

Sarah Zanolini
PhD Student, History of Medicine
Writing in support of HB0336 to repeal the institution of a private police force by JHU

Dear Members of the Maryland State House,

I am a transplant to Baltimore, having moved here to attend Johns Hopkins University. I live blocks from Hopkins Homewood campus, and my departmental office is on the medical campus, meaning that on the surface, I am very much part of the demographic Hopkins thinks needs a private police force to feel “safe.” Yet, the senseless loss of my father to police violence decades ago has forever underscored for me that the presence of police - in my neighborhood or any neighborhood – is often anything but safe.

In the past year we’ve collectively witnessed a long-overdue national reckoning around policing in this country. We’ve seen videos of Black and Brown Americans enduring what can only be appropriately described as modern-day lynching at the hands of police. Such murders are not new. They have been woven into the fabric of policing in this country since at least the reconstruction era, when southerners discontented with the loss of their human property were allowed to construct “separate but equal” laws, using the language of “law abiding” and “law breaking” to encode racism while working around older language of racial hierarchy. Because we think of justice as blind, and law color-neutral, it is easy to forget that today in 2021 police officers are just as subject to conscious and unconscious racial biases as they were in 1921 and no amount of the “diversity training” tactics we’ve seen rolled out in recent years has lessened the actual threat posed by police to innocent bystanders – particularly when their skin is black or brown. If you have not recently, please look at the statistics gathered by the site Mapping Police Violence (<https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/>) to see my point. Every day in this country, on average, one wrongful -mortal- sentence is passed against someone without a trial by judge or jury.

If Hopkins wants to build safety in the Baltimore community, they have all of the tools to do so. Our Public Health and Education programs contain overwhelming numbers of faculty and students invested in this wonderful city and the funds currently allocated to this force could be reinvested into community programs: K-12 public education, after-school enrichment programs, community mentorship programs, drug counseling and rehabilitation programs, job training for the unemployed, and any number of other projects, all of which could be funded if Hopkins actually paid a fair share of taxes to support Baltimore City’s own efforts to make these changes. It is hard not to see Hopkins continual support for private policing (something as unpopular with their own staff and students as it is with the city community at large) as another way white supremacy encodes Blackness as deviance, with Hopkins leveraging their leadership role within Baltimore to protect whiteness and white supremacy.

The answer is never more police – let alone police accountable to a corporate master, rather than the communities they work within. If you build and arm a police force, they will shoot. Sometimes they will be justified, sometimes not. Is this the kind of society we want to build? Is this the Baltimore we want to live in? Failing to pass HB0336 when you have this chance is to be complicit in someone’s death and the long-term devastation of their family. Maybe not immediately, but based on the odds, unquestionably someday. I urge you to stand against this insidious white supremacism, and for the actual safety of everyone in our community, in voting to repeal the institution of a private police force by Johns Hopkins University.

-----SJZ, Feb. 19, 2021