

July 17, 2020

Re: An Act Concerning Police Accountability, LCO #3471

To: Co-Chairmen Winfield and Stafstrom, Ranking Members Kissel and Rebimbas and the other esteemed members of the Judiciary Committee:

I am writing in support of An Act Concerning Police Accountability, LCO #3471. Connecticut has a long history of leading the nation on important issues, particularly gun violence prevention. Police accountability should be no exception. Police reform is an essential part of addressing racial inequities in our state.

Black Lives Matter protests have swept Connecticut and in every corner of this country, and people are demanding change. The conversations they have ignited are encouraging. There are hopeful signs that substantive changes are possible that will address police brutality and accountability, and more systemic changes for communities of color such as access to economic opportunity, education, health equity and affordable housing. As the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks and others have made abundantly clear, we must not only admit that police violence exists, we must confront it head on.

Limiting unwarranted use of force, improving training, expanding transparency, shifting responsibility of non-law enforcement tasks from armed police officers, and most important, holding police accountable for unjustified and unnecessary use of force are all areas where stronger regulation can root out racial bias and its disproportionate, and sometimes deadly, impact on people of color. Equally important and connected is tackling the crisis of gun violence, especially as it impacts black and brown communities.

We cannot escape the fact that police violence is gun violence, regardless of whether the victims of police brutality, who are disproportionately black and brown Americans, are actually killed or injured with a gun. Rutgers sociologist Frank Edwards, who studies the relationship between civilians and law enforcement stated, "Guns are the extreme logical end of what the whole training and whole repertoire of policing is about," referring to police officers' force-oriented approach to problem solving. "I can't imagine police acting the way they do without a firearm." As reported by The Trace, guns attend virtually all instances of police brutality, allowing officers to exercise force with little fear of resistance from victims or intervention from bystanders. Law enforcement agencies understand this; in early June, to help de-escalate tension at protests in Washington D.C., the Pentagon ordered responding National Guardsmen not to carry firearms or ammunition.¹

¹ <https://www.thetrace.org/2020/06/police-power-guns-george-floyd/>



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Police officers in Connecticut have killed 21 people in the last five years, largely by gunfire, according to a Courant review of use of force investigations.² In 2017, police shot and killed 986 people, 22 percent of whom were Black, even though African Americans make up only 13 percent of the U.S. population.

But for the guns on the hips of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin and his fellow accomplices, bystanders might have intervened, and George Floyd might be alive today. Reforms of the sort included in LCO #3471 are designed to reduce police brutality, which will in turn reduce gun violence. It's important to note that supporting these measures does not imply that all, or even most, law enforcement officers are racist or indiscriminate in their use of force. Nor can we overlook how America's lax gun laws and rampant levels of gun ownership (more than 400 million) increase the danger of policing. Studies show that there are higher rates of police-involved killings in states with higher rates of gun ownership and weaker gun laws. Partly because of the arming of U.S. civilians which increases the risks of police encounters, police shoot and kill nearly 1,000 Americans every year. Blacks bear the brunt of the killing, dying at the hands of police at twice the rate as whites. Strong measures that help keep guns out of the hands of criminals and other prohibited persons, such as the ban on ghost guns passed by the General Assembly last year, will benefit police as well as civilians.

Studies have clearly shown that weak gun laws and higher levels of gun ownership in a State are correlated with increased shootings by police. We know in Connecticut that strong gun laws save lives. Thanks to a bi-partisan majority of forward-thinking legislators, our State has some of the strongest gun laws in the country. However, more must be done to save lives and prevent avoidable gun deaths, especially at the hands of those who are sworn to protect us.

Our country is unique in the world by the fact the nearly all police officers in the United States are required to carry guns, with some departments requiring that officers carry them off duty. Our officers are also instructed to shoot to kill. Countries like the United Kingdom, Norway and New Zealand deploy mostly unarmed police, reserving firearms for highly trained officers and only in response to certain circumstances. This decision to fully arm our police and train and deploy them paramilitary style, is not without consequences. According to the Prison Policy Initiative (PPI), a nonprofit research firm that studies criminal justice, police violence is a systemic problem in the U.S., not simply incidental, and it happens on a scale far greater than other wealthy nations. According to PPI, there is no question that the number of police killings of civilians in the U.S. – who are disproportionately Black and other people of color – are the result of policies and practices that enable and even encourage police violence. U.S. police kill civilians at more

² <https://www.courant.com/breaking-news/hc-news-clb-deadly-police-shootings-past-five-years-20200605-ol2kfpmh2ngrnhq7hnczcv55rqy-story.html>



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than 16 times the rate of police in countries where law enforcement officers work unarmed.^{3 4}

Connecticut has long been a leader for gun violence prevention, and other life-saving legislation. It needs to show leadership now. This legislation is just the first step of many to right the wrongs of our past and ensure that all of the citizens of Connecticut are protected equally. I urge you to support the measures in LCO #3471 to reform police accountability and begin to address systemic racism and inequality in Connecticut.

Jeremy Stein
Executive Director
CT Against Gun Violence

³ <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2020/06/05/policekillings/>

⁴ <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/>