

Was Black Lives Matter a failure? It depends where you look.

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Five years after the murder of George Floyd ignited the largest protests in U.S. history, many consider the Black Lives Matter movement a failure. But it misses the remarkable transformation in police practices happening where change in the criminal legal system matters most: at the state and local levels.

10 Yes, the Policing Act has languished in congressional gridlock since the summer of 2020. And the second Trump administration's attacks on diversity, along with its gutting of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, have signaled that the feds have gotten out of the business of racial justice. But if we shift the focus to state-level achievements, a different story emerges: one of measurable progress and community-driven change.

15 States have quietly become laboratories for meaningful police accountability and criminal justice reform. Consider that since 2020, more than 30 states have enacted more than 140 new laws addressing police accountability and oversight. The numbers are striking: Twenty-four states banned or restricted chokeholds, at least 13 enacted broader restrictions on use of force, and at least four have banned no-knock warrants — the practice that led to the 2020 death of 20 medical worker Breonna Taylor in Louisville. Body-camera mandates and clear usage guidelines have been implemented in numerous jurisdictions. Colorado passed comprehensive legislation that eliminated qualified immunity for police officers in state courts — making it easier for victims to seek justice when their rights are violated.

25 Data transparency — long a barrier to accountability — has improved substantially. California, Maryland and New Jersey now require detailed reporting on police encounters and use of force, with public databases that allow researchers and communities to identify problematic patterns. These tools provide the foundation for evidence-based reforms rather than reactive policymaking.

30 Most significantly, cities and states have begun thinking about public safety. Sixty-two percent of the largest U.S. cities adopted some type of alternative public safety response program. Denver's STAR program dispatches health professionals instead of police to mental health calls. Los Angeles and Austin reinvested millions of dollars from police budgets into alternative public safety programs.

35 Some activists argue that these changes don't go far enough — and they're right. Implementation remains uneven. Some reforms exist primarily on paper. Many police unions continue to resist accountability measures.

40 The stark reality is that police violence remains a blight on Black and Brown communities, and officers are rarely held accountable. Between 2013 and 2022, only 2 percent of killings by police resulted in charges against an officer. But dismissing the progress that has been made undermines the powerful grassroots organizing that made these changes possible. It also misunderstands how substantive change typically occurs in America: incrementally, state by state, creating models that eventually reach critical mass.

45 The civil rights movement didn't transform the country overnight. Neither did the struggle for women's equality or LGBTQ+ rights. Those movements saw periods of explosive visibility followed by the grinding work of institutional change — often with the most meaningful reforms, such as marriage equality, happening at the state level before federal action followed.

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