

# Detroit Police Chief Departs While Calls Intensify for Defunding and Abolishing Policing

James Craig was appointed by an illegal emergency management regime in 2013 and represented the right-wing approach to law-enforcement related to the antiracist movement.

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*Since the summer of 2020 there have been consistent calls for the resignation of Detroit police chief James Craig.*

Craig announced on May 10 that he was retiring from the Detroit Police Department (DPD) and would possibly seek the office of governor as a Republican candidate during 2022.

In the aftermath of the brutal police execution of George Floyd in Minneapolis, demonstrations erupted across the United States and the world.

Detroit was no exception to this phenomenon when thousands gathered outside the police headquarters downtown on a daily basis to denounce the murder of Floyd and other atrocities committed against African Americans and other oppressed peoples. After rallies featuring militant speeches, people would march through the downtown area and other neighborhoods in the majority African American municipality.

Although the movement in Detroit was highly politicized and disciplined, local law-enforcement officials at the aegis of the federal government under the leadership of former President Donald Trump, launched repeated attacks on antiracist demonstrators. In a matter of days, Detroit Will Breathe (DWB) was formed bringing together a wide spectrum of seasoned and new activists committed to fighting racism and police brutality.

Detroit police during late May and June of 2020 utilized an unwarranted curfew along with crowd control weapons such as mace, pepper spray, rubber bullets, clubs, concussion grenades and mass arrests in a failed attempt to halt the daily protests. DWB organizers and other were subjected to arbitrary arrests, beatings and the gross vilification of the movement by the administration of corporate Mayor Mike Duggan and police chief Craig.

Within a matter of weeks, a coalition of more than 40 organizations purchased a full-page ad in the Sunday Free Press denouncing the targeted brutality against DWB and other activists.

Although the corporate media attempted to convince the public that the Duggan administration was supported by the people of Detroit, the demonstrations continued and were warmly welcomed by communities throughout the city where they marched on a daily basis.

DWB took a strong position against the deployment of federal forces into the city under the guise of “Operation Legend”, a law-enforcement project ostensibly designed to reduce crime and provide assistance to the police department. A U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Michigan openly stated on a local news program that the federal government was paying the salaries of more than 30 local police officers as part of the project.

Chief Craig became a darling of FOX News while former President Trump described him as “terrific.” Meanwhile, as part of Trump’s plans to crush the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) and its counterparts around the U.S., former Attorney General William G. Barr visited Detroit during August and was given a helicopter tour by Craig.

Several days later, police viciously attacked hundreds of DWB demonstrators and spectators on Woodward avenue in the heart of downtown. People were beaten severely and arrested on spurious charges. Videotaped accounts of this incident on August 22-23, was widely circulated on social media and through various corporate entities.

A group of progressive civil rights lawyers formed a committee along with DWB activists taking their claims of brutality into federal court. Within a matter of day, the federal court had issued a temporary restraining order (TRO) on the DPD. In addition, the suit demanded compensation for the damages incurred through illegal arrests, beatings and falsification of evidence.

### A History of Racist Policing

The finding of a recent study conducted by the University of Michigan further reiterated what has been common knowledge for many years that the DPD was firmly rooted in racism and unjustifiable use of lethal force. The research report was based upon archived police and court records along with media accounts of killings by law-enforcement between 1957-1973. (See [this](#))

During this time period, Detroit was in demographic transition where hundreds of thousands of whites were relocating to suburban areas as well as leaving the city and state altogether. The policy of successive mayoral administrations in the post-World War II period were openly designed to contain the African American population in Detroit in a manner in which their political representation and economic growth would be ruthlessly suppressed.

After the 1943 racial unrest and the conclusion of the War, a Detroit urban renewal plan took effect extending from the late 1940s to the 1960s. Entire neighborhoods and small commercial districts were destroyed forcing hundreds of thousands to relocate while abolishing jobs and social institutions which would never be fully recovered.

Nonetheless, the consistent racist municipal governance strategies prompted outrage which exploded during the early morning hours of July 23, 1967. The following week represented the largest and most violent urban rebellion in the history of the U.S. which was led by African Americans. By 1973, the city would elect its first African American Mayor Coleman Young, a veteran labor organizer and communist who instituted affirmative action within the

civil service and the police while attempting to recorrect decades of discrimination and exploitation.

The police in Detroit were a key element in enforcing the racist divisions related to unequal job opportunities, city services and access to public offices. Black people were routinely stopped, frisked, beaten, jailed, framed and murdered by the police. By 1972-73, the city was on the verge of another rebellion, perhaps even more violent, when the Young administration took power after the November 1973 municipal elections.

An article published by the Boston Review discusses the U-M Study entitled “Detroit Under Fire: Police Violence, Crime Politics, and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Civil Rights Era.” The research report includes the mapping of police violence in Detroit during the time period in question.

The [Boston Review analysis](#) by Matthew D. Lassiter says:

“Anyone seeking to give a complete accounting of the history of Detroit police violence faces significant hurdles. We know that DPD officers killed at least 219 civilians between 1957 and 1973, but this is definitely an undercount. The real number is unknown and ultimately unknowable. There is not even an official public tally of killings by on-duty officers, and the identities of their victims can only be uncovered through fortunate discoveries in non-police archives, including newspapers.... Revisiting the civil rights era in the urban North is a good place to start because activists went to extraordinary lengths to document police violence and to demand community control over the systems designed to disguise and justify it.”

Defunding and the Abolition of Policing: A Foundational Component of African American Liberation

Although Craig’s resignation is a manifestation of the movement which has gained momentum over the last year, it will by no means end police misconduct and brutality in Detroit. Craig’s announcement of his allegiance to the Republican Party does not surprise activists. His close affinity with the Trump administration and the corporate rulers of Detroit such as Dan Gilbert’s Quicken Loans and Illitch Holdings, is also shared by Duggan, who self-identifies as a Democrat.

Both Duggan and Craig are functionaries of the racist capitalist system which is committed to the continuing national oppression and super exploitation of African Americans and other people of color communities. Duggan’s installation as mayor during the illegal emergency management and bankruptcy of Detroit in 2013-2014 was an integral part of the ruling class aims of maintaining the control of the banks and multinational corporations over the city.

With the municipal elections of 2021 taking place in August and November, Duggan is seeking to put distance between himself and Craig. However, his class bias in favor of the ruling interests can never be doubted.

Just days prior to the departure of Craig, the Moratorium NOW! Coalition (MNC) issued a statement demanding his resignation. This effort came in the aftermath of Craig’s attacks on U.S. Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib of the 13th District, demanding her resignation for stating that policing, as has been historically known in the U.S., should be abolished.

The [MNC statement](#) said:

“Craig betrays our trust; and his actions, his comments, and in particular his police department’s policies and practices, harm the residents of Detroit. As an employee of the City of Detroit, Craig is using public resources to attack our elected official. This is unethical. Where is the Mayor of Detroit? Why is Mayor Duggan allowing his appointee to go rogue? Is Craig speaking for the Mayor? We join the many community groups who last year called for Chief Craig’s resignation. We, the residents of Detroit, call for Chief Craig’s resignation today! Chief Craig has taken positions against the people of Detroit. Report after report cites Detroit Police Department’s harmful treatment of Black Lives Matter protesters. The City even took protesters to court in a failed attempt to intimidate the movement. The City and Chief Craig did not prevail in court.”

Progressive forces in Detroit have welcomed Craig’s resignation. However, the struggle to end racist policing will continue in the city and around the U.S.

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*Featured image: Detroit May Day 2021 march with Moratorium NOW! Coalition, Detroit Will Breathe, among others (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)*

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