

Policing and Inequality in Flagstaff, Arizona

The Politics of Police Abuse and
Gentrification

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Summary

In attempting to understand the unwavering support and increase police funding coming from the Flagstaff Mayor and City Council, this report explores the recent record of the police in Flagstaff, how politicians and organizations build support for the police, and how the police are active and necessary for the project of gentrification in Flagstaff. The overarching analysis shows that the police, the business class, and the political sphere (including neighborhood associations and some non-profits) operate in a symbiotic relationship.

Policing in Flagstaff is rife with abuse:

- Police in Flagstaff shoot and kill at a rate over six times the national average.
- The per capita rate of fatal police shootings from January 2015-June 2020 in Flagstaff is more than double that of Phoenix and Tucson, and equal to St. Louis, the city with the highest rate of police killings of the 100 largest cities in the United States
- Flagstaff Police Department arrests Native Americans disproportionately by over 600%, and Black people by 174%. Whites are underrepresented at only 53%.
- Police homicides account for 36.4% of total homicides in Flagstaff from 2015-2019.
- Coconino County Sheriff's Offices has handed 1,301 people over to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) since 2007 through 48 hour ICE detainees.
- The police target and harass activists in Flagstaff.
- There were only 2.6 "part one" violent crimes per officer in Flagstaff in 2019.

There is a considerable effort to build support for the police, despite their record:

- The police hold a large number of PR events
- Neighborhood associations participate in the Department of Justice "Weed and Seed" program, which combines tough-on-crime policing and community outreach. This has not reduced the negative impacts of the police but has built police support.
- City government has blocked challenges to end the criminalization of homelessness.
- The Arizona Daily Sun has perpetuated a pro-police narrative.

The police have been instrumental to the gentrification model:

- Flagstaff's business class is centered in tourism and real estate development.
- The police in Flagstaff attempt to purge gentrifying areas and business zones of homeless residents and disorderly conduct through a "broken windows" style of policing.
- Business organizations in Flagstaff actively support and rely on the police. These organizations represent large-scale real estate companies along with tourism industries.
- As the high costs of living in Flagstaff produce economic distress for the poorest residents, the police criminalize attempts to survive, like sleeping in public spaces.

The report ends with some prospects for change:

- Policing itself is the problem. Because of this, efforts should be aimed at disempowering police, including defunding, disarming, disbanding police units.
- A CAHOOTS model could quickly be implemented and reduce police presence.
- Police budgets could be redirected directly to provide housing.
- Policing and inequality are linked. Because policing enforces class divides, all efforts to disempower the police should be matched with programs to attack Flagstaff's inequality.

Cover photo: Police in front of new vacation rentals at the corner of Benton Ave. and San Francisco St., on the Southside. These rentals are directly across from the Sunshine Rescue Mission homeless shelter.

Policing and Inequality in Flagstaff, Arizona: The Politics of Police Abuse and Gentrification

Nate Edenhofer¹

This report focuses on policing in Flagstaff, Arizona. It is driven primarily by the following question: amid a national outcry to defund and abolish the police following US history’s largest mass protests, why has Democrat-controlled Flagstaff gone the opposite direction and passed a [police budget increase](#)? To answer this question, I move in three steps by answering three sub-questions.

First, what does the evidence show about the actions of police in Flagstaff? The data shows that policing in Flagstaff occurs with heavy racial biases and that the police shoot and kill in Flagstaff at a rate of over six times the national average. Furthermore, policing in Flagstaff has a litany of other problems, including police brutality, complicity in deportations, and retaliation against political activists.

Second, given the troubling record of the Flagstaff Police Department and Coconino County Sheriff’s Office, why have they been immune to criticism and meaningful reform? I answer this by showing how the police enlist moderate liberal politicians, community organizations, and the media to support their public relations operations. Elected officials also promote policing and protect the police from scrutiny. When reforms do occur, they are designed to empower the police by laundering their reputation or deepening their reach, not to change their actions or curb abuses. This is most succinctly formulated as the “community policing” model.

Third, what do the police actually protect in Flagstaff? It is not public safety. In [2019 the Flagstaff Police Department](#) had 114 local police officers and 301 “part one” violent crimes,² meaning only 2.6 serious violent crimes per officer. Instead, if we look at the efforts of policing in Flagstaff, we can see how police operations serve the same function they do everywhere, to protect property and the wealthy through the enforcement of a justice system designed against the working class and people of color. Police in Flagstaff are a part of the broader dynamics of the endless war on drugs and mass incarceration that define policing nationwide, but they also are used in the service of wealthy interests in Flagstaff, specifically in real estate and tourism. I examine the relationship between gentrification and policing in Flagstaff to show this point. Policing in Flagstaff serves to purge business and revitalizing areas of the poor and homeless through harassment and criminalization to protect property values and maintain a city built for tourism.

The historic Black Lives Matter protests that erupted across the country in the wake of the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor have brought new political possibilities to American consciousness. Most importantly, [defunding](#) and even [abolishing](#) the police is now a political possibility in cities across the United States. Following years of failed technical reforms in Flagstaff and police departments nationwide—like body cams, sensitivity training, community policing, and police department diversity—the calls for defunding and abolition have emerged as the only viable solution for ending police violence, which disproportionately [harms the working class and people of color](#).

In this context, it seems strange that following weeks of mass protests across the country, including Flagstaff, the 5-2 Democrat-controlled Flagstaff City Council unanimously passed a new policing budget of over \$25.66 million, an increase of \$489,000 over the 2019-2020 budget, and \$1.33 million more than the actual FPD expenditures for 2019-2020. Yet this is not strange at all given recent history in Flagstaff. Mayor Coral Evans' and the Flagstaff City Council's staunch support for police amid nationwide calls for abolition and defunding is the latest in an ongoing trend. This has been bipartisan. While Republicans and the Right-wing have a natural support for police, Democrats and liberals are most important for shielding police from critics. Because criticism of police comes from their own potential electoral base, Democrats have become responsible for managing the discontent about policing and providing credibility for police in order to prevent meaningful changes such as [disarming, disempowering, and disbanding](#) police forces. This is largely because the Democrats financial base—the business class—continues to rely on the police to enforce the protection of their wealth and handle the people that are excluded as the “have-nots” in society.

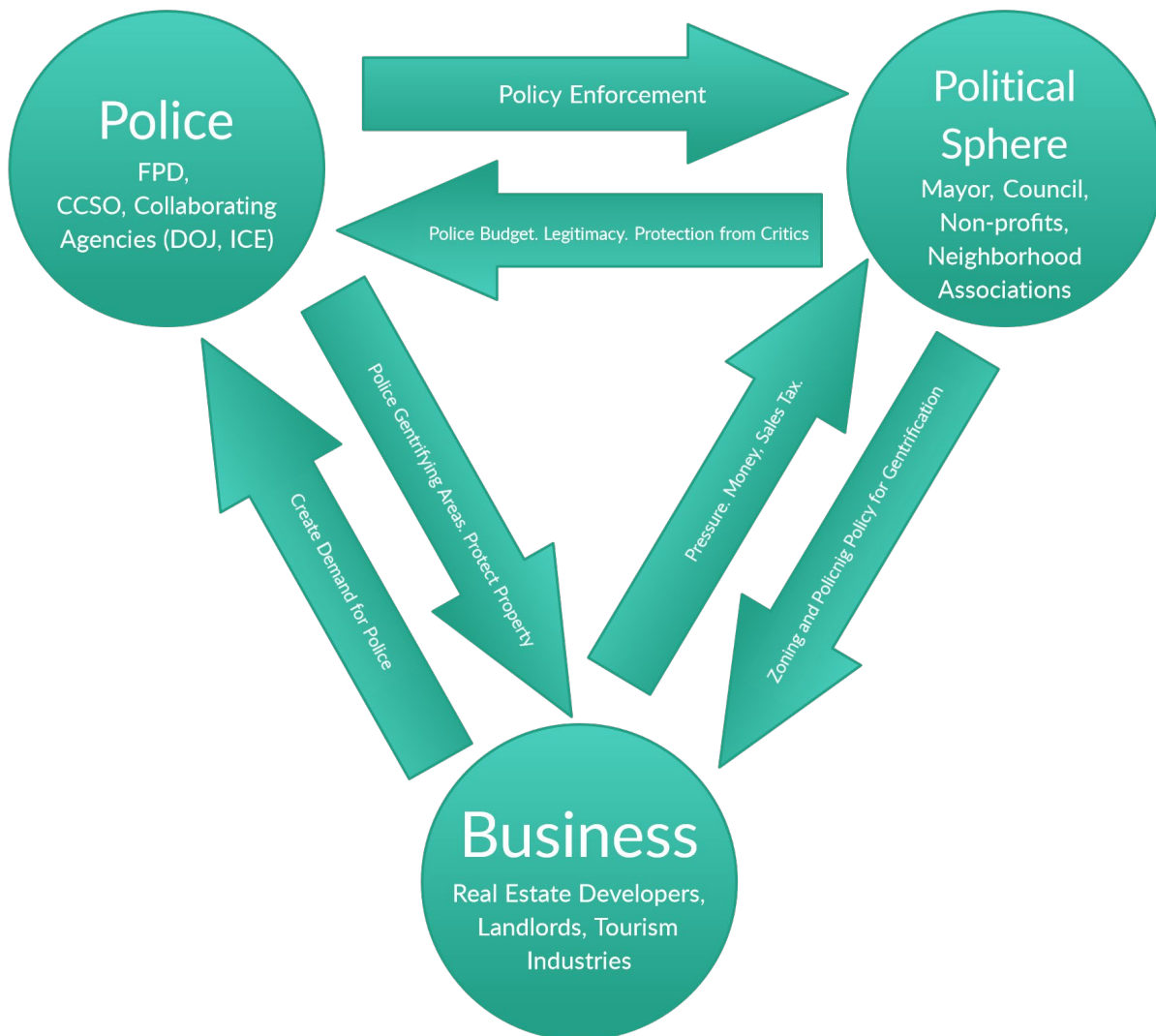


Figure 1: The Policing and Gentrification Model in Flagstaff

The analysis that emerges from this report shows that Flagstaff has a development path based in a symbiotic relationship between the police, the business sector, and the liberal political establishment, at the expense of the working class and people of color. This analysis is illustrated in Figure 1. Flagstaff's business elites are centered around tourism and real estate. Tourism and endless enrollment increases at Northern Arizona University have made gentrification the economic development model of choice for Flagstaff's business class. This helps explain the rapid development of [student and luxury housing](#), property speculation, and the criminalization of unsheltered residents. Republicans have long supported this development model, including former Mayor [Jerry Nabours](#), who was instrumental to this latest round of hyper-gentrification. But more consequentially, it is liberal and Democrat support for this model that ties them to the business class and the police. In turn, this makes opposing the police difficult.

Overall, the model works like this: Wealthy business interests depend on the laws and codes favorable to their business models, and they work to get them implemented. These are zoning codes friendly to real estate and criminal codes that punish "quality of life offenses"—like loitering and disorderly conduct—to push the problems of homelessness and inequality out of investment and tourist areas like downtown. These criminal policies come from the city government, but the police enforce them. To most effectively enforce them, the police need community associations and public officials to give the police legitimacy with their neighborhoods, which they are happy to provide. Some of these associations have even received grants from the Department of Justice to do so. And because the city government favors the business class, they also support the police and protect the police budget. Policing then continues without scrutiny, and police abuses continue.

Policing in Flagstaff

The Flagstaff Police Department (FPD) and Coconino Sheriff's Office (CCSO) are quick to present themselves as caring protectors of the city. Mayor Coral Evans recently appeared in the Arizona Daily Sun in a photo-op hugging deputy chief Dan Musselman and the police have knelt with Black Lives Matter protesters. The police and politicians paint an image of "good cops" in a relatively peaceful city. Is it true? It does not appear so from the evidence-based on five major categories: 1) extreme racial bias in arrests against Native American and Black residents; 2) a rate of killings by police over six times the national average; 3) other police violence and deaths in the Coconino County Jail; 4) the FPD and CCSO role in the jail to deportation pipeline; and 5) police intimidation and retaliation against political activists.

Race and Arrests

According to the [2019 statistics provided by the Flagstaff Police Department](#) itself, there are drastic racial inequalities in policing in Flagstaff. These disparities are presented in Figure 2 and as ratios in Figure 3. Native Americans made up 52% of all arrests, over 3,000 total, even though they make up only 8.6% of the population, according to [2019 US Census Bureau estimates](#). This means that Native people are arrested disproportionately by over six times or 600%. Black residents make up just 2.3% of Flagstaff, yet 4% of arrests. They are arrested disproportionately by 1.74 times or 174%. These inequalities are compounded by the fact that Flagstaff's police force of 114 cops is 82% white, with only three Native officers and no Black

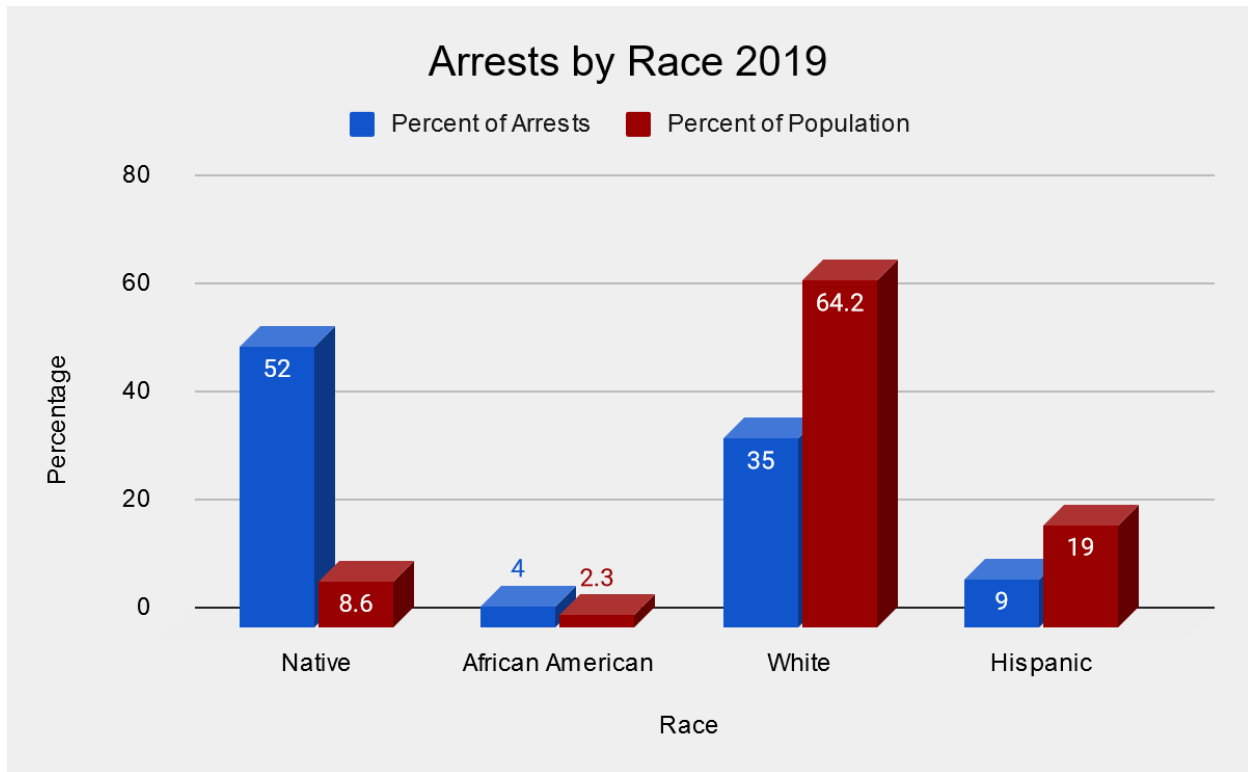


Figure 2. Sources: [FPD 2019 Annual Report](#) and [2019 US Census Bureau Estimates](#). See Appendix 1.

officers. The lower Hispanic arrest rate of 47% is a bit of a puzzle. This could result from an unwillingness to call the police among that population or some other combination of factors. Nevertheless, immigrants, who make up an essential share of the Hispanic community, also face problems in the US immigration system, discussed more below. With that caveat, the racial disparities around policing of Native American and Black residents are stark.

Police Killings

Flagstaff has an extremely high rate of fatal police shootings, over six times the national average. According to [data](#) from the [Washington Post's Police Shootings Database](#)—which documents every fatal police shooting since 2015—eight people have been killed by police in Flagstaff since 2015: Mark Nelson, Verl Bedonie, Donald Myers, Sean Brady, John Hamilton, Preston Oszust, Marcus Gishal, and Henry Russell. This number of killings within Flagstaff's population of 74,000 is exceptionally high. In fact, Flagstaff's police shootings represent 36.4% of total homicides in the city (see Figure 4).

Not only did police in Flagstaff kill over six times more often per capita than the national average, but this also is a higher rate than all other major cities in Arizona and higher than Arizona as a whole. This is especially problematic given that Arizona already ranks [fourth-highest](#) in police killings per capita in the United States and Phoenix has the [third-highest rate](#) of total police killings of the 100 largest cities in the US. I compare the rates of fatal police shootings with the Washington Post data for 2015 to 2020.³ These rates relative to Arizona and the United States are presented in Figure 5. Even Phoenix, notorious for police violence and killings of minority residents,⁴ has a

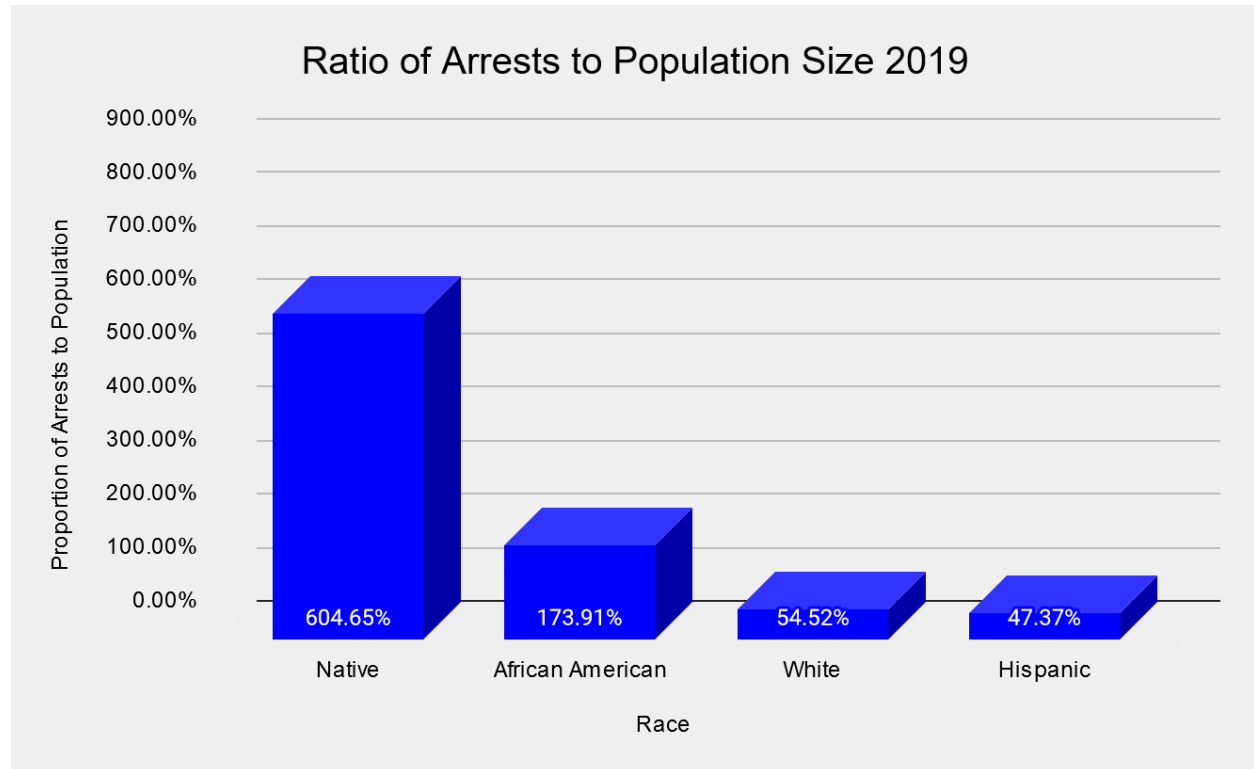


Figure 3. Sources: [FPD 2019 Annual Report](#) and [US Census Bureau Estimates](#). See Appendix 1.

significantly lower rate of total police killings per capita than Flagstaff in this time period. Phoenix had 79 fatal police shootings from 2015 to 2020. But to put it in perspective, if Phoenix had the same rate of police killing as Flagstaff, the number would be 179 police killings, over double. When these numbers are standardized as a rate per 100,000 residents, it is abundantly clear that Flagstaff has a police homicide problem. Flagstaff's rate of 10.66 per hundred thousand drastically overshadows Phoenix at 4.7, Tucson at 5.29, all of Arizona at 3.49, and the US as a whole at 1.7. Flagstaff also has a higher fatal police shooting rate than other cities notorious for police brutality, such as St. Louis, Baltimore, Albuquerque, and Minneapolis. Flagstaff has basically the same rate of fatal police shootings as St. Louis, the city with the [highest rate of police homicides](#) of the 100 largest cities in the US. These rates are presented in Figure 6. Flagstaff's high rate may be part of a broader trend of a more significant percentage of police killings coming from [suburban and rural areas](#).

Furthermore, these homicides all contain additional elements of injustice. According to the Washington Post database, in seven out of the eight Flagstaff police homicides, the person killed was either exhibiting signs of mental illness or was fleeing the police. The only case not listed with these factors was 78-year-old John Hamilton, whose neighbors later described as [having dementia](#). In the case of Donald Myers, police only turned on [bodycams after they shot](#) and killed him. Furthermore, the killing of two Native American men, Nelson and Bedonie, make up 25% of those eight killings. This keeps with the trend of the [disproportionate killing of Native Americans](#) by police.

Sadly, death at the hands of police is not a new trend in Flagstaff, even if it has intensified in the last five years. In 2006, police killed Flagstaff resident [Kyle Garcia](#). Two police officers

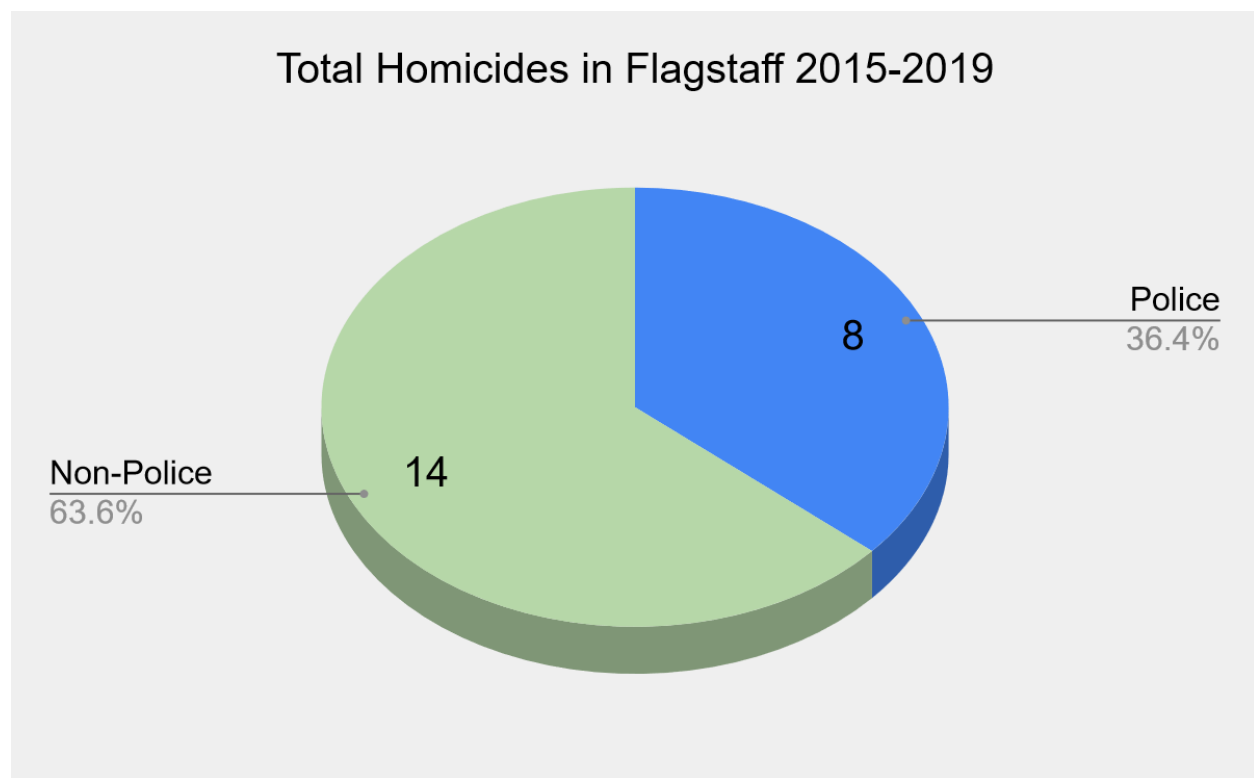


Figure 4. Source: [Flagstaff Police Department reports](#) and [Washington Post Fatal Force Database](#)

reported that Garcia aggressively accelerated his car towards them. They then shot him in the back as his car drove away and [prevented paramedics](#) from administering care after they shot him. In 2007 the police shot mentally-ill [Mark Steiger](#) 17 times, killing him. The City of Flagstaff also paid out a \$225,000 settlement to the family of [Kenneth Mitchell](#), who police killed in 2010. Between the police and county jail, mysterious deaths have also occurred. In 2014 Michael Rose—who initially called 911 for medical help—was tased by police and [died in a jail holding cell](#). In 2019, Kyle Martinson [died in Coconino County Jail](#) from medical neglect of pneumonia, despite seeking medical attention days before his death. Footage shows Martinson [yelling for help](#) just before he was found dead.

Police Abuses and Brutality

Others have survived interactions with police in Flagstaff just by chance or have been brutalized by them. Matthew Dearing was [shot in the neck](#) by officer Nick Rubey. Officer Jeffrey Wilson was filmed [punching an unarmed woman in the face](#) while another officer was restraining her. In September 2019, [18-year-old Jose Padilla](#) was hiding from police in a shipping container due to a warrant for his arrest. When the police surrounded the container, he threatened to kill himself on Facebook Live. Rather than allow the situation to resolve through dialogue, FPD tear-gassed the container and threw in flash grenades to force Padilla out. Padilla then shot from inside the can and was shot by police but survived. These examples, while illustrative, are not exhaustive.

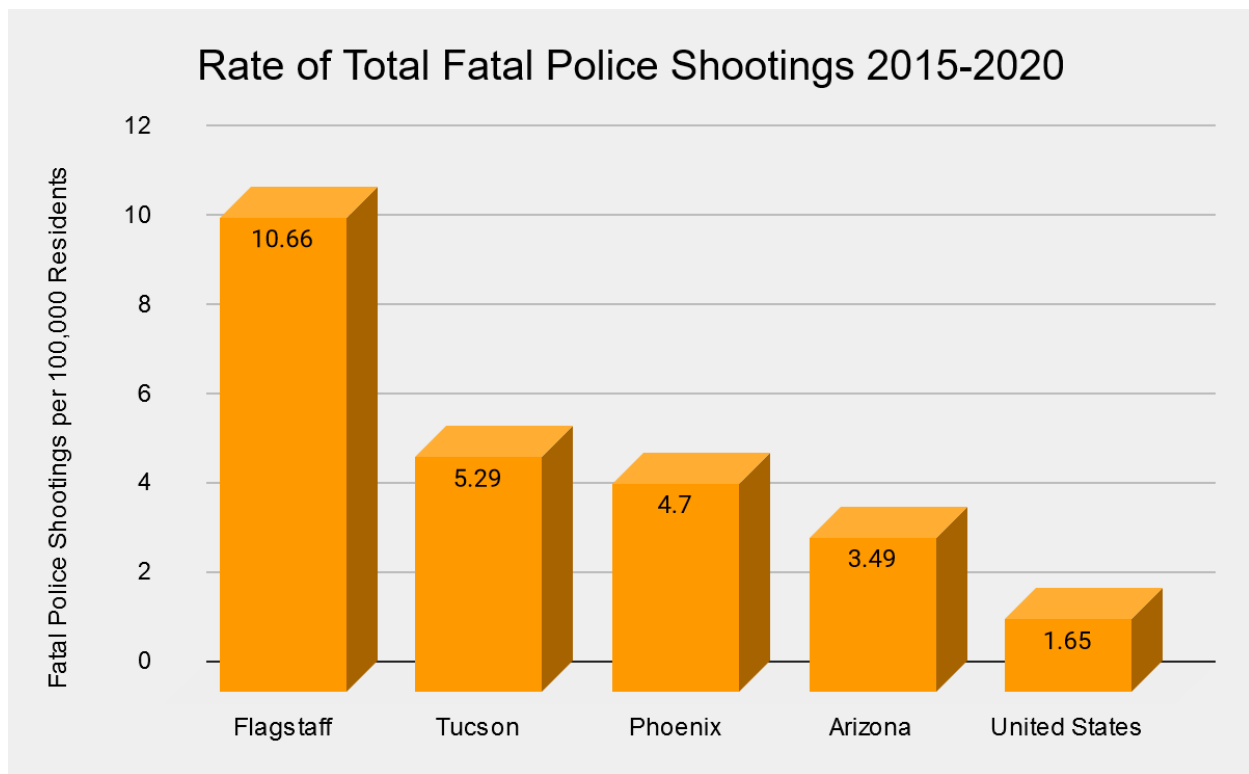


Figure 5. Shooting [data](#) is from January 2015 until June 16, 2020, the date for the Flagstaff police budget vote. Population data based on [2019 US Census Bureau estimates](#). See Appendix 2.

FPD, CCSO, and the Jail to Deportation Pipeline

Flagstaff’s Latino population also faces persecution and family separation through FPD and CCSO’s roles in the [jail to ICE pipeline](#). In the US criminal justice system, undocumented immigrants face a double punishment at the hands of law enforcement. First, if police arrest an undocumented person on a charge like a DUI, that person receives punishment for the DUI. Second, the US immigration system then punishes them additionally on immigration charges. This double punishment happens in Flagstaff when CCSO actively works with ICE by honoring 48 hour “ICE Detainers.” When the CCSO suspects an arrestee of being undocumented, they hold them in the Coconino County Jail for an additional 48 hours past their release date so that ICE can take them into custody on immigration charges. The [US District Court ruled that these ICE detainers are voluntary](#), but Sheriff Jim Driscoll refuses to cease cooperation. FPD, CCSO, and ICE together systematically remove Flagstaff’s Latino immigrant population. Amongst [other abuses](#) against immigrants in the deportation process, being deported to an unfamiliar country can be a [death sentence](#). It was for Flagstaff activist [Frankie Madrid](#) who committed suicide upon deportation to an unfamiliar country and culture, with no way back to his family in Flagstaff. Many immigrants in the deportation system first serve time in private prisons, which have recently been sued in Arizona by the NAACP for [practicing slavery](#) and recent leaks have exposed [forced hysterectomies](#) in other facilities.

The Coconino County Jail has turned 1,301 people over to ICE since 2007, according to the [Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse \(TRAC\) database](#) at Syracuse University. This number is, in absolute terms, already substantial and troubling. Figure 7 shows the ICE detainer

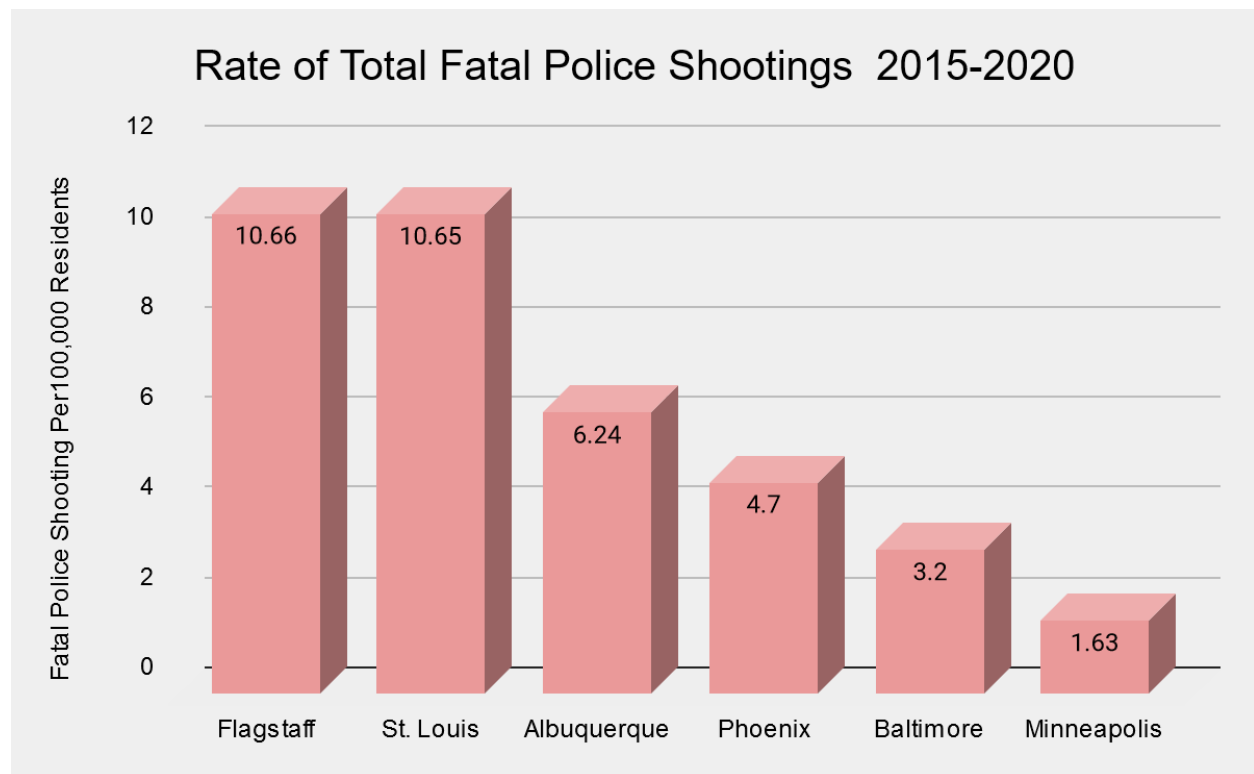


Figure 6. Source Shooting [data](#) is from January 2015 until June 16, 2020, the date for the Flagstaff police budget vote. Population data based [on 2019 US Census Bureau estimates](#). See Appendix 2.

rates compared between Coconino County, the state of Arizona, and the United States as a whole. Coconino County has a higher per capita rate of ICE detainees than the US, but less than the US average. As the Hispanic percentage of the population of Coconino County is lower than Arizona, and as the vast majority of deportees in the United States are of Hispanic origin,⁵ it is necessary to look at the rate of detainees based on the Hispanic population. This shows that the Coconino County rate of detainees per 100 Hispanic residents is higher than the Arizona rate (see Figure 8). In 2019, US Census Bureau Estimates that Coconino County was 14.3% Hispanic, which equals roughly 20,500 people. The 1,301 people CCSO has handed over to ICE is out of a population of 20,500, the equivalent of 6 out of every 100 Latinos, or roughly 1 in every 20 Latinos in Coconino County. This systematic removal of a specific population is, by definition, ethnic cleansing.

Political Policing

The police also work to intimidate and punish activists in Flagstaff. In 2014 FPD harassed anti-Snowbowl activists by [showing up to their homes](#) to intimidate them against any protest activity. Indigenous People’s Day protesters who blocked a road in 2018 were [surveilled and punished](#) by FPD via the *Gang and Immigration Intelligence Team Enforcement Mission (GIITEM)*, an interagency task force that operates across jurisdictions and shares information between state and local agencies. Long after the protest, GIITEM and FPD used social media and

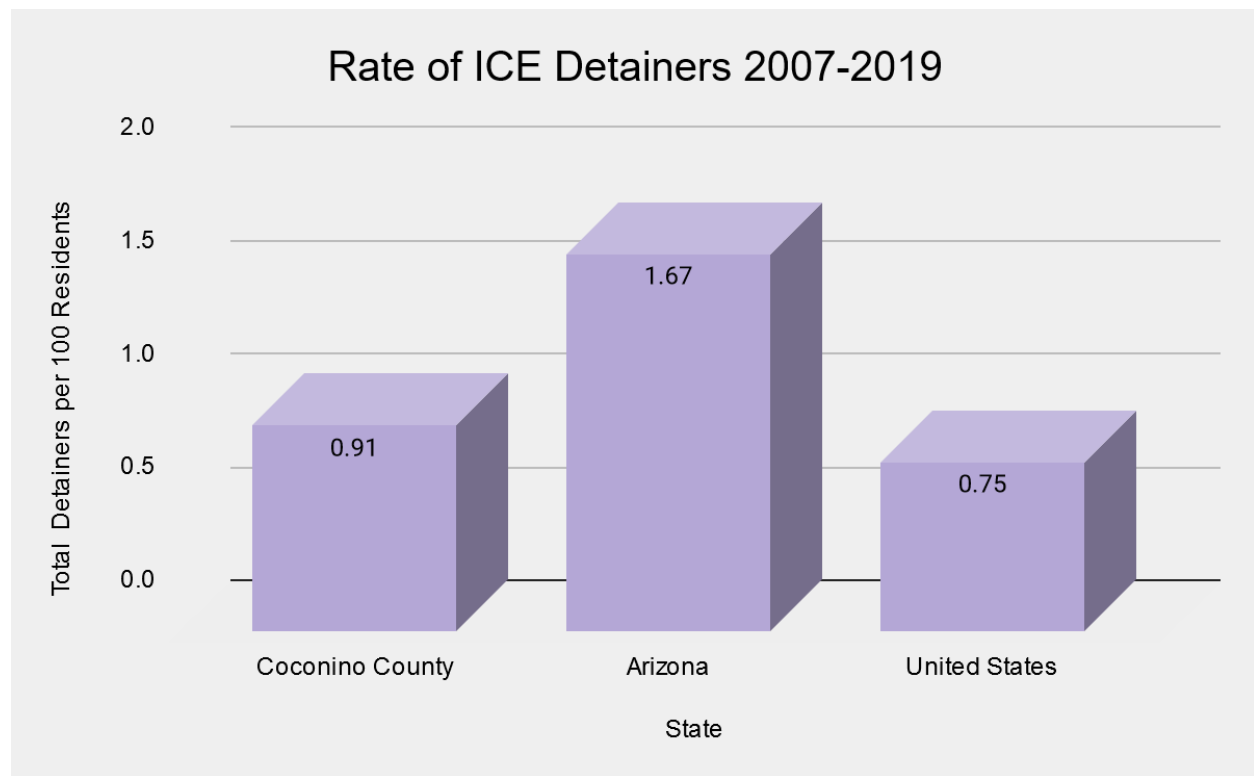


Figure 7. Source: [US Census Bureau Estimates](#) and [TRAC Immigration Data](#). See Appendix 3.

bodycam footage to bring charges against the protesters. In the new city budget, Flagstaff not only receives a \$153,000 GIITEM grant from DPS but city coffers also provide \$51,000 to support the GIITEM operation in Flagstaff.

Perhaps the most egregious case of political repression was the ICE retaliation against Jose Montelongo. In 2018 Montelongo sued CCSO over their 48 hour ICE hold policy while incarcerated in the County Jail. Following his release, ICE targeted Montelongo and his family in a series of raids that [amounted to extortion](#) in retaliation. The links between CCSO and ICE in the raids are not transparent, but this act was clear retaliation for action against the collaboration between Coconino County Jail and ICE.

Manufacturing Consent for the Police

Given the facts on policing in Flagstaff, where does support for police in Flagstaff come from? And why do the police so successfully evade criticism and reform, let alone defunding? The answer is that it comes from intentional efforts to protect law enforcement and to launder their image by politicians, centrist community organizations, and the police themselves. This fosters a belief in the possibilities of cooperation and partnering with police to solve the problems they cause, despite the poor police record. This approach fails the working class and people of color in

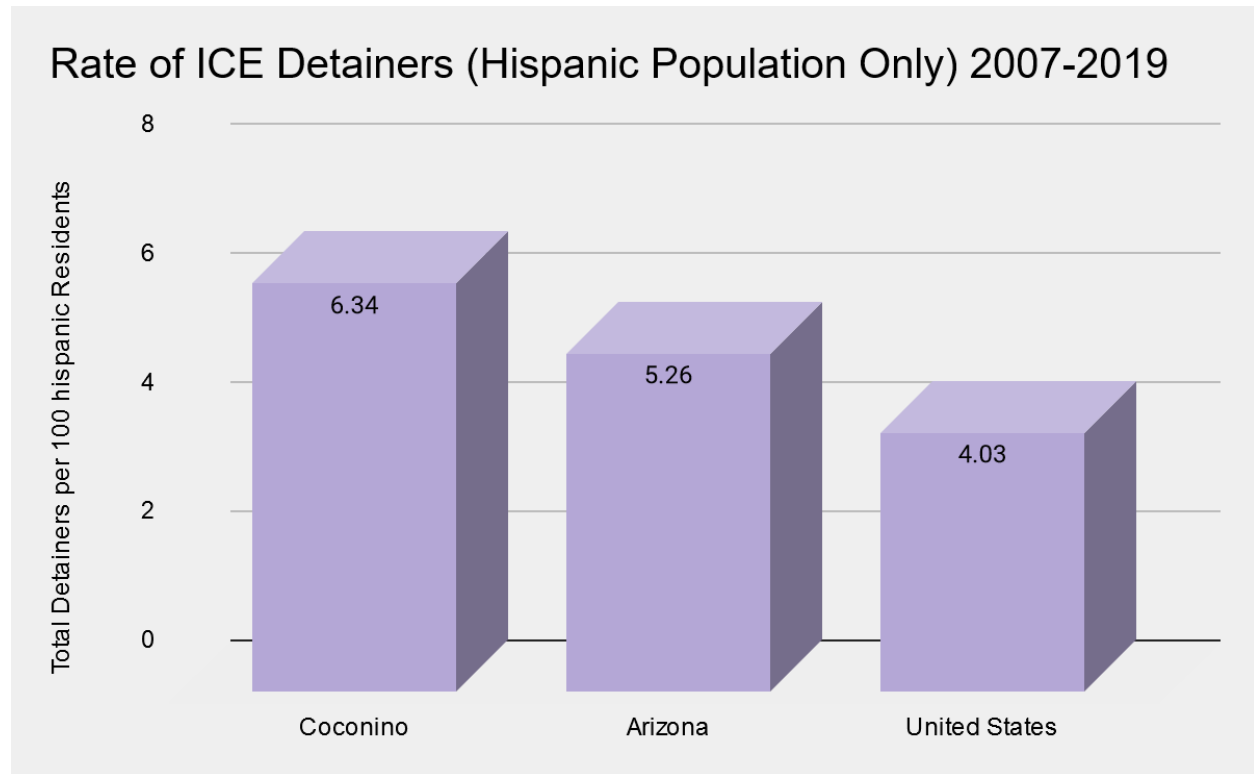


Figure 8. Source: [US Census Bureau Estimates](#) and [TRAC Immigration Data](#). See Appendix 1.

Flagstaff, as the preceding section demonstrates. It succeeds, however, in dissolving opposition to the police and increasing the scope of police power.

The [Flagstaff Law Enforcement Association \(FLEA\)](#)—a police trade association—sums up the police cooperation strategy on its website’s front page. There it presents the slogan, “*The police are the public and the public are the police.*” FLEA’s slogan represents a strategy whereby everyone is supposed to support and act as the police themselves at the same time that the police also arrest, brutalize and intimidate the residents of Flagstaff, especially people of color, the poor, and people with mental illness. It is a strategy of building consensus without stopping police abuses. The police are not alone in their attempts to build consensus. It would be nearly impossible for them to build this consensus alone. They rely on Mayor Coral Evans, the City Council, and the media (most importantly the Arizona Daily Sun, Flagstaff’s paper of record).

This support and protection emerges from 1) Police public relations stunts; 2) Police connections to liberal civil society and non-profit organizations via community policing models; 3) Police protection from center Democratic politicians; and 4) Media co-dependence with police, business, and government officials.

Police PR

The police employ an abundance of PR stunts that are coordinated by their Community Relations Office. According to the [2019 FPD Annual Report](#), the police held 373 community outreach meetings in 2019. They host a youth basketball program called “Night Court.” They host

events like “Coffee with a Cop,” where the public can meet the police. They have also undergone several [implicit bias trainings](#) since 2013, which FPD uses as evidence against claims of racial profiling. However, Native and Black residents' disproportionate arrest rates did not decline from these implicit bias training. Instead, they reached their highest levels in 2019 (at least since the earliest [available public data](#) for 2011).

This creation of police support is most apparent recently in what others have described as the “[charm offensive](#)” of police in the wake of the George Floyd protests. The clearest example of this is the Daily Sun front-page photo-op of Mayor Evans [hugging Police Deputy Chief Dan Musselman](#) as the state of Arizona implemented an 8:00 PM curfew to punish Black Lives Matter protesters. Three days later, Chief Kevin Treadway [knelt with Black Lives Matter protestors](#) for the cameras. Furthermore, following the new budget passage, [Mayor Evans called](#) for increasing police funding, and sought to resolve issues through community conversation about the Black lived experience in Flagstaff. To propose conversation rather than changing policy or defunding at once defers the issue of policing away from her responsibility (especially as she is leaving the mayoral position) and ignores the experiences of Flagstaff’s Indigenous, Latino, poor, and people with mental illness.

Police, Civil Society, and Community Policing

Mayor Coral Evans saw her rise into the public sphere in large part through working with the police in the Department of Justice “Weed and Seed” program, a program of tough on crime, “[broken windows](#)” style policing (weeding out) coupled with community development (seeding). The Sunnyside Neighborhood Association—which Evans has long been paid as the [executive director](#)—[received over \\$1.6 million dollars](#) from the Department of Justice for these programs from 2002 through 2009. The Southside Community Association—where [Evans has also been a board member](#) beginning in 2008—has also [participated in Weed and Seed](#) and adopted a police substation in the historic Murdoch Center to do so. While this model attempts to integrate more people into crime prevention and justifies itself by the police getting to know the neighborhood residents, the tough on crime element remains. Here is one [quote from Evans](#) on the community policing of Weed and Seed:

“We worked with police and the district attorney’s office to make sure that these criminals were gone for a long time,” Evans said. “We saw that anyone with a violence or drug charge that was arrested in our neighborhood or came from our neighborhood wasn’t allowed back. We had a Weed and Seed stamp that we would place on their case files so that any prosecutor that came across these cases and individuals knew not to plea bargain them. We wanted them to go to trial and get the maximum they could get in order to remove them from our streets.”

Despite the strategy to gain support from the community, this draconian model simply continues the war on drugs, which fuels contemporary mass incarceration and has been catastrophic for the poor and people of color. As Alex Vitale has noted in [The End of Policing](#), community policing over-represents the interests of homeowners, business owners, and landlords and under-represents renters, youth, homeless residents, and immigrants while failing to curb police abuses. He writes, “the research shows that community policing does not empower

communities in meaningful ways. It expands police power, but does nothing to reduce the burden of overpolicing on people of color and the poor.”

Flagstaff police have openly described their [desire to build trust](#) in the community. However, this trust appears only to give the police political cover, rather than change policing outcomes. In Flagstaff, a [Citizen’s Liaison Committee](#) formed in 2014. It has not served to give any oversight of the police—witness the terrible track record of racial bias and high levels of police killing—but instead allows the police greater access to information from the community by building trust with populations they harm. Furthermore, the police have made inroads into progressive organizations like the Northern Arizona Interfaith Council. They [facilitated community meetings](#) to build trust between FPD, CCSO and the undocumented community, even though CCSO has turned 1,300 undocumented immigrants over to ICE since 2007.

Protecting Police in Government

Mayor Evans and the Flagstaff City Council have also routinely undermined efforts to reform policing or the broken criminal justice system. For example, the City Council refused to overturn its notorious anti-homelessness law. Since 2005 Flagstaff has made it illegal to sleep in public inside city limits, criminalizing homelessness. This practice has been ruled [cruel and unusual punishment](#) by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. Yet the majority of the council [voted to keep it](#) in place. Similarly, Flagstaff had an anti-pan-handling law for years that ended only after a [lawsuit by the ACLU](#).

On policing immigrants, the City Council has also failed. The [Keep Families Free and Together](#) ordinance was written to restrict police powers by preventing deportations in Flagstaff by making Arizona’s SB 1070 unenforceable in practice. While this ordinance was a minor sanctuary bill that moderately limited police powers and made racial profiling practices illegal, Mayor Evans and the City Council stopped it. Drafted by the Arizona Repeal Coalition and the ACLU and introduced to the [City Council agenda](#) by councilmember Eva Putzova in November 2018, it was to be voted on in April of 2019. However, once the council changed over in 2019 and Putzova left the council to run for US Congress, the new council dropped the bill from the agenda because no member would sponsor it. This was despite [calls from community members](#) to put it back on the agenda.

Media-Police Interdependence

When the police and government officials work to establish support for policing, they also rely on the media. This occurs because of two conditions structuring for-profit media that Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky noted nearly 30 years ago in their now-classic *Manufacturing Consent*. First, reporters rely on access to regular sources for the news beat. City halls and police departments are especially crucial for local papers. This dependence means reporters cannot risk upsetting their sources for stories. Because of this, the media tends to reproduce the official narrative of the police and politicians. Second, for-profit media also has its own financial interests that shape its output. Most fundamentally, newspapers rely on advertising money, which means relying on business interests. For-profit media can also have a pro-business (and as we will see,



Figure 9. Media interdependence with police, government, and business

pro-police) point of view. The Arizona Daily Sun, for example, is owned by the corporation Lee Enterprises with [financing ties to billionaire Warren Buffet's Berkshire Hathaway](#) and is a member of the Greater Flagstaff Chamber of Commerce, with a representative on the [board of directors](#). These factors filter the reporting in a way that skews towards police, government, and business interests.

Like other news outlets, the Daily Sun typically produces support for the police in its reporting (with some exceptions). Sometimes this happens by simply failing to report on important events—like the [anti-police protest on Juneteenth](#) that shut down the intersection of Fourth Street and Route 66. More common, however, is the use of police friendly language and narratives, like “officer-involved shooting,” a phrase developed initially as a public relations effort by Los Angeles police in the 1970s to [obfuscate the event of police killing](#).

Similarly, the Daily Sun headlines often portray police actions positively rather than critically. In the world of click-bait news shared on social media, headlines remain how many process the news. That the facts within Daily Sun stories could lead to alternative conclusions shows a critical problem in the media, according to Herman and Chomsky:

That the media provide some facts about an issue... proves absolutely nothing about the adequacy or accuracy of that coverage. The mass media do, in fact, literally suppress a great deal... But even more important in this context is the question of the attention given to a fact—its placement, tone, and repetitions, the framework of analysis within which it is presented, and the related facts that accompany it and give it meaning (or preclude understanding). That a careful reader looking for a fact can sometimes find it with diligence and a skeptical eye tells us nothing about whether that fact received the attention and context it deserved, whether it was intelligible to the reader or effectively distorted or suppressed.

For the case of 18-year-old Jose Padilla, mentioned above, the headline ran “[Flagstaff Police stop hostage situation Saturday](#).” There was no hostage, however, besides himself. The “hostage situation” headline provides credibility for how police handled the situation. A hypothetical alternative headline like “Flagstaff Police gas, then shoot suicidal teen hiding in shipping container” paints a different narrative. Many headlines at the Daily Sun can be scrutinized

in this way, based on information within the articles (see Table 1). This dynamic is widespread in media and not confined to the Daily Sun. However, the Sun does provide the clearest example of this in Flagstaff. The point is not about the integrity of the Daily Sun. It is not even about their reporters. The Daily Sun might have a good track record for corporate news media, or it might not. The point is that the media has a reliance on sources and revenues that undermine its ability to present a critical view of the police.

Table 1. Daily Sun Headlines

Actual Daily Sun Headline	Possible Alternative Headline
“Flagstaff Police stop hostage situation Saturday”	“Flagstaff Police gas, then shoot suicidal teen hiding in shipping container”
“Alcohol drives Flagstaff’s high Native American arrest rate but recovery possible”	“Despite equal rates of alcoholism, police arrest Native Americans more than whites”
“‘Silent Majority’ defends police department funding during Flagstaff City Council meeting”	“Chamber of Commerce floods council with comments against police defunding”
“Three arrested in Flagstaff after man interrupts downtown protests”	“Video shows Flagstaff man confront, pull gun on protesters with officer nearby” (Actual alternative headline)

The Flagstaff Law Enforcement Association slogan “*the police are the public, and the public are the police,*” should have special meaning now. It shows how police and politicians do not want to change what policing *does*. They only want to change how it is *perceived* and increase the number of police supporters. Community policing, police outreach, and support for policing from the mayor, council, and media simply ease the processes of the drug war, criminalization of homelessness, and immigration enforcement in Flagstaff at the same time that it protects the police from criticism about violence, injustice, and racism. It does nothing to change those fundamental injustices of the current policing regime. In fact, it cannot. To explain the constant failure of policing to reform itself, we need to examine more clearly what police actions actually do, or put another way, who they actually serve.

The Business Class and Policing in Flagstaff

Policing is about protecting class distinctions. When inequalities across race and class define the current social order, the police reinforce that. When this racialized caste system produces acts that are crimes (or become crimes, like homelessness), the police manage crime to protect the social order of inequality. When disruptions occur that attempt to overturn that current social order—like protests or strikes—the police crack down. This is their role. The social order in the United States is an unequal capitalist economy. The wealthy and powerful have strategies to increase their wealth and stay wealthy at the expense of the poor, and they rely on the police to

ensure that these processes occur without problems from lower classes. To understand how this happens in Flagstaff, I examine the connection between policing and business in Flagstaff, specifically how police operations support gentrification amid austerity.

Gentrification and Policing

Across the United States, social resources like welfare have been slashed along with public budgets in the name of austerity. Simultaneously, organized labor has been attacked, and the costs of living have skyrocketed in many cities. Yet amid this austerity, [police budgets have remained or increased](#). The combination of a high cost of living, low social services, and aggressive policing also occurs in Flagstaff. In fact, before Flagstaff's 2016 voter-approved minimum wage raise, Flagstaff had the [lowest average wage when adjusted for the cost of living in the country](#). The cost of living, particularly housing, continues to rise. Simultaneously, Arizona has undergone massive budget cuts in non-police public sectors following the great recession, including a 24%, [\\$108 million cut to public mental health services](#). Flagstaff's [police budget](#) has also risen.

The widespread phenomenon of increasing costs of living, austerity, and increased policing is not a coincidence. They all appear together when private investors retake urban centers that were abandoned by white flight to the suburbs through real estate speculation and gentrification. This has become a new economic model for cities. Cities undergoing gentrification or urban renewal processes see increased policing, especially community-policing based in quality of life concerns. This has been documented in [New York](#), [Los Angeles](#), and [across cities broadly](#). In Flagstaff, as real estate speculation, tourism, and rent are the prime money makers for the wealthy in Flagstaff, it is necessary to securitize parts of the city to allow property values to rise and to create a welcoming and sanitized climate for tourists at all costs. In Flagstaff, this puts student housing developers, landlords, business owners, and tourists into confrontation with the unsheltered, poor, and working-class residents (including many students), people of color, and immigrants.

In Flagstaff, this gentrification and speculation has taken place in the formerly working-class and minority neighborhoods like the Southside, Plaza Vieja, and Sunnyside, among others. These areas became minority neighborhoods not through the same white-flight and suburbanization patterns of larger cities, but from the remnants of [racial segregation](#) when Flagstaff was divided by the railroad tracks, with the North for whites and the South for Black and Latino residents. But like those urban centers, these neighborhoods have been revalued and bought up by developers and speculators.

For example, the [Arrowhead Trailer Park's eviction](#) displaced 56 working-class, immigrant, and Native families by property speculator Kings House LLC. King's House bought the trailer park lot for over \$2 million and immediately gave eviction notices for the entire trailer park. King's House then [listed the property at \\$6 million](#), a \$4 million increase. Following protests and pressure on the City Council from the residents, Mayor Evan's assured that there would be no rezoning from Arrowhead's current mobile home park zoning. Kings House is now sitting on the vacant lot after demolishing all the trailers, possibly waiting for emotions to die down before seeking new zoning changes. It is not news to any long term (or even short term) resident of Flagstaff that there is a process of rapid development of student and luxury housing in the small city and that rents have skyrocketed. This makes properties like Arrowhead lucrative for investors.



Figure 10. Arrowhead Village trailer park after eviction and partial demolition. Photo by author.

Integral to the ongoing process of gentrification is policing. On the one hand, Flagstaff has seen a dramatic rise in the cost of living over the last 10 years, specifically from [rent](#) and [property value increases](#). This occurred most markedly after Flagstaff had its [zoning code rewritten](#) by contractors dedicated to gentrification in 2009, a process that has only exploded in intensity in recent years. In his book *Capital City*, Sam Stein has noted that zoning changes and city development projects have focused specifically on raising property values as their rubric for success across the USA. This is a recipe for misery in Flagstaff, which has the highest percentage of renters in the state and the [highest housing costs](#). On the other hand, the city has relied on policing strategies to ensure that the social disruptions created by the increasing costs of living and new, high occupancy student housing do not endanger the property values. The city has cracked down on those who cannot afford the rent, criminalizing homelessness by making the actions necessary to survive without shelter or employment illegal. This has included criminalizing sleeping in public and panhandling.

This policing is part of a strategy where the police have attempted to purge the poor and homeless from business areas. For example, the [Sunnyside Police Substation](#) served in no way to end crime or homelessness in Flagstaff but instead pushed it away from the 4th Street business corridor and into nearby Bushmaster Park. The FPD substation at the Murdoch Center has also not ended homelessness—people sleep instead in the tunnels of the Rio de Flag and elsewhere and [freeze to death every year](#)—but it has allowed for the property values and rents to skyrocket on

the Southside. The Flagstaff City Council also passed the [“Party Nuisance Ordinance,”](#) which cracks down on any noise complaints at any time of day for groups of five or more people. This emerged following parties at new student housing mega-complexes, which may threaten nearby property values. This is using police to fix a problem these developments themselves created. In the meantime, it also opens the door to increased policing of households of five or more and sharpens surveillance and punishment generally.

The politics of development in Flagstaff now revolve around propping up investors and real estate speculators in rapidly transforming working-class and minority neighborhoods. The return on those investments is ensured by creating a hostile and surveilled environment by policing unsheltered and marginalized people, all while neglecting services and housing for them. In fact, according to [FPD’s 2019 Annual Report](#), “officers conducted directed patrols to work in cooperation with local businesses to strictly enforce alcohol violations, trespassing, disorderly conduct, loitering and other offenses which might impact the quality of life.” This broken windows strategy of cracking down on small offenses is tied tightly into the gentrification process. [Ben Holtzman](#) writes: “Broken windows has rightly become synonymous with aggressive policing in black and Latino neighborhoods. But its history highlights a deeper purpose: protecting the economic value of ‘revitalizing’ city spaces.”

It is businesses, landlords, developers, and property speculators that benefit from this regime of policing the poor, so it is no surprise that they are the most vocal in support of the police. Council members were [pressured by the Downtown Business Alliance](#) to continue support for the anti-homeless law. [The Greater Flagstaff Chamber of Commerce called on its members](#) to mass email the council to support the police against any threat of defunding. City Council members Regina Salas (I) and (failed mayoral candidate) Charlie Odegaard (R)—both adamant supporters of the police (Odegaard was also endorsed by FLEA)—are both board members of the Flagstaff Lodging, Restaurant, and Tourism Association ([FLRTA](#)).

Who are these organizations—the Downtown Business Alliance, Chamber of Commerce, and FLRTA—that support policing in Flagstaff? Despite the connotation of downtown with local business, the Downtown Business Alliance is not made up of Flagstaff’s mom and pop shops, but primarily of [real estate and finance companies](#). It includes large scale firms like [Genterra Group](#), a real estate developer with massive projects ranging from Florida A&M to Northern Arizona University. According to the [2019-2020 Annual Budget and Financial Plan](#), FPD and the Downtown Business Alliance hold “monthly problem-solving meetings.” FLRTA represents the interests of hotel owners, who are some of the wealthiest people in Flagstaff. FLRTA is a group dedicated to undermining the minimum wage in Flagstaff. Workers in Flagstaff’s hotel and restaurant industries experience rampant wage theft, something the police have done nothing to stop. At the same time, hotel and restaurant owners have the latent threat of deportation to discipline undocumented workers against organizing, protesting, or speaking up. This is a sentiment that we continuously encountered organizing against wage theft during the time I spent with the Arizona Repeal Coalition. The Chamber of Commerce is no better. Its [members](#) are also dominated by big money, like APS, realtors, and developers. The Chamber of Commerce has been at the forefront in leading battles against the interests of Flagstaff’s poor and minority communities, most openly through multiple attempts to undermine Flagstaff’s voter-approved minimum wage law. What is the common thread here? These are the owners of Flagstaff, who depend on the police to protect them and their wealth from their workers, tenants, and people

without property generally. It is no wonder that companies who directly profit from increased property values want to continue policing to clear the streets of homelessness while increasing property values create the conditions for increased homelessness itself by rising housing costs.

Ending Policing and Gentrification in Flagstaff

The tightly linked policing and gentrification in Flagstaff is a model that can only be broken by political action. The evidence and recent history of police in Flagstaff point towards policing as a problem. Implicit bias training, body cameras, cultural sensitivity training, a citizens liaison council, community outreach, and community policing have not stopped the FPD and CCSO from enforcing racist outcomes and high police homicide levels. Pushing for more training will not solve these problems in the future. The problem is policing itself and how it enforces the rule of the wealthy over the rest. Given this, the only way to mitigate the policing problem will involve directly removing power from the police alongside reducing inequality.

Directly confronting the police problem would require things like this: defunding police budgets; stopping incoming cadet classes (no new police); disarming the police; immediately disbanding special units (for example, disbanding GIITEM); ending the Compstat predictive policing program; and finding new ways to reverse the power of the police

Unfortunately, the police have become so directly integrated into the emergency response system that it is hard to imagine what could fill the gap. Luckily other cities have experimented with new models. Eugene, Oregon, has long implemented what is called the [CAHOOTS model](#). The CAHOOTS model operates by plugging directly into the 911 line and sends two-person teams consisting of a crisis counselor and an EMT to handle distress and crisis calls. Crucially, the police are not a part of this two-person team. This model has operated for over 30 years in Eugene without a single injury to CAHOOTS responders and redirects up to [20% of the city's 911 calls](#). These often include mental health calls, which is essential given the trend of police killing people with mental illness in Flagstaff. A CAHOOTS model alone will not resolve policing problems, but together with political pressure to defund could help reduce the amount of police on the street.

On the other hand, ending policing involves ending the main reason for the police generally: inequality. The police protect the property of the wealthy and punish the poor. This puts them against working people. If policing in Flagstaff is about punishing the poor, controlling labor, and purging business zones of homeless residents, then the only solution is to fight the inequality that the police enforce.

In Flagstaff, fighting inequality means fighting against the high cost of living, giving more power to workers, and strengthening public services. To fight against the cost of living most importantly would mean rent control, regulating vacation rentals like Airbnb, and building public housing (more than just rezoning and [building market-rate housing](#) with limited affordable units.) While Arizona has passed laws like [prop 207 to protect property owners](#) like developers and has implemented [laws against rent control](#), pushing back on these are the political fights that will be necessary to make Flagstaff a livable city instead of a theme park for tourists. Fighting inequality also means fighting for workers. Most clearly, this means defending Flagstaff's minimum wage, which will reach \$15 per hour in 2021. It would also mean efforts organize workers into unions that can assert worker power at their jobs. Fighting inequality would also require fighting to reestablish services for the residents of Flagstaff and Arizona. This means more money for things

like mental health services and welfare. This could immediately involve moving money from the police budget to provide housing for unsheltered or housing insecure residents. According to one source, just 20.3% of the current FPD budget [could provide housing for up to 2,000 people](#). Fighting inequality would also require fighting for working people's power and [fighting against the color line](#) that the wealthy use to separate workers from each other. This will be necessary to reduce the inequality that gives the police their reason for existence.

These will be political battles, which is where the police are most visibly supporting the system of inequality. The police emerged in America to [patrol slaves and bust unions](#). Today they still try to [break strikes](#), [crack down on tenant organizers](#), and [punish protesters](#). But the political struggles in our near future are far from over. The economic crisis created by COVID-19 will continue to create cascading crises for the poor. Once the last trickle from unemployment benefits run out and eviction protections end, massive debt will hit renters and mortgage holders, and evictions will sweep the country. At the same time, workers will likely be organizing in increasing numbers around returning to jobs in unsafe working conditions that pay them less than what pandemic unemployment insurance did. Who will be there to enforce evictions and foreclosures, crack down on labor actions, and continue to attack protesters? The police.

The men and women that make up the police force would be far better off themselves with policing gone and with different employment. The psychological damage that being a police officer inflicts has led to two tragic police suicides in Flagstaff in the last two years, Jared Shughart and Daniel Beckwith. In the case of [Daniel Beckwith](#), the weight of shooting John Hamilton seems to be a main cause of taking his own life. Across the country, the psychological cost of policing has caused rampant [domestic violence in police families](#). Police officers and their families need an end to policing for their own sake.

If policing itself is the problem, then the call for defunding and abolition makes sense. But what does abolition mean? The all-or-nothing connotation to abolition can, at times, feel disempowering. If the city has not abolished the police, did the people fail? No. Instead, focusing on the *goal* of abolition, the goal of the end of the police, makes steps towards that goal a success. And because abolishing the police can only occur with more power to workers—that is more democracy in the economy—higher wages and rent control would begin to make police obsolete. This means that every claim against the police is also a positive claim to something else. Broadly, it would mean equality instead of police. More specifically, it could mean the following: public housing and rent control instead of police harassing unsheltered residents; strong wages and power at workers' jobs instead of police waging the drug war on the poor; mental health services instead of police killing people with mental illness; participatory budgeting instead of inflating police budgets; expanded public transportation instead of FPD arresting people for DUIs; full rights for immigrant workers instead of ICE and CCSO deporting Flagstaff's residents; and broadly, racial equality instead of racist policing. The struggle for equality and against the police can only be won together. The people of Flagstaff have the power to win this future.

Appendix

Appendix 1: Numbers for Figures 1 and 2

Race	Percent of Arrests	Percent of Population	Proportion of Arrests to Population
Native	52	8.6	604.65%
African American	4	2.3	173.91%
White	35	64.2	54.52%
Hispanic	9	19	47.37%

Appendix 2: Numbers for Figures 5 and 6

	Population	Fatal Police Shootings	Per Capita Fatal Police Shootings
Flagstaff	75,038	8	10.66
Tucson	548,073	29	5.29
Phoenix	1,680,992	79	4.7
Arizona	7,278,717	254	3.49
USA	328,239,523	5416	1.65
Albuquerque	560,513	35	6.24
Minneapolis	429,606	7	1.63
Baltimore	593,490	19	3.2
Chicago	2,693,976	38	1.41
St. Louis	300,576	32	10.65

Appendix 3: Numbers for figures 7 and 8

	Population Estimates	ICE Detainers	Detainers Per 100 Residents	Hispanic Population Estimates	Detainers per 100 Hispanic Residents
Coconino County	143,476	1,301	0.91	20,517	6.34
Arizona	7,278,717	121,382	1.67	2,307,353	5.26
United States	328,239,523	2,448,454	0.75	60,724,311	4.03

Endnotes

¹ Reach the author at nathan.edenhofer@gmail.com. The author was born and raised in Flagstaff, was a member of the immigrant and worker rights group Arizona Repeal Coalition, and holds an MA in political science from Northern Arizona University. He is currently a PhD student at University of California Santa Cruz and is a member of the Rank and File Action Caucus within UAW 2865.

² These are “Part 1” violent crimes which are homicide, rape, aggravated assault, and robbery.

³ This is January 2015 to June 16, 2020 (the scheduled date of the budget vote).

⁴ Recent killings include [Dion Johnson](#) and [James Garcia](#), both of whom were sleeping in cars when police intervened. [Ryan Whitacker](#) was also shot twice in the back in his apartment and killed by police following a noise complaint.

⁵ Immigrant deportations are overwhelmingly of Latinos. Over [90% of deportations in 2019](#) were of immigrants from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador alone. That number for just those four countries was over 94% in 2013. Other Latin American countries are also the country of origin for deportees.