

Demands and Statement Regarding the Ridgewood Police
Ridgewood for Black Liberation

24 August 2020

On July 26th, a 15-year-old Latinx boy was brutalized by Ridgewood Police while riding his bike in downtown Ridgewood, NJ. You can watch the video of his arrest [here](#).

This incident has since been covered on national news, both on CBS and NBC. It has also been shared by Ben Crump, the ACLU of New Jersey, Zellie Imani and various local community leaders and organizers. As of August 24th, the video has garnered over a million views.

The national uproar is unlike anything Ridgewood has seen before. But in Ridgewood, too much of the response has revolved around a demand for more “context.” Mayor Susan Knudsen herself responded to the incident with the following statement: “The concerns I have are that we are not seeing the whole video or prior to it and I think it is important to have it in context.”

We ask what “concern” is there, if not that for a 15-year-old boy who was choked, bruised, and violently forced to the ground? What other concern should exist than that of the safety and well-being of this child? Is it only when a Latinx child from out of town is attacked that our community demands “context” and justifies violence by the same people who supposedly protect us?

Our mayor and our community have asked for context, and we will provide it in this statement, but before we do, we want to emphasize the following: there is absolutely *no context* that will ever justify police brutality, *especially* against an unarmed CHILD.

Here’s your context anyway, Ridgewood: A group of boys, ages 12-17, were riding their bikes around Bergen County. When they got to Ridgewood, police began trailing them down East Ridgewood Avenue. Eventually, they issued one of the boys a motor vehicle summons and tried to grab his bike. He held on to it. He loves his bike. He’s 15. He’s scared. He never puts his hands on an officer; he merely attempts to hold on to his bike.

Here’s your context: the street that these children were riding their bikes on *was closed to vehicles*. These children were *not* blocking traffic when they were stopped by the police. Ridgewood residents ride bikes and scooters there all the time. But when people of color do the same? Karol Ruiz from immigrant rights group [Wind of the Spirit](#) commented on the immediate criminalization of Latinx youth with the following statement: “If predominately white kids from Ridgewood had been the ones riding their bikes in Ridgewood, the outcome would have been different. There is a history that we cannot ignore of Latino and Black youth not being allowed in certain neighborhoods.”

Here’s your context: In a statement, RPD stated that they “were trying to stop the kids in order to speak with them about bike safety.” Is this what safety looks like to you, RPD? Approaching a non-violent child with your hands out, reaching for his neck?

Here's your context: the second officer approached the kid from behind, grabbed him forcefully by the neck, and violently threw him to the ground. Two full grown men, twice his size, pinned him down, and he lay there facedown, squirming and crying out in pain. When the officers pulled him up and dragged him to their vehicle, he walked with a visible limp, according to witnesses. His neck, his back, and his arms were all bruised, scratched, and swollen.

Is this what you call community safety? Community care? De-escalation?

On August 6th, in the wake of this event, an outpouring of solidarity and joy emerged when residents, supporters, students, and parents in Ridgewood gathered to heal and learn. We were there to remind the Village of Ridgewood that we are still fighting for Black lives and Black liberation. Yet, Ridgewood PD showed up in full force. Three cars were parked in the church parking lot across the street prepared with cameras suited for a sting operation. A van full of cops armed with batons was on standby patrolling the area. Another van sat empty, ready to be used as a paddywagon. Do not be fooled: they were not acting in our best interest to keep us safe. They were there to intimidate us; the police saw this space, which was dedicated to envisioning a better world, as a threat.

Later that evening, hours after the protest had ended, the Ridgewood PD was seen gathering in Village Hall dressed in military gear, but for what? What could possibly have warranted an escalation of this magnitude? Against whom were the police protecting the precious property of the affluent residents in Ridgewood, where violent crime rates are exorbitantly low? There were no threats of violence before, during, or after the protest. The police were not there to protect our safety. They geared up, invoking images of New York and Portland, ready and willing to inflict violence on us.

Policing as an institution is innately violent, contrary to what Chief of Police Jacqueline Luthcke claimed during her speech at a BLM rally on June 10th: that "individual monsters" are the problem. We condemn this surface level analysis and recognize instead that policing systemically enacts violence on BIPOC, the LGBTQIA+ community, the working class, and anyone standing up against these interlocking systems of violence, all in the name of protecting the wealth and power of the ruling class.

Time and time again, we see these blatantly violent attempts to silence and repress the voices of the masses who are fed up with the current state of the world and are now demanding real, lasting change. We, like many others around the world, are simply answering the call for Black liberation and for our collective liberation from fascism, authoritarianism, imperialism, racial capitalism, white supremacy, and the ableist cisheteropatriarchy. We must call Ridgewood PD's actions for what they are: an escalation of intimidation tactics which were attempts to remind us that they are the ones with weapons, money, and power. The state has a monopoly on violence and will continue to violently repress anyone who questions authority or challenges the status quo.

Ridgewood, the world is watching, and it sees right through your supposed "tradition of excellence." You are being exposed for the violent, racist, and exclusionary suburb that you are.

And it's time for change. It's 2020, and Ridgewood has yet to meaningfully reckon with its history as a self-proclaimed white, Christian community.

The violence committed against this Latinx minor on July 26th in Ridgewood can never be separated from the violence of the state and is fundamentally connected to the struggle for Black Liberation. Locking families in cages at this nation's borders, the epidemic of Black Trans Women being murdered, the disappearance of indigenous womxn, and George Floyd's death were not anomalies. Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Jameek Lowery, Jacob Blake, and the countless other Black people who continue to be murdered and brutalized by the police—these acts of violence are not isolated incidents, just as the incident on July 26th in Ridgewood is part of a system of racist, state-sanctioned violence. Ridgewood marched for George Floyd, but where are you when that same system of brutality rears its head right here in Ridgewood?

The time for action is now. The time for meaningful, systemic change is now.

Our working list of demands as they pertain to policing in Ridgewood are as follows:

1. **We demand a thorough, third-party, non-accrediting investigation into RPD to address patterns and practices of unconstitutional policing, intimidation, and excessive use of force.** RPD called for an internal affairs review following the instance of police brutality on July 26th. As we've seen all around the country, these kinds of reviews are never sufficient, and will never bring about real justice. RPD has shown itself to be unaccountable and violent, and must finally be investigated and held accountable.
2. **We demand that this investigation is followed by the firing of any officers involved in the above practices.** An investigation without action is a performance of accountability. It is critical that we as a community are able to hold the police accountable for their negligence, brutality, and ineptitude. We, as Ridgewood residents, do not feel safe knowing that officers who commit acts of unconstitutional policing, intimidation, and excessive force are still roaming our streets, armed with guns, emboldened and unaccountable.
3. **We demand that all charges against Thria Bernabe be dropped immediately.** Thria, an organizer with Ridgewood for Black Liberation, was arrested over a month ago while peacefully protesting in Ridgewood. Learn more about her arrest and sign our petition [here](#).
4. **We demand that all police officers wear masks while on duty during the duration of the COVID-19 crisis.** One of the officers who brutalized the minor on July 26th was not wearing a mask. The officer who processed Thria Bernabe also refused to wear a mask (though Thria is immunosuppressed and asked her to multiple times). We are in the middle of a public health crisis; if RPD had any semblance of concern for public safety, we wouldn't even have to demand this.
5. **We demand that Ridgewood begin the process of DEFUNDING the police and INVESTING in racial justice initiatives.** Ridgewood must invest money taken from its police department into programs that begin to desegregate our community, open up affordable housing, fully fund programs that support our students and communities of color, pay reparations, and redistribute its wealth.

Ridgewood is a wealthy, white, exclusionary suburb that was founded on the genocide of Indigenous Munsee Lenape peoples, on slavery, and on the backs of Black people. As they stand, these demands can begin to meaningfully address and work to remedy the harm that Ridgewood has caused Black and Brown people since its inception.

Our demands are in accordance with the Movement for Black Lives' vision, specifically with their campaign for [Amnesty for Protestors](#), where they demand that “all charges be dropped against protestors and political prisoners; a full investigation into all allegations of police and federal agent violence; the calling off of Operation Legend and militarization of police; all law enforcement agencies including ICE and CBP must stop arresting protestors; and passage of the [BREATHE Act](#) to divest from and end militarized policing.”

These demands also follow M4BL's [INVEST-DIVEST model](#), which calls for the investment “in the education, health and safety of Black people, instead of investments in the criminalizing, caging, and harming of Black people. We want investments in Black communities, determined by Black communities, and divestment from exploitative forces including prisons, fossil fuels, police, surveillance and exploitative corporations.”

[We encourage you to read their full Vision for Black Lives here.](#)

We, as Ridgewood for Black Liberation, heed M4BL's call, and following in their footsteps, urge Ridgewood to begin to reimagine public safety and community care by committing to the process of INVEST-DIVEST, a tangible preliminary step on the road to abolition.

To reimagine public safety is to recognize and actively combat the inherent brutality of policing as it exists both nationwide and in our community. According to [NJ Force Reports.com](#), a comprehensive public database of police use of force, Ridgewood uses force at a higher rate than 427 other police departments in New Jersey. It uses force at a rate 23.8% higher than the state average. This use of force also displays a pattern of obvious racial bias: based on population, a Black person in Ridgewood is 405% more likely to have force used on them than a white person.

And these statistics are just the beginning: what will be uncovered through an investigation will surely prove the true depth and scope of inequality and brutality that RPD practices. What is clear to us is that Ridgewood's police force, which is highly armed and extremely militarized, is not only willing, but *eager* to use force--even though Ridgewood has one of the lowest rates of violent offenses in the state.

You might ask: why defund? Why not fund more training on implicit-bias and use-of-force, and more body cameras? Because, as [MPD150](#) states, “reforms, while often noble in intention, simply do not get to the root of the issue.”

The Ridgewood Police Department isn't broken, and therefore it *cannot be fixed*. RPD's high levels of brutality are not an accident, coincidence, or mistake. Police departments began as slave patrols; their history, their foundations, their purpose has always been to criminalize, brutalize, and oppress communities of color. As [Michelle Alexander](#) reminds us, “The criminal justice system....is not primarily concerned with the prevention and punishment of crime, but rather

with the management and control of the dispossessed.” What happened on July 26th to the Latinx child who dared ride his bike in Ridgewood is the direct result of the legacy of violence against BIPOC that the state, enforced by the police, enacts on a daily basis.

Defunding the police begins the process of creating a better world, a police-free world, a world where communities take care of each other, a world where Black lives matter. Innumerable Black abolitionists, such as Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Khalil Gibran Muhammad, Mariame Kaba, and many others, have done the work of imagining this world for us, and [we urge you to read further about what they have said](#).

We must actively and deliberately uplift Black and Brown people in their assertion of self-sovereignty. We are committed to engaging in that process with you in order to imagine and build a better world. We will not back down. We are not going away.

We will fight until our demands are met. Join us.

In solidarity,
Ridgewood for Black Liberation

Learn more from the abolitionists mentioned above:

Angela Davis - [Are Prisons Obsolete?](#) (pdf of book)

Ruth Wilson Gilmore - [Ruth Wilson Gilmore Makes the Case for Abolition](#) (podcast from Intercepted with Jeremy Scahill)

Khalil Gibran Muhammad - [The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Urban America](#) (paperback available for \$15.95 at Harvard University Press)

Mariame Kaba - [Yes, We Literally Mean Abolish the Police](#) (NYT article)