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Policing Atlanta: Past, Present, and Future

Atlanta Abolition Research Collective

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Abstract

In Spring 2025, after a four year-long opposition movement, the Atlanta Public Safety Training Facility (Cop City) opened for business. In the most surveilled city in the U.S. with the most well-funded police foundation, Cop City highlights Atlanta's role as a testing ground for new

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spaces and infrastructures of policing. In response, the Atlanta Abolition Research Collective formed in 2024 to serve as a home for research on Atlanta's geographies of policing and incarceration. In our first article, we present a broad review of the history of policing in Atlanta across four periods. We begin with the violent policing and containment of Indigenous life and land in the 18th and 19th centuries. We then examine how policing worked to reproduce the threatened colonial gendered-sexual-racial order and coerce labor from newly freed peoples after emancipation. Third, we identify the emergence of a more racially integrative mode of policing that obscured yet extended the inherent violence of policing in the postwar period. We next trace the development of militarized policing during Atlanta's neoliberal turn, when austerity measures worked with policing to prepare the city for gentrification. In the penultimate section, we provide a brief introduction to policing in Atlanta in the 21st century, focusing on three roles: the protection of property, the disciplining of immigrants, and the violent repression of protest. We invite other scholars and abolitionists to connect with us by conducting research in conversation with this agenda or suggesting new questions and collaborations for our collective.

Keywords

police, abolition, Atlanta, urban governance, 21st-century policing

Introduction

In 2021, the Atlanta Police Foundation (APF) and the City of Atlanta, announced their plans for the Institute for Social Justice and Public Safety Training. Later renamed the Atlanta Public Safety Training Center (colloquially known as Cop City), the sprawling 150-acre facility was purported to offer a "career training and educational center designed to provide operational, cultural and management training to the sworn law enforcement officers of the Atlanta Police Department and Atlanta Fire/Rescue" (Atlanta Police Foundation 2021; Rico 2023). A promotional video for the Center invited the public to support this new "investment in the community" that is "leading the way in police reform" through "reducing crime and protecting the civil rights of all citizens" (Atlanta Police Foundation n.d.-a). The APF wanted to make clear that the training center, which would include faux neighborhoods and city blocks to practice urban policing maneuvers, was a project for *new* policing—reformed policing.

Just months prior, the United States erupted into weeks-long rebellion after the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis prompted a crisis of legitimacy for policing (Fisher 2022). In Atlanta, where the rebellion saw a second wave after the June 2020 police killing of Rayshard Brooks, the city administration fractured in the face of property destruction and an armed occupation by protestors. Determined to prevent future rebellion, the local bloc of private corporations, political leaders, and university representatives[1] rallied behind APF with a plan to fortify their power. The size, budget, and tactical purposes of Cop City suggest intentions not just for local police training, but also for regional, national, and international

[1] Notable support for the Atlanta Police Foundation includes the Home Depot, Chick-Fil-A, Atlanta Gas Light, BlackRock, Georgia Pacific, and beyond, with more information on the executive committee and board of trustees on their website (The Atlanta Police Foundation n.d.-b).

coordination. Other cities followed suit. As of February 2025, 80 "Cop Cities" of various sizes are in production, proposed, or completed around the U.S. What started as a small local movement against Atlanta's Cop City has since transformed into a widespread movement against cop cities everywhere (Guariglia 2024; reneecj n.d.).

That police expansion and its opposition has transferred from a major Southern city to elsewhere in the U.S. is unsurprising, as new carceral developments are often born in the South (Pelot-Hobbs 2023). Yet scholarship on carceral geographies and policing in Appalachia (Schept 2022) and Midwest cities such as Milwaukee (Bonds 2019), Detroit (Caverly 2022), and Chicago (Sherman 2019) outpaces scholarship on cities of the South (see Pelot-Hobbs 2024 on New Orleans for an exception). Existing scholarship on carceral Atlanta includes the emergence of modern policing and incarceration (Booth 2025; Haley 2016), policing and repression of 20th-century social movements (Grady-Willis 2006), and the role policing played in key moments to restore a threatened gendered-racial-sexual order (Haley 2016) or revalorize devalued racial-space (Rodriguez 2021; Wiggins 2019). Yet, we find that research on contemporary, 21st-century dynamics of policing in Atlanta is only recently emerging (see Owens 2020; Sherman 2022a; 2022b).

The importance of scholarship on the history and present of police in Atlanta (and Georgia writ large) cannot be overstated. The state of Georgia incarcerates people at a rate two and a half times that of the nation and is a global leader in the "number of individuals under correctional control" (Muñoz 2023). Hundreds of carceral facilities across the state include thirty-five state prisons, six federal prisons, four private prisons, 143 county jails, six Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention centers, and many other facilities for transition and reentry, juvenile detention, and dozens of bail bond companies (Georgia Department of Corrections n.d.). Although exact numbers are difficult to parse, many of these facilities exist within the five core counties of the Metro-Atlanta area (Clayton, Cobb, DeKalb, Fulton, and Gwinnett). As of summer 2025, the operating budget for the Atlanta Police Department (APD) is over $360 million, an increase of 15% from the previous fiscal year and accounting for over 30% of the City's *total* 2026 budget (ATLbudget 2025; Thigpen 2025). Atlanta itself is proving to be a prime testing ground for new spaces and infrastructures (legal, technological, tactical) of policing, with the most well-funded police foundation (APF), the highest rate of surveillance (Lapienytė 2021), and, since the Spring of 2025, one of the largest militarized domestic police training facilities in the nation (Rose 2024).

The Atlanta Abolition Research Collective

The Atlanta Abolition Research Collective (the Collective) formed in 2024 to serve as a home for research on Atlanta's geographies of policing and incarceration. As abolitionist academics, tenured and non-tenured faculty, and graduate students engaged in organizing,[2] the Collective responds to place-based questions from a broad abolition movement and aims to historicize contemporary abolitionist organizing within the longue durée of carceral

[2] The extent of our organizing varies among members, but we take seriously Ruth Wilson Gilmore's argument on the role of scholars in and for movement research, whereby scholars can impact organizing "because we have the precious opportunity to think in cross-cutting ways and to find both the promising continuities and productive breaks in the mix of people, histories, political and economic forces, and landscapes that make up forgotten places" (Gilmore 2008, 31).

geographies in and from Atlanta. We commit to open-access and accessible publishing and strive to share our academic findings with organizers outside of the standard journal article format through gatherings, accessible research reports, and presentations. For example, members of our collective produced five stand-alone yet connected zines expanding on themes raised in this article for distribution as enforcement strategies escalated in advance of the 2026 FIFA World Cup. To decenter academic hierarchy and ownership of knowledge, we chose a collective name, recognizing and hoping that membership in the Collective will shift over time and expand to include non-academic organizers. Our research aims to work with and for movements, bridging the time and resources of academic scholarship to abolitionist questions and needs. In line with Chennault and Sbicca (2025) we see this as multidirectional research praxis, whereby, "[d]ialogic integration of knowledge from the streets and the libraries holds potential to set and move action-oriented goals" (173). We hope that our recognition as a Collective will make us legible to Atlanta organizing struggles and allow us to connect with collectives and organizations in other cities conducting similar research.

In our organizing and thinking, we noted the lack of research, both popular and academic, tracing the longue durée of Atlanta's policing within a single, accessible place. We aim to fill this gap by presenting an abolitionist historical geography of policing in Atlanta across four major periods. This historicization draws largely on secondary literature, a majority of which documents the history and development of the city of Atlanta, with policing less central to the original authors' analyses. We also analyze major policing initiatives within the metro area, including police budgets, institutional propaganda, and documents that celebrate the private-public partnerships developing in the 21st century. Finally, we draw on newspaper articles, activist journalism, and anti-carceral research coming out of Atlanta.

We begin in the 18th century, identifying the role settler colonialism played in the policing and containment of Indigenous life and land, where federal troops violently displaced and dispossessed thousands of Native Americans from present-day Georgia to support the ever-growing planter class. Second, we examine how policing newly freed people post-emancipation resulted in continual forced labor across a gendered-sexual-racial order. Third, we review the emergence of order maintenance and broken window policing in postwar Atlanta, arguing that a more racially integrative but no less oppressive approach took root in this period, working to obscure, yet extend, the underlying inherent violence of policing. Finally, we trace the development of militarized policing during Atlanta's neoliberal turn in the late 20th century, when austerity measures such as the destruction of public housing worked with increased policing to remove poor and working-class Black life from public space and prepare the city for gentrification and white return.

In the penultimate section, we provide a brief introduction to policing in Atlanta in the 21st century. We believe that an understanding of the role police play in the protection of property, the disciplining of immigrants, and the violent repression of protest can elucidate how to combat the carceral state in and beyond Atlanta. We pose questions we believe should be urgently addressed by both academics and organizers alike to understand and resist police power in the lives of all Atlanta residents. We invite other scholars and abolitionists to connect with us, by conducting research in conversation with this agenda or suggesting new questions and collaborations.

Settling Atlanta

Much of the *official* history of Atlanta centers on its establishment as the terminus of the Western and Atlantic Railroads with the driving of the Zero Mile Post in 1837. Yet, a long century of colonial carceral space-making preceded the establishment of the railroad terminus (Hahn 2004; Harjo 2019; Saunt 1999). Cherokee and Mvskoke borderlands were first hailed by settler-colonial visions through a hydrologic land claim pronounced from London in the 18th century. In 1733, the claimed southern boundary of the thirteenth British colony in North America was extended from the Altamaha River watershed headwaters through the heart of present-day Atlanta (Hahn 2004). Thirty years later, in 1763, England established the Royal Proclamation Line to limit settler expansion beyond the eastern sub-continental divide of the Appalachian ridge. West of the line running through present day Atlanta lay what British colonizers first named, defined, and, eventually, policed as "Indian Territory."

Through a series of corrupt land deals and coerced treaties through both economic and physical violence, Mvskoke people were forcibly displaced from their lands in central and western Georgia through the late 18th and into the early 19th century (Harjo 2019). Through military forts at Hawkinsville, Macon, and Standing Peachtree, the Georgia government and federal agents drove Mvskoke people into a policed enclosure in Alabama just west of the Georgia border (Ethridge 2003; Garrett 2011; Harjo 2019; Saunt 1999). By 1827, all Mvskoke lands were "officially" ceded through the Treaty of Indian Springs (1825) and the revised Treaty of Washington (1826), leading up to Andrew Jackson's signing of the 1830 Indian Removal Act. This act resulted in the Trail of Tears and the displacement of thousands of Native Americans from their ancestral homelands of so-called Georgia, with half of the Mvskoke people perishing during removal (Harjo 2019). These violent expulsions—foundational acts of genocide for nation-building—were aided by federal troops and supported by the state of Georgia (Harjo 2019; Saunt 1999).

The ongoing displacement of Indigenous peoples and settler occupation of agricultural land was one side of the settler colonial planter system, required to extract profits from enslaved Black labor. Under the slave labor system in Georgia, enslaved people's lives and mobilities were under the direct authority of enslavers (Booth 2025). Forms of resistance, such as plantation rebellions or work refusals, were handled on the plantation, and the state tended not to interfere. While early-19th century Atlanta had a town marshal and a small number of part-time deputies, night watchmen, and constables who responded to reports of crimes and kept order, this system was unrelated to the county slave patrol, which captured self-emancipated Black laborers (Booth 2025).

Indigenous peoples continued to threaten and challenge the colonial planter system and its expansion into west and northwest Georgia. A Hitchiti raid into Stewart County led to the Creek War of 1836, at the conclusion of which an estimated 2,500 Mvskoke were detained and forcibly marched west to Montgomery (Ellisor 2010). In 1838, the Stephen Long survey—credited with deciding the location of the railroad terminus—provided Long and Georgia Governor Gilmer with information about the land, which they used to install internment camps for the detainment of Cherokee and other Indigenous peoples (Hughes 2024).

Atlanta's railroad terminus, built in 1836, connected the South to the Midwest, enabling the circulation of goods and people for a growing empire built on stolen land and

enslaved labor. These railroads took on even greater importance during the Civil War by connecting the South, West, North, and Atlantic Coast, helping Atlanta emerge as a place for industry and Northern business interests (Hunter 1998).

Chain Gangs, Convict Labor, and Jim Crow

In the decades following the Civil War, a new method of policing emerged in response to newly freed Black labor in Atlanta and Georgia more broadly. This early modern policing disproportionately targeted freed peoples and their descendants, a population of Black migrants from rural areas in the South to Atlanta's manufacturing and domestic industries (Booth 2025). A nascent Confederate police force—that once primarily targeted drunk and disorderly conduct—now acted with impunity in their violent harassment of Black Americans. During Reconstruction and the decades that followed, police controlled Black life and space through physical violence and excessive fines for unruly behavior (Booth 2025).

In 1874, after Georgia's white Democratic reactionary Redeemer Coalition wrested control of the state and ended Reconstruction, the city officially formed the Atlanta Police Department with the goal of formalizing policing (Booth 2025). This new police force continued to disproportionately arrest and harass Black residents for offenses of so-called social disorder (Booth 2025). Most arrested residents were forced to labor to rebuild the economy after the war. On chain gangs, they built the poorhouses and stockades for their own detention, as well as the city's roads and railroads that circulated extracted resources for new industries. In convict camps, they built the private wealth of individual capitalists who were hungry for cheap, disposable labor (Blackmon 2008; Haley 2016). While maiming and killing enslaved people meant capital loss for slave owners, such violence was economically permissible under convict leasing, benefiting corporations such as the Chattahoochee Brick Company (Blackmon 2008).

As a result, disciplinary authority over the Black population shifted: whereas under the system of slavery, *individual* white slave owners disciplined those they enslaved, after emancipation, *all* whites and the state assumed disciplinary authority (Booth 2025; Godshalk, 2005; Haley 2016). That authority was used to criminalize and punish Black people not only to coerce unfree labor, but to reinforce what Haley (2016) calls the "gendered-racial-sexual order" that developed under slavery and was threatened by freed people and their descendants. A range of activities, including idleness and leisure, were criminalized through "lay criminology" linking idleness with criminality (Booth 2025). By 1890, the police headquarters moved to Decatur Street, the largest Black leisure district in the area, and by the turn of the century Atlanta boasted the highest arrest rate of any U.S. city (Booth 2025). The racial pogrom known as the Atlanta Race Riot in 1906 provided a spectacular example of white power and disciplinary authority over the Black population. White mobs were deputized by the police to carry out the arrest of Black residents who defended themselves from violence (Godshalk 2005).

Black women faced additional mechanisms of social and political control. A 1900 sundown law threatened Black women with arrest if found at a restaurant or club alone after certain hours (Kelley 2016). After arrest, Black women who could not afford to pay fines were sent to convict camps where they faced the "unabated racial-sexual sadism" of white male prison guards (Haley 2016, 68). Individual whites also had opportunities to coerce the labor of Black women; in debt to white households who paid their fines, Black women became

unpaid domestic workers. In leasing Black women to these households, the state redirected disciplinary authority back into the hands of individual whites and reinforced the racial-gender domestic hierarchy of slavery (Haley 2016).

While the Black leisure district was under the surveillance and control of white police, Black residents were able to seek refuge in separate neighborhoods, geographically distant from white residential and commercial spaces. For instance, Black women found protection from the constant gaze of the white employer through work as washerwomen, in which they gathered laundry from white households and completed the washing at home (Hunter 1993). Despite the threat of arrest, Black women domestic workers, of which 98% were washerwoman by 1880, organized for higher wages. As Black neighborhoods became a primary site for labor organizing, the police responded by increasing surveillance to these spaces of social and political life (Hunter 1993).

This era of policing in Atlanta used convict leasing, chain gangs, and parole to reinforce the previous gendered-racial-sexual regime, enforce unpaid labor, and ensure the reproduction of capitalist development in the second largest city of the former confederacy (Haley 2016). While the city's boosters promoted the new police department as a sign and tool of modernization, the domination of the Ku Klux Klan in the APD was a well-known fact (Booth 2025; Rodriguez 2021; Tuck 2001). In the first decades of the 20th century, the trend of policing Black space continued, and by the 1930s, Black neighborhoods faced rampant police harassment and brutality while police extorted money from underground economic transactions such as gambling and sex work (Ferguson 2002). Under Jim Crow, segregation, exclusion, and the rules of racial etiquette were reinforced through the threat of violence and coercion (Bayor 1996).

Postwar Policing

While the police continued to command labor, control bodies in space, and suppress protest and organizing, they nevertheless changed in composition and developed more sophisticated techniques in the postwar period. Once an explicitly white supremacist organization, APD transformed over decades to contain more Black officers than white (Miller et al. 2016). As the Black middle class grew in economic power and political influence, many began to view the police as a body that *could* and *should* serve their interests. The introduction of order maintenance and community policing thus allowed police to advance a more racially integrative approach to policing Black neighborhoods that included Black officers and some protection of Black spaces and property, while simultaneously working to maintain gendered-racial-sexual orders through criminalizing disorderly conduct, clearing blight, and removing so-called social ills.

In light of unabashedly racist policing, demands for Black police raised as early as 1867 were amplified in the 1940s. Black civic and political leaders hosted protests and lobbied for the inclusion of Black police officers in hopes of reducing race-based police brutality (Bayor 1996). By 1948, the first Black officers were admitted to the Atlanta police force, segregated in their own station house and directed to exclusively police Black neighborhoods (Bayor 1996). Segregation, however, was also a target of Black reformers. As the movement for Black civil rights grew in Atlanta, white political leaders saw an opportunity to embrace the change that was coming while keeping the economy churning (Winders 2006). Black and white political, business, and civic leaders negotiated over the place and pace of desegregation,

which helped the city minimize more visible and violent forms of white supremacist backlash seen elsewhere in the South (Stone 1989). Under the direction of liberal police chief Herbert Jenkins, the local police could paradoxically appear as neutral upholders of law and order when they politely arrested activists in pre-arranged symbolic actions and upheld order after legal desegregation. So, even while Black and white police officers helped police Black residents' mobility and organized resistance, the department also appeared as a politically flexible institution that might, through racial representation or community policing, serve the interests of middle-class Black residents.

Despite Mayor Ivan Allen's branding of Atlanta as "The City Too Busy to Hate," whites fled to the suburbs to avoid sharing space with Black residents as desegregation was selectively enforced. Between 1960 and 1970, the white population declined by twenty percent, and by 1970, Atlanta had a majority Black population (Bayor 1996). While the federal government was subsidizing white flight through federally backed home loans, Mayor Allen's administration directed urban renewal funds to revitalize downtown by building highways and hotels, clearing slum housing and "blighted" buildings to make way for the central business district, and constructing a baseball stadium (Holliman 2009). While Model Cities and other urban revitalization efforts displaced poor Black residents from the city center, middle-class Black Atlantans saw the replacement of slums with a second wave of public housing development as a way to control and "rehabilitate" poor, working-class Black people (Wiggins 2019, 715). Black political leaders thus embraced Allen's plans, expecting that public housing for the city's large and growing impoverished population would replace housing for the thousands of displaced Black residents (Holliman 2009).

Yet, the City's failure to build an adequate number of replacement public housing units made impoverished Black residents further destitute. In 1966, small riots erupted in Summerhill, where the city constructed a baseball stadium, and Bedford Pine, where residents organized to defend against displacement. The unrest began in response to a police shooting of Harold Prather, an unarmed Black man. But residents' explanations of the unrest stressed neighborhood conditions, suggesting that police violence was a force of dispossession alongside urban renewal (Holliman 2009). Unlike the 1906 racial pogrom, where Black resistance was violently repressed by white police and vigilantes, during the 1966 unrest, Black residents faced both white *and* Black police. Beginning in the mid-20th century, Black police officers increasingly policed Black neighborhoods and enforced displacement from those neighborhoods chosen for revitalization. The 1969 desegregation of the police force allowed Black police officials to take leadership roles starting in the 1970s under the first Black mayor, Maynard Jackson (Bayor 1996).

During Jackson's first term, Black business and political leaders joined downtown white business leaders in lobbying City Hall for stricter laws and increased police presence. Black business owners were able to appeal to less divisive ideological commitments, suggesting tackling crime and disorder would protect the Black community's economic health and potential for collective advancement (Wiggins 2019). Echoing calls from early 20th-century Black Atlantans for *more* police presence, the Black middle-class feared "poor and working-class African Americans" were a hindrance to "economic development [and] the advancement and survival of the race" (Wiggins 2019, 715). Stemming from the desire to maintain (both inward and outward) order, Black middle-class Atlantans were instrumental in calls for harsher punishments for "victimless crimes," such as petty theft, loitering, and sex

work within Atlanta's historic Auburn Avenue, furthering the enforcement of gendered-racial-sexual control among the working poor and Black lower-class. This *order maintenance policing*, which included enforcing neighborhood aesthetics such as clean yards and tidiness, intertwined ideas of "safety" and policing with economic development, while distancing property-owning Black Atlantans from poor and working-class Black communities (Wiggins 2019, 724).

This collaboration by the urban regime to increase police patrols and surveillance to ameliorate the concerns of merchants and downtown investors would have lasting effects on the criminalization of Black urban residents and the presence of police in working-class and poor neighborhoods (Wiggins 2019). The putatively "softer" and more racially integrative approach to include Black officers and propertied Black interests in the postwar era would soon be melded with "harder" techniques, military technology, and carceral expansion. With this turn, Atlanta elites ensured the policing of meaningful sites for grassroots social movement organizing, what Wood (2025) calls spaces for neighborhood social movement capacity (NSMC) from which working-class and poor Black residents built power. These spaces were pivotal to over two dozen coordinated labor and rent strikes taking place from 1966 to 1977, notably including organized strikes at Howard Johnson, Church's Chicken, Mead, and two public sector sanitation strikes (Wood 2025). Mounting labor militancy of the period culminated in the massive, city-wide sanitation strike on March 29, 1977, when over 1,000 workers walked off the job demanding a 50 cent raise. On April 1, Mayor Maynard Jackson swiftly ended the strike by firing 900 striking workers, sending a message that Atlanta's ruling class, Black or white, did not align with labor. While policing spaces of Black life and recreation expresses a continuation from previous periods, Black and white political elites targeted these spaces, now aiming at the displacement of Black workers, and the ever-militant struggles they presented. As Atlanta's ruling class attacked NSMC, livable wage and unionized jobs within manufacturing and the city's public sectors steadily declined so that Black working-class life became untenable within the city (Wood 2025).

The Neoliberal Turn

In the 1980s, Atlanta accelerated a more militant approach to policing, one that ran tandem to the City's nascent neoliberal turn. Here, we argue that APD embraced more violent tactics in their control of so-called Black "deviant" life and space (Rodriguez 2021). After urban renewal failed to resolve the problem of a declining tax base and exacerbated poverty, Atlanta followed national trends in constructing a neoliberal carceral state. In the face of white flight and the gutting of social welfare and federal infrastructure funding federally, Atlanta began competing against other "entrepreneurial cities" on the international stage for private capital (Keating 2001; Rutheiser 1996). The violent policing of working-class Black life and space made possible the emergence of Atlanta as a "world city" by the end of the 20th century. Once seen as a solution to the problem of poverty, the now majority-Black public housing projects, and the underground economy and community organizing emerging from within them, became a target for another round of urban redevelopment.

Edgett (2025a) locates the repression of an armed community defense patrol in 1981 as a key moment in which policing enforced the acceptance of a lower standard of social reproduction under neoliberalism. The City's lack of action in response to the string of murders of all Black and primarily public housing residents known as the Atlanta Child

Murders led to the creation of armed community defense patrols in several public housing projects (Edgett 2025a). The Ron Carter Patrol (also known as the Bat Patrol) at Techwood Homes public housing project was just one effort towards protecting the basis for social reproduction of the community. It emerged from the ongoing self-organization of residents who were also engaged in a grocery delivery program, a community-enforced curfew to protect the children, and efforts to expel drug dealing (Edgett 2025a). Yet rather than supporting these efforts, the City, media, and APD criminalized community patrols, labeling them as vigilante activity. Black civic leaders, the Black mayor, and police officials collaborated to repress the patrol (Edgett 2025a).

At the same time, a deep imbrication between the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA) and APD developed, resulting in resident evictions and the policing of so-called deviant behaviors (Rodriguez 2021). Public housing as a hub for both anti-poverty organizing and a growing underground drug sales economy posed a problem for the City's attempts to attract investment and redevelop centrally located neighborhoods. The national "moral panic" about crime in public housing and the violence associated with drug sales legitimized police action against residents of majority-Black public housing complexes (Hobson 2017). Through circular logic, state abandoned public housing justified carceral expansion. Increased militarized assaults on public housing and poor Black citizens both *responded to* and *legitimized* neoliberal austerity measures while aiding the City's neglect of crumbling public housing infrastructures.

Following a national trend towards police militarization under the neoliberal turn (Camp 2016), APD began to amass military-grade weaponry, including automatic assault rifles, army tanks, and body armor (Hobson 2017). Coinciding with the national War on Drugs, in 1988 Black Police Chief-turned-Public Safety Commissioner George Napper created the REDDOG Unit (Run Every Drug Dealer Out of Georgia), an anti-drug law enforcement unit that conducted militarized raids in low-income and majority-Black housing complexes (Rodriguez 2021). The REDDOG Unit held an explicit policy to not cross North Avenue, a barrier between the majority-white North Side and the majority-Black South Side (Hobson 2017). In the first nine months of 1988 alone, police arrested 171 people, primarily Black minors, and the REDDOG Unit maimed and killed Black Atlantans at a much higher rate than other racial and ethnic groups (Hobson 2017, 152). With the War on Drugs, the number of jail beds grew in the 1980s and 1990s, increasing the demand for incarceration. The City Annex jail was built in 1981 then expanded from 300 to over 500 beds in 1987 (City of Atlanta n.d.). By 1989, Fulton County Jail was built to house 1,125 prisoners (Chidi 2023). Earlier AHA-APD collaborations culminated in the 1990 sixty-day police occupation of over forty public housing developments, which led to the arrest of nearly 7,000 and the incarceration of over 2,000 people (Rodriguez 2021, 172).

The 1996 Olympics presented the city with a dual opportunity: to both hide and replace the low-income, Black, and publicly housed and unhoused populations with white wealthy elites. The "Olympification of Atlanta" (Hobson 2017, 183) was only made possible through the combination of carceral expansion and the destruction of Black space. In conjunction with Central Atlanta Progress (CAP), the city created a new downtown police precinct and increased undercover surveillance specifically to remove undesirable Black and poor populations from desirable neighborhoods and business districts (Hobson 2017). Gustafson (2013) estimates that nearly 30,000 Atlantans were impacted by this effort, with

nearly 9,000 homeless and destitute residents arrested and jailed. Further, the city expanded punitive measures for minor crimes. As Hobson (2017) notes, "the city council elected to raise the maximum sentence for violating a city ordinance from two to six years" (Hobson 2017, 197). Concurrently, the city began the construction of a new downtown 1,000-bed jail and the destruction of public housing, beginning with the nation's oldest public housing complex, Techwood Homes (Hobson 2017). The expansion of Metro Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) through historic and primarily Black enclaves further expanded the city's destructive Olympic footprint, without providing alternatives or recompense for legacy residents (Gustafson 2013; Hobson 2017).

A record number of law enforcement officials during the games, which included over 20,000 police, military personnel, and "volunteer security patrols" further supported the "Olympification" and growing surveillance of Atlanta (Coaffee 2024, 644). In collaboration with community-improvement districts (CIDs), the Olympics also saw the emergence of an Interagency Law Enforcement (ILE) program to collate all the governing police bodies in monthly meetings, providing security and surveillance debriefs in the lead up to–and during–the 1996 games (Sherman 2024). The remnants of such partnerships continue today, converging into what Sherman (2024) calls the "police-convening machine," one enabled and supported by a growing network of video surveillance technologies across CIDs and beyond (1515). Olympics security measures included thousands of closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras, biometric machines, smart chips, electronic gates, and even surveillance blimps, with some technologies expanding into Tennessee and Florida where several Olympic events were held (Associated Press 1994; Kifner 1996).

With the City's punitive and violent crackdown on the low-income and Black population came the resurgence of wealthy corporate elites, subsidized by the city's development finance agencies like Invest Atlanta and the Development Authority of Fulton County (Immergluck 2022, 99). Consequently, Immergluck (2022) found a nearly 20% decrease in Atlanta's Black population during this same time. We argue here that gentrification alone cannot explain the displacement of low-income Black life. We find that it was also the parallel insurgence of policing particular Black spaces (i.e., historically Black neighborhoods and public housing) that ensured (and thus protected) white return and capital back into Atlanta. APD supported these gentrification processes by clearing public space of poor or unhoused Black life, continually making spaces uninhabitable for one group while supporting the reinvention of spaces for the white and wealthy. Private-public partnerships surrounding the 1996 Olympic Games further aided these efforts. Organizations such as CODA (the Corporation for Olympic Development in Atlanta) focused on "shifting the demographic make-up of the city'....to 'get more middle-income people into [Atlanta]" (in Immergluck 2022, 43). Additionally, with CIDs we see the emergence of private security forces aiding in the city's continued expulsion of poor Black "deviance" from public space and the ongoing protection of property (Edgett et al. 2023; Rodriguez 2021; Sherman 2024).

Thus, for a city already suffering from 1960s and 1970s white flight, a retreating tax base, urban renewal, and increasing gentrification, the neoliberal and militant turn in policing only furthered the expulsion of poor, Black, and unhoused people from public space. Importantly, this return to brute force against Black residents did not mean an abandonment of the supposedly "softer" and more integrative approach to policing poor and Black life from the postwar era. Appealing to a broadening coalition of liberal Atlantans, the City and APD

often deploy the semblance of such "soft" tactics as a cover for the continuation and expansion of more brute modern policing techniques developed under neoliberalism. As the Cop City promotional video discussed in this introduction reveals, racial representational politics work to deny the racism of policing, while calls for community policing reappear when needed to justify the expansion of policing in the name of reform.

21st-Century Policing in Atlanta

In the 21st century, Atlanta policing continues to combine the seemingly "softer" approaches of community policing, order-maintenance, and representational politics with violent force, including maiming and killing civilians, as the scale and scope of policing expands further into everyday life. Today, the City of Atlanta has fourteen overlapping police and security jurisdictions across both Fulton and DeKalb counties (Shelton 2022). In any given location, a person could be subject to as few as two overlapping police jurisdictions to as many as seven, including university police (e.g., Georgia State University), transportation police (like MARTA), as well as standard city, county, and federal police units (Shelton 2022; Sherman 2022). Despite calls to "defund the police" during the 2020 George Floyd Uprising, two successive mayoral administrations have further invested in APD through officer salary raises, new equipment, and the development of Cop City. Protests against policing in the last decade have brought renewed attention to policing expansions, and scholars have begun to call for more research on urban policing in general (Davies 2014a, 2014b; Owens 2020), with a few scholars researching policing in Atlanta. For instance, Booth (2025) traces the origin of the police force, Wiggins (2019) locates the emergence of order-maintenance policing, and Sherman examines the role of police in urban governance and planning (2022a) and on university campuses (2022b). We celebrate such scholarship and join the call to continue investigating the purposes, tactics, and strategies of policing in 21st-century Atlanta. Next, we briefly outline an agenda for future research on the current state of policing in Atlanta across three domains: the protection of property, the containment of immigration, and the repression of protest.

Policing Property

We cannot talk about carceral power without an analysis of how police operate to protect property. This is especially salient in 21st-century Atlanta, with increasing gentrification, an expanding police force, and overlapping crises of inflation, cost of living, and homelessness. In the early stages of our research on the role of police in property and development in contemporary Atlanta, we have identified: 1) the dichotomous role police play in protecting white wealthy residential property versus their role in working-class primarily Black neighborhoods; and 2) the role of police in protecting private development spaces within middle and upper-class neighborhoods that encourage white movement into historically Black spaces.

Thus far, our research demonstrates the shifting control of police powers, wherein policing is now outsourced to the *private citizen* in primarily white and/or affluent neighborhoods via Neighborhood Security Watches. We contrast this with how policing is reimagined in Atlanta's working-class and Black neighborhoods via the Atlanta Police Foundation's Secure Neighborhood community policing program that moves police officers into subsidized housing in places like Vine City. Further, we examine how policing works in

commercial districts, like in Midtown and Downtown, where "non-sworn officers" assume the role of police in maintaining commercial and private property to bring wealthy people back into commercial districts. Finally, we are interested in what policing looks like in mixed-use commercial and neighborhood districts, where police now take the form of robot cops and surveillance cameras in historically Black neighborhoods. From this, we ask: How are the shifting controls of police powers affecting everyday life? What avenues for abolitionist intervention exist at the scale of the neighborhood and the commercial districts? How can abolitionists combat the spread of new policing technologies, such as robot cops or Flock Safety, an AI-powered private surveillance company expanding the city's use of license plate readers (Free 2025)?

Kass (2025a) highlights how, beyond the violent enforcement of exclusion (or *private property*) in general (Blomley 2003), police in Atlanta also operate to protect *police state infrastructure* through violent material and discursive maneuvers. Kass (2025a) notes how sites of police violence (e.g., the forest in which Cop City was built) become labeled by the state as places of "critical infrastructure" to enforce violent "protection" through severe repression of protestors. These properties then necessarily become "police state infrastructure, which supports and materializes police state expansion and its associated enclosure of a commons" (Kass 2025a, 8). Future research could continue to ask how policing in Atlanta functions to not only protect private property but also to build an emerging police state.

Policing Immigration

Immigration in Atlanta (and the greater southeastern U.S.) is a key element in our analysis of the expansive role of police in the 21st century. Atlanta (as well as many other Sunbelt cities) has emerged as a locus for new migration to the U.S. Consequently, these geographies are focal spaces of increased state surveillance, detention, and deportation of (un)documented migrants for the purposes of both producing and policing a gendered-racial-sexual order. The state of Georgia has the third-largest number of immigrant detainees in the nation, across six detention centers with the lowest rates of asylum granted (Muñoz 2023). The Georgia Budget and Policy Institute finds that nearly 80% of all Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detainees are housed in private detention centers (Muñoz 2023).

We find the increasing scale and scope of immigration policing to be especially pernicious in the last two and a half decades. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was established in 2002 in response to 9/11. Conflating terrorism with migration (especially across the U.S.-Mexico border), the U.S. increased its national security efforts through the creation of ICE, resulting in new cross-scalar collaborations between federal agencies and local law enforcement agencies (LEA). Of particular importance is the §287(g) Delegation of Immigration Authority program. This program encourages collaboration between ICE and LEAs to "...protect the homeland through the arrest and removal of aliens who undermine the safety of our nation's communities and the integrity of U.S. immigration laws" (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement n.d.). Today, six jurisdictions in Georgia have entered into a Memorandum of Agreement with ICE, deputizing local law enforcement *into* immigration officers (Muñoz 2023).

For instance, in Cobb and Gwinnett Counties, key hotspots in the implementation of §287(g), county officials regularly conduct racial profiling through traffic checkpoints and stops leading to detention with ICE (Stuesse and Coleman 2014). Although this collaboration

no longer exists in Cobb and Gwinnett counties, largely through the organizing of immigrants'-rights activism, coordination between ICE and other metro Atlanta counties continues (Project South n.d.). Today, President Trump has continued this program, issuing Executive Order 14159, Protecting the American People Against Invasion (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2025). Georgia is one of a few states considering mandating this collaboration (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2025). As Muñoz (2023) writes, this program is an "on-ramp to immigrant incarceration, with private prison companies incentivizing rural Georgia localities to accept immigrant detention centers in exchange for…jobs (2)."

Anti-immigrant policies in Georgia like the ban on undocumented students and Georgia House Bill 87 (Illegal Immigration Reform and Enforcement Act of 2011), the Arizona SB1070 copycat show-me-your-papers bill, have the legislative intent of creating a climate of fear and hostility by "criminalizing" undocumented and under documented residents, including those with Temporary Protected Status and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status (Freshour and Iniestra Vareles 2023). At this moment, we also seek to analyze immigration policing in relation to the current Trump administration's calls for "mass deportations," unlawful removals to foreign prisons, visa removals, and detentions of foreign students for political speech. Most recently, the U.S. Congress passed the Laken Riley Act (2025), a Georgia-grown law, mandating the detention of undocumented immigrants for *any* crime, including lower-level crimes like petty theft or shoplifting. The National Immigration Law Center argues this new law "undermines constitutional protections without providing public safety" (Altman 2025). These cross-scalar and cross-collaborative efforts at criminalizing immigration are increasing both within and beyond Atlanta. Research on policing in Atlanta must include the role of policing in immigrant communities. In future research, we ask: What are the connections between increasing anti-immigration practices, detention centers, and so-called spatial fixes that prisons purport to provide for low-income and rural economies? How are people resisting or stopping deportations? What avenues exist to combat the reach of ICE within and beyond Atlanta?

Policing Protest

In Atlanta, as elsewhere, the early years of the movement for Black lives (2014-2016), mass protests against immigrant detention during Trump's first term (2016-2019), and the 2020 George Floyd Uprisings targeted local jails, policing practices, and immigration detention policies. Examining these waves of social movement can help us understand the purpose and strategies of protest and the possibilities for abolitionist horizons. For example, after a decentralized movement to shut down the Atlanta City Detention Center in the 2010s, Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms ended the immigration detention agreement between the City and ICE, then swore in 2019 to close down the jail altogether. Yet, under Mayor Andre Dickens, the jail remains open and leases 700 beds to Fulton County, expanding the county's carceral capacity (Brasch 2022). From this loss, we ask what does the jail's persistence mean for both strategies of social control and the possibility of decarceration in Atlanta?

A similar pattern repeats in the story of Cop City. Kass (2025a) argues that Cop City and the repression against the opposition movement compose *police statecraft,* a strategy of police legitimation that marries police expansion with authoritarian repression against those who dissent. Within this framework, Cop City itself provides a continuation of the *role* of

policing, that is to protect property and enforce social, political, and territorial boundaries. However, the lengths to which the City and State of Georgia were willing to go to repress the movement to stop Cop City and ensure the project's completion reveals an increased *urgency* around the expansion and improvement of police for *social control*. Georgia Attorney General Chris Carr charged Anti-Cop City protestors with felony domestic terrorism and indictments in one of the largest Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) cases brought against protestors; the City ignored over 100,000 petition signatures calling for a referendum on the project; the City blatantly ignored environmental concerns in the "city in a forest"; and police killed land defender Manuel "Tortuguita" Paez Teran during a raid on the protest encampment (Herskind et al. 2025). From this we ask how Cop City not only reveals police statecraft, but also what can we learn from the fact that a well-organized and widespread popular activist movement, arguably the largest sustained social movement in Atlanta's post-60s history, was faced with a stubborn refusal to concede by the mayoral administration?

Writings on the movement against Cop City exemplify abolitionist horizons that have broader implications beyond Atlanta. Kass for instance highlights how "forest defenders" undermined carceral state power (2025b) and property relations (2025a) through radical place-making as they built abolitionist life-worlds. In conversation with Kass and Dunlap (2025), who find in the George Floyd Rebellion *ungovernable abolition geography*, Edgett (2025b) analyzes the repression of the Stop Cop City movement to argue for *autonomous abolition ecologies*: self-governed, direct democratic, and place-based, autonomous abolition ecologies that fill necessary social functions, replace the coercive functions of the state, and serve as groundings from which people can sustain the fight for liberatory urban futures.

These are some examples of how struggles against the carceral state have inspired scholarship on police repression and abolitionist horizons. In-depth studies of repression against Occupy Atlanta in 2011, the Black Lives Matter movement from 2013-2016, the movement against Dekalb County jail in 2019, and the Pro-Palestine student intifada at Emory University in 2024 would deepen understandings of the intricacies of policing and strategies to organize for abolition.

Conclusion

The appearance of policing may suggest that policing is an isolated problem of the excesses of state power, rank-and-file police, or individual departments. However, a rich tradition of scholarship and organizing demonstrates that policing exists to uphold social relations of domination and exploitation constitutive of racial capitalism (Camp 2016; Gilmore 2007; Schrader 2019; Vitale 2021). As we have demonstrated here, the City of Atlanta's practices of territorial capture and social control have transformed, stretched, and multiplied over the previous centuries. From our review of scholarship on Atlanta, we highlight how Atlanta's carceral institutions and practices 1) are grounded in containing and dispossessing Indigenous life, 2) function as a criminalizing response to poor and working-class Black life and rebellion, and 3) enforce ongoing Black displacement to remake Atlanta in the service of profit. We present potential areas of future research across three themes that are imperative to understanding the current moment of policing in Atlanta and beyond: property, immigration, and protest.

We do not suggest that such state violence is inevitable or fixed. Indeed, we align ourselves with the broad abolitionist movement that suggests policing and incarceration are produced and *re*produced through a set of social relations grounded in the protection and proliferation of private property and profit (Gilmore 2007). With the transformation of such social relations into life-affirming relations, policing and incarceration can be eradicated. Research on policing in Atlanta is only one step towards abolition, yet we believe that step is necessary and urgent. We hope this article on the longue durée of policing in Atlanta will equip activists to better analyze future directions of policing for abolitionist ends. We invite others to conduct research on Atlanta with and alongside us, to connect in discussing (dis)continuities of policing between cities, and to challenge our findings here and in future publications.

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