

Backlash to police reform in full swing

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USA TODAY

Every time a Black person is killed by police, Minneapolis native Alicia Crudup thinks about her boys.

The 42-year-old is a married mother of six sons, ages 11 to 21. She runs a nonprofit that mentors kids and pairs them with role models in the community.

When George Floyd was killed on May 25, 2020, during America's coronavirus lockdown, Crudup remembers a downpour of commitments too numerous to count. Fortune 500 corporations made gigantic financial pledges and tiny arts groups were hired to install Black Lives Matter murals on public spaces, all stating that this tragedy represented a spark to eliminate racial disparities.

See BACKLASH, Page 4A

Backlash

Continued from Page 1A

“There was an opportunity here and across the country to enact change in many areas, long-lasting change,” Crudup told USA TODAY.

But “I feel like we really missed an opportunity to do that,” she said. “All of the talk was really just that – a lot of talk.”

Now, instead of historic achievements, she lists setbacks. That fatigue and frustration is echoed by dozens of voters, community activists, civil rights leaders, scholars and elected officials who spoke with USA TODAY four years after Floyd was suffocated by a white officer’s knee to the neck.

They say the legacy of Floyd’s murder is an example of not just a resistance to police accountability but a larger and sophisticated backlash movement that quashes any attempts at racial justice.

“I have mixed emotions because I hear from some who remain committed. I hear from others deafening silence,” said Marc Morial, president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League. “I see evidence of backlash in many quarters, and I feel in many parts of Black America the idea is, ‘Here we go again.’”

The counter-actions over the past four years are widespread, observers say, such as the Supreme Court knocking down affirmative action admissions policies used to diversify college campuses, Republican-led legislatures stamping out Black history courses in public education and the closure of offices that promoted diversity, equity and inclusion.

Even symbolic wins aren’t safe, experts say, highlighting opposition to “Lift Every Voice and Sing” – often referred to as the Black national anthem – being sung at sporting events and a Virginia school board moving to restore the names of Confederate leaders to two local schools.

And last year, the police killed more Americans than any other year on record.

Jason Williams, an associate professor of justice studies at Montclair State University in New Jersey, said there’s been a “very major backlash.”

“I think ground zero for that project is our colleges and universities, where entire DEI departments have been dispersed,” Williams said.

The failure of Congress to pass a



In May 2020, George Floyd was murdered by police outside this Minneapolis convenience store. His death sparked nationwide protests over police brutality.

SAM WOODWARD/USA TODAY

sweeping reform package in 2021, dubbed the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, spurred candidates and elected officials to use “cultural politics as a political football,” Williams said. It is almost certain to bleed into the 2024 presidential contest.

“This sort of repression against the George Floyd effort is on steroids, especially now considering that we’re in an election cycle where the GOP is using that very movement as part of the ammo to their base,” he said.

But amid widespread pessimism, some police reform advocates point to flickering progress. Those still in the trenches say local and state efforts to establish alternative public safety models show that Floyd’s ghastly death was not completely in vain.

A ‘very sad event,’ then inaction

In the immediate aftermath of the viral video showing Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on Floyd’s neck for 9 minutes, 29 seconds, according to state prosecutors, Washington appeared ready to unclench its partisan fists.

Then-President Donald Trump, who rarely criticized police action, called the murder a “very sad event” in a tweet on May 27, 2020. “Justice will be served,” he said.

Fifty-eight percent of Americans

polled in a July 2020 Gallup survey said policing needed “major changes.” Another 36% said at least minor changes were required. Just 6% said the country should do nothing.

Even after Trump lost reelection, there was a bipartisan commitment with Sens. Tim Scott, R-S.C., and Cory Booker, D-N.J., launching a yearlong quest to draft a police reform bill that the Senate could agree upon. It eventually foundered: irreconcilable differences, changing political winds.

More broadly, led by a fiercely right-wing counter-movement, Floyd was recast from victim to boogeyman embodying the social ills some associate with America’s cities. His death, GOP critics said, paved the way for looting and violence led by left-wing radicals.

That sentiment remains prevalent among conservatives on Capitol Hill today. Police officers, these lawmakers say, have been the ones mistreated and targeted by violence since 2020.

“I hate that our entire police force is connected to George Floyd all the time,” Rep. Lauren Boebert, R-Colo., said recently.

“Police protect this country. We support our officers now more than ever,” Rep. Ralph Norman, R-Pa., said ahead of a House vote.

Republican Christopher DeCruze, 39, of Trumbull, Connecticut, believes the 2020 summer may have been “counter-

productive.” It led, he thinks, to “an increase in crime.”

The Republican-controlled House flexed its law-and-order might during this month’s National Police Week by passing several bills backing the blue. GOP lawmakers won approval for laws that require the quick arrest and deportation of any immigrant accused of assaulting a law enforcement officer, undermine changes the D.C. City Council made to sentencing rules and youth offender status and require the attorney general to submit a report on violent attacks against law enforcement officers.

“We’re obviously trying to move legislation to support police officers and stand with cops,” said Rep. Chip Roy, R-Texas. “We stand firmly behind police.”

Outside of Congress, Republicans on the ballot this fall are using “defund the police” as a wedge issue. The slogan became common among the political left during the Floyd protests, but Democrats have long since abandoned it.

Other GOP officials, however, said that while their support for law enforcement is solid, additional reforms in terms of training and other procedures are worthwhile for Congress to pursue.

“We’ve always got to improve and by improving we’ll instill more confidence in the general public. We need everybody to have an understanding that 96% of police are good people,” said Rep. Dan Meuser, R-Pa.

Meuser noted that Americans are anxious about crime – which rose during the pandemic, though it has since fallen – with 63% describing it as either extremely or very serious, according to an October 2023 Gallup survey. He said rather than fueling trends that could worsen police-community bonds, policymakers should look to mend those relationships.

Fear of crime vs. racial justice

Rosemary Nevils Williams, of Minneapolis, thought Floyd’s murder would be a wake-up call for her hometown as well as the country.

She said enough hasn’t been done to repair what has been broken between the city’s Black and Indigenous communities and law enforcement.

“It has to definitely change,” she said. “It can’t go on the way it is.”

Nevils Williams, a 75-year-old retired teacher and social worker, said seeking

Continued on next page