “some funding from police to social services, such as mental health, drug treatment or violence prevention programs.”⁷¹ These results were in line with national data that showed stronger support for questions that asked about redirecting spending toward emergency response mental health professionals and other alternatives to police contact rather than invoking the “defund” slogan explicitly.⁷²

Importantly, however, public opinion was not simply out there, ready to be measured by pollsters, but instead actively constructed by the political struggle. Activists, civic and political leaders, and the police department were all fighting for the hearts and minds of the public, or at least their votes.

Blocked from the Ballot in 2020

Before the first charter amendment proposal could make it to a vote, it had to make it through the city’s charter commission, which was entitled to a 150-day review period. This volunteer group of appointees had, like much of the city, erupted in debate over the ballot question. Some thought the amendment should move forward. Others believed its vague wording wouldn’t pass legal muster or that the different changes it proposed should be broken up into individual ballot questions. In the end, the commission could not come to a consensus, instead deciding to take its full review period, which effectively meant blocking the question from the 2020 ballot—cooling, if not killing, its chances altogether. When the charter commission later issued a recommendation to the city council, it was to reject the charter amendment.

The idea of a charter amendment to “end” the MPD, however, was not so easily squashed. Over the next year, supporters of a new department pushed forward two initiatives to get the question on the 2021 ballot. First, as in 2020, a set of council members worked on drafting a new council-led proposal, taking in the feedback from the failed first initiative. Second,

because ballot questions can be put forward by citizen petition, organizers set out to gather signatures. By April 2021 the charter campaign led by abolitionist activists in the city (including Black Vision's Kandace Montgomery, who had pressed Frey for a yes or no answer on defunding the MPD) had gathered over fourteen thousand verified registered voter signatures—more than enough to guarantee that the question would appear on the ballot. In response, the city council members supportive of the change pulled their version of the proposal. The vote to #ChangeTheCharter would use abolitionists' language, from the people for the people.

The year in between the two charter amendment proposals could have given activists time to organize, plan, and build support for a new model of public safety—especially among the other anti-police-violence activists who would seem natural allies. Perhaps the new proposal might include some of the reforms suggested by the other coalition or otherwise address their concerns about accountability. But that coming together never happened.

Nor did much change between the two iterations of the charter amendment, now slated as “City Question 2” on the November ballot. The 2021 version would again strike out all language related to the MPD (including mayoral control and the mandatory staffing minimum) in the city charter, replacing it with a new department oriented around a public health approach. The name had changed, however, now the Department of Public Safety, language that allowed charter supporters to argue that *they* were the ones who took the “safety” of Minneapolis seriously. While rhetorically powerful, the name also held ambiguous connotations since most existing public safety departments (including the State of Minnesota's) were heavily oriented toward law enforcement. Yet the 2021 proposal was even more ambivalent about the role of police than its previous iteration—rather than saying the new department *may* include a law enforcement division, it stated that the department *could* include licensed peace officers “if necessary” to serve its functions.⁷³

Further complicating matters, another yes-or-no charter proposal would also appear on the ballot above the question on the MPD. “City Question 1,” if approved by voters, would give the mayor *more* power over city operations, essentially extending the executive power they held over the MPD to all other city departments. This kind of “strong mayor” system had for generations been a goal of Minneapolis politicians (including Humphrey in the 1940s), with supporters arguing that the prevailing “weak mayor” system led to dysfunction in city hall—especially when the city council and mayor were at odds. Notably, however, the 2021 version of this

initiative was authored by the chair of the charter commission, the same group that had blocked the first attempt to end the MPD. While its supporters sold Question 1 as a question of administrative efficiency (ending the so-called “14-boss problem”), the proposal was also a clear rebuke to the city council members who had fought for greater control over the MPD.

Thus, at the same time that Question 2 would decide the fate of the MPD, voters would also decide whether to reelect or replace the mayor, choose how much power to give that mayor with Question 1, and select a new slate of city council members.

Defining Safety in 2021

Violence, like the rain and snow, follows a seasonal pattern in Minneapolis. And as winter turned to spring, tensions again flared, both on the streets and in city hall. It turned out the violence of summer 2020 was just a prelude. By the end of 2021 the city would lose nearly one hundred victims to homicide, an annual tally on par with the worst year of the “Murderapolis” era and more than double the typical number of annual homicides across the 2010s.⁷⁴ Though the city had grown slightly since then, the homicide rate was still an appalling 22 homicides per 100,000 residents, nearly reaching the 1990s peak. Further, the speed at which homicides had spiked was unprecedented, both nationally and in Minneapolis.⁷⁵ Similarly, as carjackings—a relatively unnoticed crime across the city in earlier years—rose, so too did the headlines and public fear.

At the same time, the number of uniformed police at the MPD was still dropping, both in terms of payroll totals and the actual number of officers not on leave and available to respond to calls for service. While the MPD reported 900 active sworn officers in May 2020, by the end of 2021, that number had dwindled to roughly 640 (and was still dropping).⁷⁶ The last time the department had been that small was the early 1960s. Opponents of the charter initiative would continually link these trends, blaming the rising crime on declining officer capacity. While the research on whether hiring more police officers reduces crime is surprisingly fraught (in part because of the challenges of both defining and measuring crime), there is compelling causal evidence that adding officers to a force can reduce homicides (though those gains come with both fiscal and social costs).⁷⁷ That research, however, had limited capacity to explain what would happen if a police department suddenly lost nearly a third of its effective force, in the context of the most widely protested instance of lethal police violence in American history.

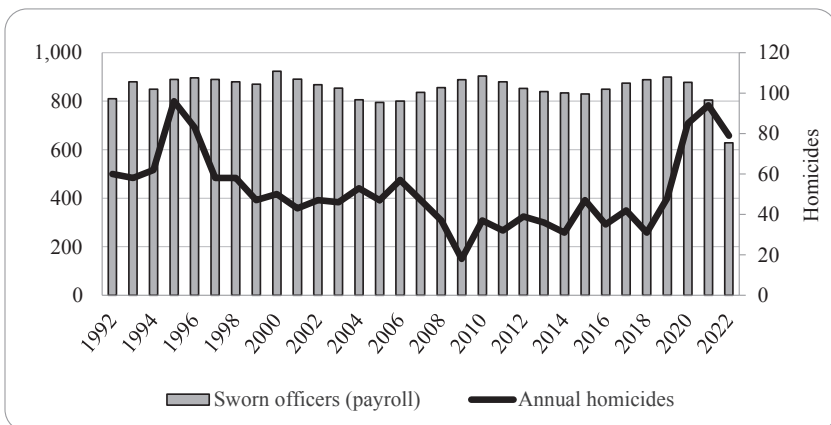


FIGURE 4.1. MPD sworn force size (payroll) and annual homicides, 1992–2022
Sources: Data on payroll staffing totals for the MPD in 1992–1996 from Kevin Diaz, “Council Takes Up Police Staffing,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, October 12, 1996. Data for 1997 are from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics (LEMAS), 1997. Staff totals for 1998 and 1999 were estimated through linear interpolation. Data for 2000–2020 are from the Minneapolis Police Department, Public Information Office, and represent payroll totals as of January 1 for each year (received July 14, 2023; on file with author). Homicide totals for 1992–2018 generated from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Crime Data Explorer, available at <https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov> (v. 23.4.1). Homicide totals for 2019–2022 collected from the City of Minneapolis, Crime in Minneapolis Dashboard, NIBRS Crime Offenses (last accessed June 26, 2023).

But the police weren’t necessarily the only, or even the primary, driver of the rise in violence. Indeed, if we look at trends in the MPD’s size and homicide rates in the city over the past three decades, there is little correlation between force size and homicides. As figure 4.1 shows, while murder rose and fell over three decades, the MPD’s uniformed force size stayed relatively constant until 2020. That’s because many other social forces beyond the number of police shape homicide rates. Most important for understanding the rise in 2020 and 2021 was the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to mass unemployment, closed schools, and precipitated a wave of fear and grief. Looking to the pandemic, which began just before Floyd’s murder, also better explains why homicide rose across the country, not just in left-leaning cities or places where police power was challenged.⁷⁸ (And it better matched what would happen in 2022 in Minneapolis, when officer payroll numbers continued to fall even as the homicide wave receded.)

This kind of academic research and its nuance, however, was not top-of-mind for the amendment’s opponents. Whether or not it was true,

charges that the Powderhorn Pledge was responsible for the uptick in violence, and predictions that it would only intensify should Question 2 pass, became a powerful bludgeon against change.

The rise in crime became not just families' tragedy, but a political disaster that played out on the front page of the news. Though some would blame the media for sensationalizing violent crime in the city, they were not simply manufacturing a crisis. This coverage, and the city's grief, was most intense after three young Black children were caught in Northside's crossfire over several weeks in spring 2021. Two of the children would die from their injuries. On April 30, ten-year-old Ladavionne Garrett Jr. was shot in the head while riding in the backseat of a car with his parents. (Remarkably, he would survive after spending six months hospitalized.) Two weeks after that shooting, nine-year-old Trinity Ottoson-Smith was shot, also in the head, while jumping on a trampoline at her best friend's birthday party just as a young man drove past intent on murdering another man sitting on the side porch of the house. Twelve days later, she would die at North Memorial Hospital. And Aniya Allen, just six years old, was shot while strapped into a car seat in her mother's vehicle, waiting at a McDonald's drive-through. Aniya languished in critical condition for two days before dying of her injuries at the same hospital. In a small-city coincidence, Aniya's grandfather was K. G. Wilson, a prominent and tireless peace activist in North Minneapolis. (Three years later, only the person who killed Trinity would be identified, arrested, and convicted, even with a large reward offered for tips.⁷⁹)

In the days following the third shooting, Mayor Frey and Northside's council members, Jeremiah Ellison and Phillippe Cunningham, held dueling press conferences—inadvertently spotlighting the political dysfunction of the city's response to violence. At the mayor's conference, he was flanked by a majority-Black crew of victims' family members, Chief Arradondo, and community leaders who supported his public safety plans. While there were some council members in attendance, notably missing were Northside's actual representatives. Salting the injury, Mayor Frey announced a new safety plan (unsobly doubling as a campaign brochure) that highlighted the need for the kind of violence prevention programs long championed by Cunningham.⁸⁰

In front of a crowd of reporters, the mayor declared that stopping the bloodshed would mean enacting police reform, building sustainable alternative approaches to violence prevention, *and* expanding the size of the MPD. Contrasting his approach with the council members' fight for police defunding, Frey claimed his was a "data-driven approach to community

safety” that “listened to community”—implicitly coded as the Black community.⁸¹ The answer, according to the mayor, was (at least in part) more police. As Chief Arradondo would argue the next month, after a three-year-old was injured in another shooting: “The biggest threat to public safety in our city, and particularly to our African-American community, is not the police.” Instead, the problem lay in gun violence by residents: “We have an epidemic right now of unequivocal gun violence particularly in our African-American communities. And that must stop.”⁸²

The day after Frey’s event, Councilmembers Ellison and Cunningham offered a different diagnosis in their own press conference. Violence in the community was spiking, they argued, because the “status quo” in policing remained. Northside remained unsafe because of the failures of the city’s leadership. What Minneapolis—and, more precisely, the Black residents of Northside—needed was a reimagining of public safety. Noting that they supported “parts” of the mayor’s plan, they argued: “We deserve a more comprehensive plan than simply adding more police or focusing on police reforms.” And they, too, invoked “data,” arguing for a holistic approach to addressing violence that would combine “data-driven street outreach, engagement and social services with highly targeted law enforcement for individuals who remain violent.”⁸³ The mayor and police chief, they argued, were not solving the problem, but instead had stalled the kinds of changes Northsiders desperately needed.

Despite their differences, the two press conferences shared a key outcome: both were interrupted by frustrated residents demanding more than grandstanding politicians. Residents were tired of the turf wars at city hall that, like beefs on the street, were exacerbating the violence.⁸⁴ They wanted city leaders to get “together on the same stage” and figure out a plan for the city as a whole.⁸⁵ The problem was, of course, that no one could quite agree on what that plan ought to look like exactly, with both sides dug in on what ailed Minneapolis.

Changing Hearts and Minds

As spring turned to summer in Minneapolis, campaigning for the 2021 election began in earnest. By then, advocates and opposition for Question 2 had solidified into two opposing camps: “Yes for Minneapolis” (the campaign for the amendment) and “All of Minneapolis” (the coalition against the amendment). Each group attempted to garner the votes it needed to win, blanketing the city in flyers and teams of door-knockers. They also debated one another in public forums across the city and media outlets.

Both sides had regrouped the now-familiar players: on the “pro” side of the ledger were abolitionist activists and their allies, and on the “con” side were the same set of defenders of the mayor and the chief of police who had been fighting the defund initiatives since 2020.

Whereas in most political fights the “establishment” side is expected to have more financial resources, heading into the charter amendment debate it was actually the abolitionists who had garnered the most dollars in fundraising, both through grassroots donations from summer 2020 and the support of national progressive groups.⁸⁶ This funding allowed the “Yes” team to build out significant infrastructure, hiring canvasser teams, for example, rather than relying on the labor of organizers and protesters who also had to hold down day jobs. And it was the establishment trying to catch up—using their internal resources and political heft to make up for their weaker ground support of activist labor.

In flyers blanketing the city, “Yes for Minneapolis” argued that a holistic public-health approach would minimize the chances of police violence, particularly for Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other marginalized residents, by reducing the number of armed police interacting with residents, replacing them with social workers, mental health professionals, addiction counselors, housing specialists, and more. When residents called 911, they promised, the city would send the *right* response. And the result would be stronger public safety for everyone—with some flyers suggesting that if this new department had been in place before 2020, George Floyd would not have been killed by police.

The campaign was evasive (or perhaps strategically ambiguous) about how many law enforcement personnel would remain in the new department. On the stylized cartoons depicting multiple first responders, for example, the campaign noted that some incidents (involving violence) would require the response of “armed police.” Yet the flyers shied away from explicit promises about police, likely attempting to keep radical leftists onboard while not losing their more moderate liberal supporters. In campaign materials and at public events, spokespeople for the campaign took pains to clarify that a yes on Question 2 did *not* mean the immediate end of police in Minneapolis (or even “defunding”). Instead, the new Department of Public Safety would increase resources for public safety *and* go beyond the current “police-only” approach.⁸⁷ Other organizers with the campaign, however, would tell reporters that they were working toward “total abolition” of police on a five-to-ten-year time horizon.⁸⁸

The argument from the opposition was simple: replacing the police department in the charter would lead to more disorder and violence on the

streets of Minneapolis. Not only would Question 2 imperil public safety, but the city's mayor was already taking the lead on police reform—efforts that would be derailed by the end of the MPD. Amendment opponents particularly highlighted the “lack of a plan” for implementing the initiative—and spurred fear of what would follow. For example, reason number 1 in “Top Ten Reasons to Vote NO on Question 2” on an early “All of Minneapolis” flyer told residents that the amendment “would **remove** the police department 30 days after the election with no timeline or plan for its replacement.” That meant, opponents charged, that there was no guidance as to how many officers would remain in the department, what new staffers might be brought in, and what the organizational structure of this new department would look like exactly. As Chief Arradondo would quip about the lack of planning: “At this point, quite frankly, I would take a drawing on a napkin.”⁸⁹

In truth, there was no detailed plan for the proposal's implementation—by the city's design. Back when the charter amendment proposal was proceeding through the council-led process, Phillippe Cunningham had been interrupted mid-presentation by the city's ethics officer, who announced that actively planning for the passage of the ballot question would constitute a violation of campaign ethics (because of a prohibition on using city resources to promote ballot questions). Instead, all of the city ordinances that would flesh out the new department's operations, giving residents the details they were clamoring for, would need to be designed *after* the vote. And by then, we would have a new city council, too.

These struggles between the two dueling campaigns spotlighted how complex and contradictory this moment was for Minneapolis's politics of policing. From the name of the group to their calls for more alternative responders, “All of Minneapolis” continually mimicked the language of the charter supporters in their materials, just as Mayor Frey had folded Council Member Cunningham's violence prevention initiatives into his safety plan.⁹⁰ After George Floyd, you could not simply be pro-police in Minneapolis—but you could support increasing funding to the police for *reform*. After months of each campaign working to position themselves as the *real* locals and *authentic* spokespeople for Minneapolis's residents,⁹¹ it was finally time to let voters pick a side.

A Historic Election

The public safety amendment dominated the 2021 election, turning the mayoral and city council elections into proxy fights for Question 2 on creating the Department of Public Safety (and, by extension, Question 1's

provocation to extend mayoral authority). The centrist editorial board of the *Star Tribune*, for example, recommended a “yes” on Question 1 and a “no” on Question 2, nearly uniformly endorsing the candidates who opposed Question 2.⁹² In contrast, more progressive and left-leaning outlets pushed for those candidates who supported the new Department of Public Safety, telling voters to select “no” on 1 and “yes” on 2.⁹³

Key to leftists’ strategy was electing a mayor who would support police defunding, putting the unwritten goals of Question 2 into practice. Mayor Jacob Frey faced a slate of contenders, but only two consistently garnered substantial support: Sheila Nezhad and Kate Knuth. Nezhad was an organizer, one of the coauthors of the MPD₁₅₀ report, and a street medic, committed to becoming the city’s first queer woman of color mayor. Nezhad was among the Reclaim the Block organizers who pushed city leaders to envision a police-free future, arguing in 2020 that the abolitionist groups had “primed” the council members to accept the idea that “reform won’t work,” moving instead toward a new plan: “We are going to abolish the police.”⁹⁴ Instead of police, Nezhad envisioned a robust set of holistic violence prevention resources, leading with “healing, not fear” and creating a “safe Minneapolis” through “stable housing, inclusive mental health care, accessible food and livable wages.”⁹⁵ Her campaign—which ran under the slogan “Sheila for the People”—continually garnered national headlines declaring that an abolitionist might become mayor of Minneapolis.⁹⁶

Kate Knuth, a white woman and three-term Minnesota House Democratic–Farmer–Labor Party representative whose career had focused on environmental justice, positioned herself between Nezhad and Frey—providing a more progressive alternative to the incumbent without quite as radical a stance on the MPD as Nezhad. Knuth argued that the city needed to “unbundle and transform” (not abolish) the police, shifting away from a “policing first” approach so that the MPD could more effectively “respond to violent crime.”⁹⁷ She also promised to promote police accountability measures—something Nezhad framed as reforms that don’t work. Despite their ideological differences, Knuth and Nezhad formed a coalition against Frey, attempting to coordinate the city’s ranked-choice voting by telling voters #DontRankFrey. Perhaps surprisingly, there were no viable challengers to Frey’s political right—meaning that the contest was largely between the incumbent mayor and two more progressive women.

Many of the city council races were deeply contested as well—with city hall contenders staking out their positions on the possibility of a police-free future. Cunningham, for example, fought against a more moderate

challenger, LaTrisha Vetaw, a Black woman and vocal opponent of the charter initiative who ran while serving on the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board. Jeremiah Ellison, the other Northside representative, similarly battled a number of more moderate challengers, including one of the neighbors who were suing the city over inadequate police protection. And Steve Fletcher, the representative for downtown and Northeast Minneapolis and another of the Powderhorn Nine, squared off against Michael Rainville, an older white man whose family had been influential in Minneapolis politics for generations⁹⁸ and who stood to become the council's most conservative representative. These races were closely watched as proxy contests for Question 2: Would the council members be rewarded or punished for their association with the “defund” slogan?

Let the People Decide

The final weeks leading up to election day were chaotic. The Samuels and their allies filed a last-minute lawsuit to block the ballot question altogether, resulting in a tense back-and-forth right up to the printing deadline between the mayor and the city council over the wording of Question 2. Key to this struggle was exactly how much detail about the deleted text on the MPD, and what the new department might look like, should be included in an “explanatory note” attached to the ballot question. In the end, the two sides compromised on an explanatory note nearly as long as the question itself, as displayed in figure 4.2.

As absentee ballots began rolling in, endorsements and statements of opposition from prominent Democrats flooded the headlines, paralleling national consternation over the police. Chief Arradondo reiterated his opposition in the final days, too, holding a press conference in his dress blues to denigrate the charter initiative (later deemed an ethics violation). Just days before the vote, the city seemed to resolve the most pressing union question—in a memo sent to city employees and leaked to the press, city administrators wrote that officers would *not* have to reapply to their jobs. The police would be automatically transferred to the new department should the ballot question pass. The implication was that the charter would not be used to break the federation's grip on Minneapolis politics.⁹⁹

In the end, voters ultimately rejected Question 2, with 56 percent voting “no” to 44 percent “yes.” Alongside the “no” on Question 2, city residents said “yes” to Question 1, the “strong mayor” proposal (with 52 percent in favor) and reelected Mayor Frey.¹⁰⁰ The mayoral ranked-choice vote tallying process was relatively quick, lasting only one round of elimination.

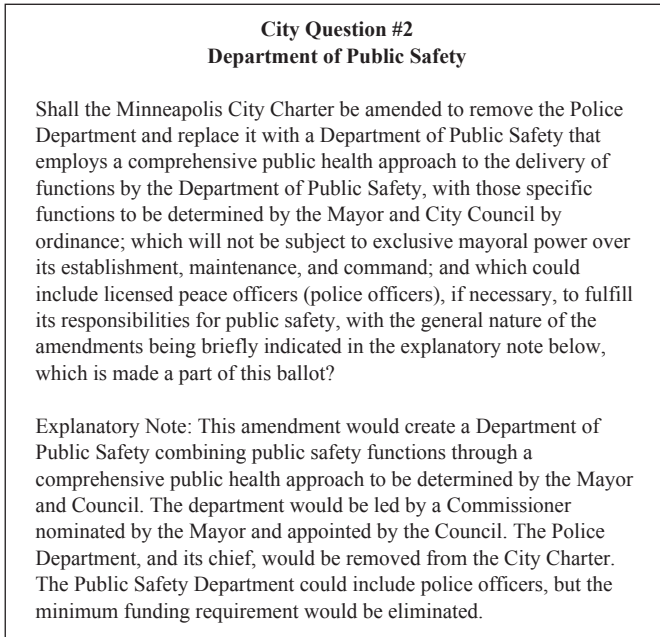


FIGURE 4.2. Charter amendment question on the November 2021 ballot

Tallies showed Frey led in the number of first-choice votes (with 61,620 votes), with Nezhad in second place (with 30,368 first-choice votes) and Knuth a close third (26,468). That Nezhad won roughly a quarter of the first-choice votes (far less than the amendment's 44 percent support) suggested that Minneapolis's most fervent abolitionist voting bloc was large, but still far from a majority in the city. Voting strategically, many of Nezhad's voters ranked Knuth second, catapulting Knuth to become Frey's final challenger. In that second round, Frey won with 56 percent of the vote, while Knuth trailed with 44 percent.¹⁰¹

While keeping Frey in place (and handing him more power), voters reshuffled the city council. In contrast to the 2017 elections, the council did not swing left. The progressive side of the council lost some of its champions. Rainville beat out Fletcher, and Cunningham lost in a landslide to Vetaw, who would now serve as the chair of the Public Health and Safety Committee. But Jeremiah Ellison held onto his Ward 5 seat in a very close race, while others of the Powderhorn Nine were reelected on wider margins, including Andrea Jenkins, whose challenger barely registered as real opposition. And in the three wards where pledge supporters declined to run for reelection, they were replaced by a younger and farther

left cohort, as voters elected a record-breaking three candidates endorsed by the Democratic Socialists of America, including Robin Wonsley (then Wonsley Worlobah), to represent the ward that encompassed the University of Minnesota and its young, left-leaning voters. Of the three council members who declined to take the Powderhorn Pledge, two remained in office and one was replaced by a council member who vocally supported Question 2. In short, the council's center of gravity remained roughly the same as it had been—but both of its edges had pulled farther apart.

Defunding the police, it turned out, was *both* a powerful rallying call and, for some council members, a liability. Yet, in a testament to the power of the BLM movement, for the first time, the city had a majority BIPOC council—there were more people of color on the dais than white elected officials. Importantly, for all the reading of the tea leaves in these results, some of the races were tantalizingly close (leaning on just dozens of votes), meaning that how they ultimately fell is best understood as a matter of chance. Had just a few voters chosen differently, skipped the polls that year, or decided to vote rather than stay home, it would have produced a substantially different Minneapolis city council. What we saw were voters, in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, as conflicted toward the city council as they were toward the charter amendment. With Frey in charge as a strong mayor, however, the council's policing politics mattered even less now.

It's important to note here too that only *half* of all registered voters decided these pivotal races. Had the charter amendment question been on the 2020 ballot, it would have coincided with a presidential election. Voter turnout that year reached an all-time high of 81 percent of registered voters in Minneapolis. (And, had the vote been in 2020, the Powderhorn Nine and other city council members would have been in office another year to implement the plan afterward.) Instead, in November 2021, only 54 percent of voters went to the polls—a record-breaking turnout for a municipal election in Minneapolis, but far less than the turnout for presidential elections.¹⁰² We cannot know how these residents might have voted, but low turnout was another consequence of the delay. So too was uncertainty about the other races (for the mayor's seat and city council) that would shape the initiative's implementation.

After the election, people wanted to know not just whether police defunding had won or lost in Minneapolis—but *who* was responsible. As Levy Armstrong declared in her derisive *New York Times* op-ed, were the “white progressives” who had supported the ill-fated proposal to blame?¹⁰³ On this question, she and the mayor were aligned. As Frey often repeated

to reporters: “I’d walk down the street and I’d hear from White people, ‘Defund the police! Defund the police!’ And then I’d hear from a Black person a half block later, ‘Hey, we really need to have some additional help.’” Supporters of the charter amendment would rebut this narrative, spotlighting the BIPOC activists at the helm of the charter initiatives. As Sheila Nezhad replied to a reporter: “I’m not White. So when Jacob Frey talks about only White people want to defund or whatever . . . I think that he is perhaps shaping the narrative to benefit his political goals.”¹⁰⁴ Making things more complicated to parse, supporters of the charter amendment often insisted it was white (and wealthy) voters who had *blocked* the initiative.

The truth, however, resisted a simple narrative. While individual-level voting data are not public, we can look at precinct-level vote counts, displayed in figure 4.3. These results show that voters in the precincts in North Minneapolis, home to the greatest share of Black residents in the city, on average narrowly rejected the ballot initiative (although these neighborhoods also saw some of the lowest turnout rates). But the staunchest opposition to Question 2 (and highest voter turnout) came from the southwest precincts—predominantly wealthy white neighborhoods. Support for the charter amendment, in contrast, was highest in the multiracial communities around George Floyd Square in South Minneapolis, where residents had been radicalized in the wake of the murder, and in areas with younger voters, including near the University of Minnesota.

Public opinion polls launched just before the election generally confirmed these spatial patterns. In a September 2021 poll, just under half (49 percent) replied that they supported the initiative to replace the MPD with a new Department of Public Safety,¹⁰⁵ several points higher than the share of voters who would say “yes” two months later at the polling booth. Racial differences on the charter amendment question were small, but white voters were slightly *more* in favor of the proposal on average (51 vs. 42 percent). The data suggested that anyone arguing that *only* white progressives were supporting the amendment or that *only* white voters were driving opposition to the amendment was wrong. In contrast to the muted divides across race, gaps in attitudes across age in the poll results were striking, with 57 percent of voters under age thirty-four years in support, compared to 39 percent among those age sixty-five and up.¹⁰⁶ The charter amendment, it turned out, was propelled by *young* voters and blocked by their more conservative elders.¹⁰⁷ There was a clear demographic divide, but it was across *generations*, not race.

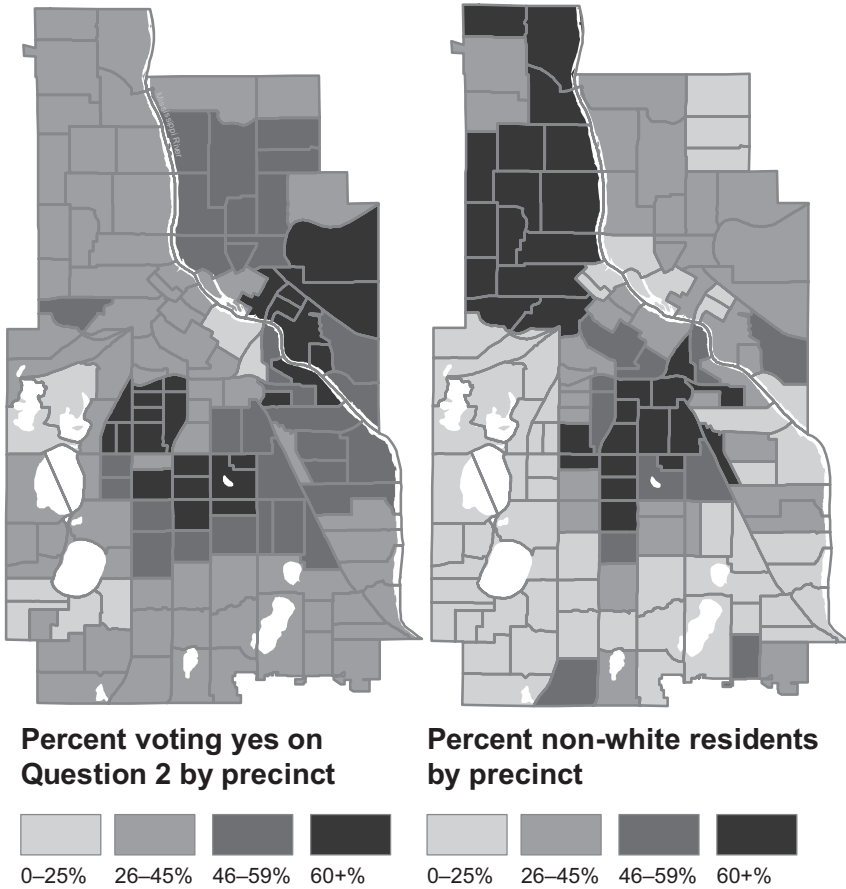


FIGURE 4.3. Precinct-level voting results for question 2 and racial demographics

Sources: Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State, Election Results, City Question 2 (Minneapolis), Reports by Reporting District (last updated November 8, 2021); US Census Bureau, 2020 Census Redistricting Data (P.L. 94-171) - Table P1, Race (Washington, DC: US Department of Commerce, 2021).

Yet these poll results also reveal how much city residents struggled to understand what exactly a “yes” vote on Question 2 meant, and whether or not it would bring them more safety. As in the 2020 polls, registered voters in September 2021 continued to report a largely unfavorable opinion of the MPD, with just 28 percent of Black voters and 34 percent of white voters describing their opinion of the MPD as “favorable.” Yet despite this lack of support, just over half (55 percent) of polled voters—and a full 75 percent of Black respondents—reported that the department

“should not” reduce the size of its police force. In other words, trust in the MPD was low, but a majority of residents (especially Black residents) did *not* want fewer police patrolling the city’s streets. Putting those results together implies that even among Black voters who wanted more police, many still decided “yes” on Question 2, hoping it would bring them a better system of public safety.

Lessons Learned

The fires that torched the 3rd Precinct after the murder of George Floyd unsettled local politics, prompting nine city council members to pledge that they would begin the process of “ending” the MPD. Yet, in the wake of the November 2021 election, the MPD stood intact, with an even larger budget. In short, when the swell of progressive mobilization crashed against the politics of policing, the radical vision for change in Minneapolis faltered. Blocking challengers’ attempts to wrest power over the MPD were a series of legal and regulatory barriers that slowed down the process of change. These too were part of the politics of policing, erected by city leaders (and state legislators) to bulwark police power in earlier eras.

In the intervening time, homicides in the city spiked, shifting attention from violence by *police* to violence by *residents*. And, in the meantime, the department had lost nearly a third of its effective force. As the editorial board of the *Star Tribune* summarized in their election guide, the proposal to include police in the new department only *if necessary* had “an ominous ring in a city with an already understaffed police force and a crime wave in progress.”¹⁰⁸ As the tide turned back again, many of the groups that had cut ties with the MPD (including my own university) quietly reestablished those connections, reaching to the city’s police force for the promise of protection. Even anti-police-violence activists known for their blistering critiques of the department came to the defense of the MPD, arguing that the charter amendment would take the city in the wrong direction. The mayor, his allies, and the police union went a step farther, directly blaming the Powderhorn Pledge for emboldening criminals and prompting the mass exodus of officers that left the city with rampant “lawlessness.” The factual basis for some of these claims may have been weak, but they were powerful rhetorical weapons. Together, this odd coalition of opponents convinced enough voters to select “no” on the ballot, dashing abolitionist activists’ hope of eliminating the charter’s mandatory minimum number of officers.

The same national news outlets that had blared that Minneapolis was “abolishing” its police department in summer 2020 now pivoted to

headlines about failure. “Defund the police,” pundits gloated, was a flop as a political slogan. Yet the reality on the ground in Minneapolis was more nuanced. Indeed, that 44 percent of the public supported a measure associated with police abolition, in the context of a significant homicide spike, was a victory of sorts. And to the extent that 44 percent constituted a “win,” it didn’t come just from the fires of summer 2020, but from the years of organizing that had worked to unsettle residents’ assumptions about the police. The results of this groundswell of support for police abolition would be felt in the years to come, sometimes in surprising ways. And the abolitionists weren’t going anywhere.