

Phelps, Michelle S. *The Minneapolis Reckoning: Race, Violence, and the Politics of Policing in America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024. xiv + 283 pages. Hardcover, \$29.95.

This ambitious work of sociology, history, and political science documents and reflects upon the 2020 murder of George Floyd. It is a careful reckoning of the grim episode—a robust accounting of its facts, context, and possible meanings. Meanwhile, in the sense of the book’s title, its subject is the reckoning *with* police violence by the city and country where Floyd died. This other kind of reckoning is an overdue rupture, inevitable but mostly unwanted, often sparking dramatic change. Even so, many of its outcomes already have been upended by the current U.S. government in a crass bid to stoke white nationalist support for its authoritarian pretensions. Given this circumstance and the uncertainty of future support for any similar so-called DEI research, this book is likely to prove quite valuable to scholars and students for many years to come.

Author Michelle S. Phelps is professor of sociology at the University of Minnesota, where she started her postgraduate career in 2013 after earning a Ph.D. at Princeton University, focusing her research on aspects of the criminal justice system including probation and prison rehabilitation. Once posted in Minneapolis, she absorbed the tenets of Black Lives Matter and turned her attention to the city’s troubled record of police violence. Thus, in May 2020, Phelps and her students had been on the ground for some time already when city patrolman Derek Chauvin suffocated Floyd on camera. Her longtime reform advocacy and her team’s ongoing project to collect information from policymakers, police, activists, and residents made Phelps a uniquely qualified participant observer and oft-cited expert in the months that followed.

Phelps sets the stage historically for the emergence of Black Lives Matter activism in Minneapolis after police killed Jamar Clark in 2015. The timeline covers deep-rooted residential segregation, growth of a corrosive police union, urban unrest of the late 1960s, failed attempts by the progressives to reform the police, and the steady development of grassroots activism. She

shows that between Clark's death and Floyd's, in the face of more killings by city police officers, a growing proportion of anti-brutality activists in Minneapolis moved restlessly toward an abolitionist stance. The reasons why are richly illustrated with interviews of Black residents who continued to suffer the routine violence and racist provocations of a brutal police force. This frustrating progression of events, along with a general bent toward progressivism in Minneapolis, explains city council members' immediate willingness to adopt activists' goal of dismantling the police department in response to the protests over Floyd, Phelps writes.

Minneapolis would not ultimately muster the will for such a complete reckoning. Phelps argues that the "politics of policing" weigh against deep structural changes by framing police as the indispensable answer to the threat of violent crime in the community. Politicians are heavily motivated to provide safety to their constituents, and robust police forces have long been the traditional proof that safety is at hand. Those who would fundamentally reimagine the meaning of safety are met with scornful arguments that reducing police means more crime. Racial disparities swiftly exacerbate this problem, because impoverished communities are simultaneously less safe and more heavily policed than their wealthier counterparts. Therefore, a genuine desire for more and better policing—for greater safety—is expressed by those who are most likely to experience police violence themselves.

Phelps uses the city as a detailed case study to explain why efforts to reform and hold police accountable often fail in the face of vested interests who employ the politics of policing. She details what happened in Minneapolis after Floyd's death. A slow-moving process to partially dismantle the police department was undertaken by the city, but as the number of police officers was reduced, in part because of Covid, an increase in homicides was attributed to that reduction. Large and sometimes destructive protests brought both hope and consternation, and divisions among activists grew. A charter amendment to abolish the city police that failed when

it was opposed by a coalition of business owners, Black voters who feared community violence more than police violence, and of course the police union. Phelps presents data that show increasing voter support for abolitionist candidates and initiatives in some white precincts, but ambivalence from Black voters. She details the prosecutions of police officers involved in Floyd's death—remarkably, all four were convicted, but activists charged that the intensive state effort to put Chavin away was a pacification tactic. Indeed, overall city spending on policing crept higher year over year.

In most activists' eyes, overlapping layers of federal, state, and local governments, from the U.S. Department of Justice to a volunteer citizen oversight committee, failed to bring real accountability for police misconduct. Phelps's work convincingly reveals the dysfunction of many of these local institutions and the deep difficulty of reforming a system built to protect itself. But these days, five years after Floyd's death, dysfunction in the topmost layers outdoes any cautionary tale Minneapolis could possibly offer.

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