The Boston Black United Front and Community-Centered Alternatives to the Carceral State

Joseph W. Sikowitz

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THE BOSTON BLACK UNITED FRONT AND COMMUNITY-CENTERED ALTERNATIVES TO THE CARCERAL STATE

A Thesis Presented

by

JOSEPH W. SIKOWITZ

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THE BOSTON BLACK UNITED FRONT AND COMMUNITY-CENTERED
ALTERNATIVES TO THE CARCERAL STATE

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This thesis is a history of the Boston Black United Front’s (BBUF) activities combatting the growing carceral state in Massachusetts in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The BBUF was an “umbrella” organization within Boston’s Black community during the Black Power era and was particularly active on issues of police shootings, court appointments, prison reform, and street crime. This thesis examines these aspects of the carceral state, the network of criminal justice institutions that arose following World War II in Boston, and shows that the BBUF were responding to the early stages of this trend. Committees, rallies, and ideology were early methods utilized by the BBUF to unite their community. These tactics were later built upon as the group mounted an opposition to the carceral state and presented community-centered alternatives to punitive solutions to poverty.
Specific rallying points for the BBUF were four police shootings of unarmed Black men, judicial appointments, prison reform, and BBUF street patrols in the South End, Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan neighborhoods. In the end, the BBUF saw some success, but failed to prevent the carceral state’s growth. Their history, however, dispels many long-held assumptions about Black communities and the carceral state and adds a unique perspective to the history of Boston.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The confluence of urban renewal, economic decline, demographic change, and racism in Boston led to an increasing reliance on punitive solutions for the problems of poverty in the 1960s and 1970s. Black Bostonians bore the brunt of this carceral transformation, and continue to do so today. Finding little relief in established white institutions at the beginning of this carceral turn, the Boston Black United Front (BBUF) organized a years-long, community-based response. This thesis examines that response and reveals that Boston’s Black population were significantly impacted by the growing carceral state.

As an idea, the BBUF emerged after Stokely Carmichael’s December 1967 speech at the Roxbury YMCA, in which he urged Black communities across America to form united fronts in their communities to counter the coming backlash against the civil rights movement.¹ Many local organizers who had participated in previous social movements in Boston began meeting shortly after Carmichael’s speech to discuss his concept, but it remained largely that—a concept—until the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968. As in many Black communities across America, Dr. King’s killing jolted Boston’s Black activists to organize in the fashion Carmichael had advocated. Their efforts found a ready willingness among even the more traditional elements of the community to

¹ Chuck Turner, interview by Carly Caroli, March 2016, Boston, MA.
coordinate on self-defense, policing, economic development, education, housing, and politics. The BBUF was created as a result. A self-described “umbrella organization” of individuals and organizations, the BBUF was formed by activists and everyday residents who found common cause through the BBUF’s work despite ideological divisions.

While Carmichael’s speech and Dr. King’s assassination galvanized the formation of the BBUF, national figures and events should not obscure the vibrancy that already existed among Boston’s Black activists in the 1960s. School reform had already spurred a great deal of action, including the “Stay Out for Freedom” protests of 1963, which saw thousands of students temporarily refuse to attend classes to draw attention to the abysmal condition of the public schools that Black students attended. Housing was likewise an issue that saw a great deal of Black activism throughout the 1960s with groups like the Community Assembly for a United South End (CAUSE) pressuring the city and construction companies for more equity in urban development. On the economic front, 1963 saw activists organizing boycotts of businesses that were known to discriminate against African Americans. These actions delivered concrete gains in some cases—job offers to members of the Black community—and raised general awareness of the obstacles that Black Bostonians faced.

Protests for economic justice coincided with police brutality in what became known in the Black community as the Police Riots during the summer of 1967. The impetus for these violent confrontations were demonstrations by Mothers for Adequate Welfare (MAW).

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3 “Statement of Purpose,” Boston, MA: Boston Black United Front, n.d. SC1, Box 1. Roxbury Community College Library Special Collections.
4 King, Chain, 30-78.
Having agitated peacefully since 1965 for welfare reform, MAW began a nonviolent sit-in at the Welfare Department in Roxbury. On the second day of protests, however, things took a violent turn. Demonstrators were attacked by police attempting to break up the gathering. This violence then spilled over into looting and arson in the commercial areas of Blue Hill Avenue. Chuck Turner, later a co-chairman of the BBUF, was deeply involved in organizing MAW. The violent response of police to peaceful demands for social and economic justice would inform his and other members of the BBUF’s views as they confronted similar iniquities in coming years. As both MAW actions and Turner’s involvement show, the formation of the BBUF did not happen *sui generis*. Instead, the organization’s founding was the culmination of national and local events, and the next phase of a robust activist community already at work in Boston.

As this thesis examines the BBUF’s actions, impact, and legacy, six key insights emerge. One is that both the carceral state and street crime were concerns for Boston’s Black community in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Historians have often posited that these two trends were mutually exclusive or that the latter caused the former. The history of the BBUF shows that it was possible to be concerned with both. BBUF leadership saw the interrelationship between the two, but did not assume more policing and prisons would solve crimes driven by poverty. This awareness among BBUF activists also demonstrates the Black community’s historical agency on matters of criminal justice, another area sorely missing in much of the literature.

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6 King, *Chain*, 57-9.
A second insight that this thesis reveals is the degree of community cohesion present among members of Boston’s Black community during the BBUF era. Several decades of community activism and shared lived experiences led them to find common cause against the burgeoning carceral state. Without cohesion from these historical elements, an organization would have struggled to be effective. The degree of community cohesion exhibited also speaks to the ongoing and long-term effects of racist policing and punitive policies against a targeted segment of the population. Living in a community under threat of violence from those who were in charge of safety had a powerful effect on group identity and self-reliance.

Third is the inextricable relationship between racism and economics, and the ways this connection affects policing, incarceration, and crime. Boston’s Black community was targeted for control through the carceral state more than other communities because of a history of racist economic exclusion. A vicious cycle of racism and impoverishment fed on itself, and in the late 1960s a punitive solution to this poverty replaced the state’s former focus on welfare.

A fourth insight uncovered by this thesis is the degree to which the BBUF’s media-based activities prefigured much of the online activism of today. The BBUF were savvy users of newspapers, rallies, posters, and other forms of communication that mirrored ways racial justice activists use today’s media landscape. The BBUF’s tactics in this area, like those of individuals and organizations working on similar issues today, raise important questions about the ethical limits of using various media for a cause. For one, do marginalized groups have a right to communicate messages not sanctioned by mainstream power brokers? If so, how far can they take their alternative views? Even if one agrees with a
group’s overall challenge to the status quo, the means by which that challenge is put forth may not be considered ethical by all.

Fifth, this thesis shows the degree to which the BBUF was willing to pursue different avenues simultaneously to affect change. Often, the group attempted to work with city and state power holders while at the same time attempting to deal with issues of policing, courts, prisons, and crime themselves. Many Black Power groups of the time were seen as hostile to authority, whereas the BBUF was not. The BBUF did not neatly fit into the Black Power movement, even though it was formed during the Black Power era and adopted much of its rhetoric.

A sixth and final insight apparent in this thesis is that the BBUF understood the systemic nature of the carceral state. BBUF leaders made connections between economics, crime, racism, policing, urban renewal, incarceration, government, and community. These are interrelated facets of the carceral state that many scholars and much of the public did not understand until recently. For BBUF activists, reform of one of these components of the carceral state alone would not yield a new relationship with the state for Black Bostonians. Rather, comprehensive changes were needed. The BBUF offered a community-centered alternative model as a potential replacement for the carceral state. Ultimately, as compelling as the BBUF vision was for many Black Bostonians, it failed to prevent mass incarceration, police brutality, and other manifestations of the carceral state. Their failure demonstrates the limitations of community-based actions against systemic social problems.

After a year in which Black Lives Matter (BLM) protesters marched on state houses across the nation, the legacy of the BBUF and its efforts to radically reform the criminal justice system
justice system have never been more relevant. Just as the BBUF marched, issued demands to city officials, investigated police brutality, and took criminal justice into their own hands in a variety of ways, today’s BLM activists are similarly challenging the foundations of the carceral state by demanding police, prison, and social reform.

At the same time, significant differences of scale, urban racial diversity, and legacies of Black activism separate the BBUF and BLM challenges to the carceral state. When the BBUF began its attempts to find justice for Black Bostonians in the late 1960s, the carceral state was in its infancy, with mass incarceration rates and federal spending on policing just beginning to grow. In contrast, BLM activists are now seeking to reform or abolish a system that has had fifty years to mature and now employs hundreds of thousands, imprisons millions, and has supporters across the political spectrum and throughout legislatures across the nation.\(^7\) Cities today are also more diverse than they were during the earlier period and so racial justice protesters and activists come from more diverse backgrounds.

While these differences are significant, they do not detract from the historical importance of understanding the successes and failures of the BBUF. Balancing cooperation and resistance with the carceral state, use of various media to promote movements for justice, and uniting local communities behind a cause are all as relevant today as they were then. Indeed, the legacy of the BBUF is only becoming more important in the third decade of the twenty-first century and therefore it demands a robust historical accounting.

The second chapter of this thesis explores the historical context of the BBUF and puts an emerging historical literature on the origins of the carceral state in conversation with urban histories of Boston. Economic decline, urban renewal, the Second Great Migration, and racism are explored as the forces that led to the growth of Boston’s carceral state. Social movements within Boston’s African American community are also examined as a source of historical precedent for the BBUF. Finally, the second chapter connects the African American history of Boston to the BBUF’s rhetorical and operational responses to the carceral state. The third chapter explores BBUF concepts, organizing tactics, ideology, and rallies that incorporated the rhetoric and operations discussed in chapter two. The fourth chapter examines BBUF actions on police shootings, court reform, prison reform, and community security, connecting the historical context of chapter two with the actions and rhetoric of chapter three. In chapter five, the conclusion, the thesis draws together all of the elements from preceding chapters to offer insights into the historical relevance of the BBUF’s struggle with the carceral state.
CHAPTER 2

THE GROWTH OF THE CARCERAL STATE IN MASSACHUSETTS

After World War II, urban areas across the United States saw changes in the relationships between Black communities and the collection of criminal justice institutions known as the carceral state. Restructuring of capital, urban renewal projects, the Second Great Migration, and racism all shaped an urban landscape in which the state increasingly looked to punitive solutions for the problems associated with poverty. Over the past decade, historians have analyzed how today’s carceral state took shape both in national policies and particular cities, like New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago.

In Boston, where the Black community accounted for less than ten percent of the population prior to the 1960s, capital restructuring and urban renewal did not initially target Black Bostonians to the degree they did in other cities. However, as Boston’s Black population doubled and thousands of white Bostonians left the city over the course of that decade, the effects of the carceral state grew. Incidents of police brutality, unfair sentencing in the courts, a growing prison population, and declining safety in Black neighborhoods were becoming a regular part of life in the South End, Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan.

While Boston had a long history of Black activism prior to the late 1960s, no organization directly or systematically addressed the effects of the carceral state in the Black community until the BBUF was formed in 1968. Perceiving the interrelated nature of urban decline, the criminal justice system, and racism, the BBUF protested, sought reforms where
possible, developed rhetoric rooted in Black Power, and served as a surrogate local
government when the city of Boston failed to justly serve its Black residents.

The historical context in which the BBUF arose was shaped by the societal changes
that took place in the 1950s and 1960s. In response to these changes, policymakers and
politicians began to rely on policing and incarceration rather than social supports for the most
vulnerable citizens. In this context, the BBUF’s criminal justice work shows that a lack of
jobs, education, housing, and healthcare for Boston’s Black community were the drivers of
poverty and crime, and that a punitive solution would not solve the underlying issues. The
organizational capacities of the BBUF were developed with these concerns in mind and
unleashed in response to over-policing, declining safety, and increasing entanglements for
Black Bostonians with Massachusetts’ carceral apparatus.

Evidence of the effects of the carceral trend on Boston’s Black community is
nowhere more apparent than in the rates of incarceration for various racial groups in
Massachusetts. While contact with police officers is the likeliest point in the carceral system
for violence, prisons are the point at which the failures of the justice system to protect all
citizens truly come to light. By the end of the 1970s, Massachusetts was imprisoning African
Americans at approximately six times the rate of whites, a ratio that remains intact today. 8
There were increases in this ratio during the 1980s and 1990s, but the overall point is that
Black citizens in Massachusetts were and are imprisoned in vastly disproportionate numbers
compared to white residents.

Another indicator of the power of the carceral state in Boston is the budget of the
Boston Police Department (BPD) compared to other city departments. The force’s fiscal year

8 “Incarceration Trends in Massachusetts,” Vera Institute of Justice, December 2019,
2020-2021 budget was $414,182,025. That amount is ten times larger than the library budget, fifteen times larger than the budget for neighborhood development and one-hundred eighty-two times larger than the budget for the arts. Today’s carceral conditions began in the urban changes that occurred in the postwar period and led to a punitive shift in the state. The BBUF’s anti-carceral state activities were the Black community’s early answer.

**Economic Decline in Boston, 1945-1980**

Boston, like other urban areas of New England, experienced an industrial and economic decline during the Great Depression and that continued apace following World War II. Key industries like leather and footwear moved out of the region while shipyards closed. The end of the war economy also had an impact, with the cancellation of war contracts and the ensuing decline in the machinery and tooling industries. Within the city limits of Boston, the overall decline was exacerbated by the movement of capital and jobs from the inner city to the suburbs. The burgeoning electronics industry, in particular, grew along the Route 128 corridor rather than in the heart of the city. This sent the city into a spiral where city income declined while taxes were raised, further incentivizing businesses to leave for cheaper locations.

By the early 1950s, many white Bostonians were abandoning the inner city for the jobs and housing that were available in the suburbs, leaving city structures to deteriorate. Boston's economic situation affected working-class communities across the city, but by the 1960s, continuing economic restructuring and suburbanization disproportionately touched

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9 Lauren Chambers, “Unpacking the Boston Police Budget,” American Civil Liberties Union Massachusetts, [https://data.aclum.org/2020/06/05/unpacking-the-boston-police-budget/](https://data.aclum.org/2020/06/05/unpacking-the-boston-police-budget/).


11 O’Connor, 72-3.
Black residents. Populating a significant portion of the low-wage sector of the workforce, they were particularly subject to changes in the prevailing economic winds.¹²

Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s analysis of postwar California in *Golden Gulag* provides a useful framework for understanding the impact these economic changes had on Boston and the carceral turn that most affected its Black citizens. While the two economies had similarities and differences, the effects of the changes fueled a carceral approach to poverty in both cases. Crucial to Gilmore’s theoretical framework is what the author outlines as the shift from the Keynesian welfare state to a much less forgiving form of capitalism. This change is described as one from the “welfare-warfare” state to the “workfare-warfare” state, where, as care for the most vulnerable members of society devolved from federal to state governments, the latter turned toward policing and incarceration as the remedy for the declining economic prospects under the post-Keynesian economic outlook.¹³

Boston, like parts of California, saw war industry contracts dry up in the 1950s, and with them, industrial jobs. The movement of business and middle-class taxpayers in Boston from the inner city to the suburbs likewise mirrored the disruptive effects that capital had in California. By the late 1960s, the retreat of the federal government’s welfare initiatives devolved responsibility for the most vulnerable to Massachusetts and Boston. For the city, the solution for these problems became growing the carceral state.¹⁴

Gilmore’s work helped launch the carceral perspective in historical studies from which this thesis draws its analytical framing. Other scholars have built on this foundation to

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¹⁴ On the defense industry and suburbanization in Boston see O’Connor; on the decline of welfare in Boston see Fischer; on the lack of economic opportunity for Black Bostonians see Mel King.
add more complexity to the framework. John Clegg and Adaner Usmani argue against overemphasizing race in the causes of mass incarceration in favor of economics. In developing this argument, the authors first point to a statistical jump in violent crime in the 1960s. Clegg and Usmani then draw attention to the weakness of the American working-class as a political bloc, arguing that as a result necessary resources were not adequately redistributed from the top of the economic hierarchy to the bottom, provoking local authorities into taking a punitive approach to a rise in crime in poor communities. Thus, the turn toward punishment, rather than social reform, was the result of economic forces and the weakness of the American welfare state. To bolster their argument, Clegg and Usmani draw from economics, education, and public opinion statistics to demonstrate these historical trends.\(^\text{15}\)

In a rebuttal called “Materializing Race: On Capitalism and Mass Incarceration,” Jack Norton and David Stein argue that Clegg and Usmani overemphasized and oversimplified the connections between a hypothetically stronger United States welfare state and a smaller carceral state. Norton and Stein do not disagree that unfettered capitalism has contributed to the rapid growth of mass incarceration in the United States, but argue that race is integral to understanding class and economics. It cannot be disaggregated and posited as a secondary cause. Crime, too, in Norton and Stein’s refutation is integrated with economics and race, and should not to be dismissed or overemphasized in any analysis.\(^\text{16}\) The authors of “Materializing Race” argue for an intersectional analysis of the carceral state that incorporates race, class, and other aspects of society rather than the distillation of a particular

component of society like economics alone. This is not so much a complete refutation of Clegg and Usmani’s view as a case for a richer, more complex analysis of the carceral state.

Unlike Clegg and Usmani or Norton and Stein, Elizabeth Hinton’s book, From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America, traces the history of mass incarceration to the political environment born of the Great Society. In Hinton’s assessment, mass incarceration was, perversely, the byproduct of the growth of the welfare state and a reaction to the civil rights movement. The same progressive reformers who sought to end racial discrimination and poverty also tied crime prevention into their program. Major aspects of this shift, according to Hinton, were the growth of “scientific” approaches to criminal behavior and increased funding from the federal government. These approaches were ultimately flawed to begin with as they overemphasized crime in African American neighborhoods, further reinforcing the surveillance, detention, segregation, and impoverishment of Black citizens. Hinton’s analysis recognizes the significant role the federal government played in the early days of the carceral state in a manner that differs from Gilmore. The War on Poverty and ensuing federal policies certainly played a role in shaping policing in the 1960s and 1970s, but, like economics, do not entirely explain the changes that occurred. Rather, the federal government helped shape capital’s shift away from inner cities, and the increased support for policing was a byproduct of the earlier swing away from Keynesianism.

Economic decline in Boston in the postwar period and its disproportionate effects on African Americans defines part of the historical landscape of the BBUF. Poverty was a concern for the organization, but the response by the state to the effects of poverty was even

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more important. As increased policing and incarceration were favored as methods to control the poor, the BBUF connected the injustices of poverty and this type of state intervention. At the same time, the BBUF also sought to combat the increased crime within the Black community that resulted from a lack of economic opportunity. Economics acted together with urban renewal, demographic change, and racism, but was not far from the minds of the BBUF leadership as they confronted the issues presented by the carceral state.

**Urban Renewal in Boston, 1950-1970s**

In his inaugural speech as mayor on January 2, 1950, John Hynes promised to create a “New Boston.” His plan, in part, would utilize slum clearance with the aid of federal funding. Hynes’ tenure kicked off a new era in which the machine politics of Mayor James Michael Curley gave way to a business-friendly administration. The physical transformation of the city promised economic revitalization to the bankers and business leaders that Hynes courted.

Intertwined with the business interests now dominating City Hall in the 1950s was the designation of “blight” given to particular areas of the city by local banks. This policy, known as redlining, caused significant political and economic damage to these neighborhoods. Redlining, as historians define it today, began in the 1930s when the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) commissioned local real estate boards to produce color-coded maps of cities to determine their desirability for investment. Systemic disinvestment, beginning in the 1930s, eventually rendered whole neighborhoods fit for the wrecking ball, a process of state-sponsored redevelopment that opened them to private capital.

Dominated by white men, Boston’s banks considered the areas with the greatest numbers of Black residents like the South End, Dorchester, and Roxbury to be the most
blighted. But Black neighborhoods were considered blighted only because they did not have the businesses or upper-class populations that banks wanted in order to justify investment. This then became a self-fulfilling prophecy in which middle class people moved outside of the city for lower mortgage rates and jobs, further impoverishing those neighborhoods that actually needed investment the most. City services suffered, as well, which left garbage on the streets and led infrastructure to decline. Even downtown Boston by the 1950s was considered a blighted area by many of these banks.

Slum clearance and the remaking of “blighted” areas would provide an opening for business investment in Boston, but at a cost to the most marginalized residents in the city. The West End and New York Streets areas were two sections of Boston that saw radical redevelopment as part of this process.\(^{18}\) The former was a mostly white area and the latter more racially mixed. Urban renewal in Boston demonstrated an indifference and hostility to working class communities as their neighborhoods were selected to be cleared and rebuilt.

Boston’s small, tight-knit Black community avoided the comprehensive neighborhood clearance that residents faced in the mostly white West End. Nonetheless, by the 1960s, Black Bostonians were increasingly feeling the effects of urban renewal. As their population in Boston doubled over the course of a mere decade, it did so in a city that had eliminated thousands of units of housing for working-class residents. In Roxbury, the heart of the Black community, clearance projects had begun for two highways, the Inner Belt and the Southwest Expressway.\(^{19}\) Neither one was ultimately built, in part, because of a coalition of activists that included the BBUF. Boston’s integrated South End was spared total clearance,

\(^{19}\) Karilyn Crockett, *People Before Highways: Boston Activists, Urban Planners, and a New Movement for City Making* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 164-95.
however, redevelopment projects there still brought struggles for Black community leaders to rally against, including BBUF stalwart Mel King. Leaders like King demanded community-controlled affordable housing rather than the middle-income redevelopment that targeted the white professional class.\textsuperscript{20}

By the 1960s, despite the Black community’s efforts, redevelopment in Boston shifted from slum clearance to subsidizing and encouraging private investment, driving the newly diagnosed problem of gentrification. This process replaced Black South Enders with an influx of white newcomers. Many longtime residents of that neighborhood were forced to move into more cramped and less desirable parts of Roxbury.\textsuperscript{21} At the same time, the professionals who gentrified formerly Black neighborhoods demanded an increased police presence in the name of safety. In this way, displacement was the first step, followed by more policing.

Another effect of urban renewal was to empower white enclaves, often at the expense of Black residents. The urban renewal that also affected white ethnic neighborhoods in Boston led residents of those neighborhoods to organize politically and for their own interests. This shifted divisions within city politics from ones of religion and ethnicity to those of race and class. The declining support from the federal government for welfare programs (beginning in the late 1960s) exacerbated this situation, putting white and Black groups at odds over state and city services.\textsuperscript{22}

Increased policing and incarceration were then grafted onto this already volatile situation. As Gilmore observes, by the late 1960s, the decline in federal support for inner city

\textsuperscript{20} Vrabel, \textit{People’s History}, 101-11.
\textsuperscript{21} Vrabel, 110.
\textsuperscript{22} O’Connor, \textit{Building}, 290-6 and King, \textit{Chain}, 64-78.
populations left states and municipalities to deal with the problems of poverty. Business interests, too, wanted slum clearance, an end to blight, and the perception that their newly renewed neighborhoods would not have the type of people that would make them undesirable to professionals and other moneyed buyers.

Anne Gray Fischer in “‘The Place is Gone!’” illuminates the causal relationship between the over-policing of Black Bostonians—particularly Black women—and the mid-century urban renewal project. The author’s work demonstrates that African Americans in downtown Boston’s red-light district, colloquially known as the Combat Zone—an area that emerged when the “old” red light district, Scollay Square, was cleared for urban renewal—were disproportionately targeted by the police in order to make the area more amenable to white capital interests that were developing the area.\(^{23}\) The connections made by Fischer between capital, urban renewal, policing, and racism demonstrate that these were all interrelated forces that converged on Boston’s African Americans more than other groups. While the author’s focus is on Black women in particular, the BBUF’s activism around police shootings, courts, prisons, and neighborhood safety supplement what Fischer found to be an increasing part of the Black experience in Boston in the 1960s and 1970s.

Arnold Hirsch’s *Making the Second Ghetto* analyzes the effects of urban renewal on postwar Chicago, but nonetheless points out similar dynamics to those that were occurring in Boston. White flight to the suburbs, an expansion of Chicago’s Black population, and urban renewal both expanded and further impoverished the “ghetto,” the segregated section of Chicago where the city’s Black population lived. Urban economic decline was met with reactions from both business interests and lower-class white populations. The former drove

\(^{23}\) Fischer, “Place,” 20.
urban redevelopment projects to clear slums and invest capital while the latter group rioted and attacked Black Chicagoans over and over again from the 1940s to the 1960s. In Hirsch’s telling, “the process of reconstruction, which saw blacks treated as objects rather than as participants, revealed their powerlessness.”\textsuperscript{24}

So too were Boston’s Black residents marginalized by economic decline followed by redevelopment along racial lines. Most famously, these tensions erupted into the anti-busing movement in 1970s Boston, but historians have made connections between the earlier changes wrought by urban renewal and the later fight to protect white neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{25} To working-class white Bostonians, economic restructuring had only benefited elites and urban renewal had robbed them of their neighborhoods. The racism and interethnic friction that led white Bostonians to violently reject busing—itsel driven by economic decline and urban renewal—likewise contributed to the escalating role the carceral state played in the lives of Boston’s Black community.

**The Second Great Migration and Urban Change in Boston, 1960s**

Over the course of the 1960s Boston underwent drastic demographic changes. Much of that change came from those who left the South as part of the Second Great Migration. Still underway in the 1960s, this growth in Boston’s Black population, combined with economic decline, urban renewal, and racism, made their community a more significant target for increased policing and incarceration. In a 1961 report published by the U.S. Department of Commerce’s Bureau of the Census, African Americans only comprised 9.06

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percent of the population of Boston. By 1971, African Americans’ share of the city’s population had grown to 18.15 percent. Coupled with this increase was a decline in the city’s overall white population from 90.2 percent to 81.8 percent. These local trends—growing African American populations and declining white ones—were indicative of larger national trends for urban areas. Many African Americans moved to northern cities from the South for jobs and greater freedom, while white urban residents fled to the suburbs in what was deemed “white flight.” Boston was no different and these major population shifts would contribute to the shape of activism in the 1960s and 1970s.

From one perspective, Black citizens’ control at the municipal level due to the rapid growth of their population and the decline of Boston’s white population could have provided a larger bloc upon which political and economic power could be built. Boston had seen such enlargements in power by ethnic groups in earlier eras, most notably by the Irish during the reign of Mayor James Michael Curley. If progress for certain ethnic groups was built upon taking control of City Hall, many in the 1960s thought perhaps it was African Americans’ turn. From another perspective, Boston’s demographic shift in the 1960s was relatively small compared to those taking place in other northern cities. While potentially hindering the seizure of political power, this fact also allowed for greater community cohesion and would have made the formation of a group like the BBUF somewhat easier.

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29 O’Connor, Building, 72-3.
30 King, Chain, 7.
While a larger stake in politics looked possible, and a tight knit community allowed for activism and cohesion, the relative growth in their population, coupled with changing city economics, development, and ever-present racism, made African Americans the primary target of Massachusetts’ growing carceral state. Historian Simon Balto, in *Occupied Territory*, makes the connection between the Second Great Migration, white anxiety, and increased policing in Chicago during the same period.\(^{31}\) Similar forces would play out in Boston during the 1960s and manifest themselves in police violence and increased incarceration for Black Bostonians. As economics and urban renewal restructured Boston’s social order, lower class white residents looked to the police to reinforce white supremacy, while wealthier interests wanted the growing population kept out of neighborhoods they deemed worthy of investment. Police brutality toward Black citizens and the indifference to the violence in the courts and government were aspects of this process.

Anne Fischer’s work on the treatment of Black women by police and courts in downtown Boston is especially illustrative of this phenomenon. Black women working as prostitutes were deemed unfit to live and work in downtown Boston, and were arrested while white sex workers were not. Upon appearing before a judge, the women were offered the chance to leave town instead of being sent to prison.\(^ {32}\) This example directly demonstrates the carceral state’s attempts to dislocate Black residents from Boston, but this dynamic played out daily in less conspicuous ways as members of the Black community were brutalized and harassed by police, subjected to unfair sentencing, imprisoned, and themselves made victims of crime. From a wider perspective, the growth in Boston’s Black population

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\(^{32}\) Fischer, “Place,” 16.
meant that they would be increasingly targeted by the police because the white power structure saw them as a hindrance to its economic and social plans.

**Racism Among Police and Other Power Brokers in the Carceral System**

Seminal to the discussion of race’s role in the carceral state, Michelle Alexander’s 2012 book *The New Jim Crow* argues that a racial caste system currently exists in the United States and that this system is perpetuated through mass incarceration, a form of social control. Alexander traces the origins of mass incarceration to the War on Drugs of the 1980s while recognizing that the current system of control over African Americans also has roots in the original Jim Crow laws and slavery. Ultimately, this system, according to Alexander, has led to the marginalization of a vast underclass—composed primarily of African American men—who are locked out of mainstream society as well as the American economy.\(^{33}\) *The New Jim Crow’s* focus on the explanatory power of race is relevant to the changes that occurred in postwar Boston and contributed to the growth of the carceral state in Massachusetts, but alone does not explain them. Coupled with economics, urban renewal, and demographic change, however, racism did play a significant role in creating and reinforcing the challenges foisted upon Boston’s Black community.

Balto points out racism as a significant factor in Boston’s police force in a larger discussion of police attitudes toward African Americans in urban areas during the 1960s. In a study he cites, seventy-two percent of white police officers expressed highly prejudiced or “anti-Negro” attitudes. Black officers were not immune either. The same study found that eighteen percent of Black officers showed “disdain for Black people.”\(^{34}\) Racism obviously ran high in the BPD and elsewhere. This meant that as Boston’s Black community was

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\(^{34}\) Balto, *Occupied*, 172.
economically and socially marginalized, and as policing was turned to by the state to control and dislocate the same population, the Black community would be confronted by armed officers harboring racist agendas. Racism surely contributed to the willingness of police to use deadly force with Black Bostonians, leading to the string of police shootings the BBUF would confront in the early 1970s. Judges, guards, and wardens also harbored racist sentiments that drove them to treat Black defendants and prisoners more harshly than their white counterparts.

While the racism endemic in the BPD and the Massachusetts criminal justice system certainly had an insidious effect on the Black community, it was not explicit state or municipal policy that African Americans were to be treated differently from other citizens within the carceral state. Rather, it was the aggregate racism of individuals who exercised power over the most vulnerable that perpetuated the system. Hirsch describes the racist motivations behind the rioters who attacked Black neighborhoods in Chicago and the police who abetted them as failures of individuals. Police officials as well as patrolmen sympathized with the white mobs who terrorized African Americans in Chicago from the 1940s through the 1960s.\(^35\)

In Boston, too, the failures were by individual police officers, judges, or prison personnel. This does not mean that racism was not systemic in 1960s or 1970s Boston, but that there were many points within the criminal justice system in which individuals made decisions driven by race. The impunity with which these decisions were made and their aggregate effects on Boston’s Black community were what made them systemic. The string of police shootings of unarmed Black men that rocked Boston’s Black community in the

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early 1970s in particular demonstrate the power that racism exerted when individual police officers confronted Black citizens. These incidents, and the BBUF’s responses, will be addressed in more detail in chapter four.

**The Carceral State in Massachusetts**

The intersectionality that Norton and Stein argue for when analyzing Black communities’ experiences with the criminal justice system mirrors the perspective of BBUF leadership. Racism, economics, demographics, education, government policies, class, and crime were simultaneously on the minds of BBUF leadership and any attempt to disaggregate them—to propose that one definitely caused the other—is an attempt in futility. Rather, they are mutually reinforcing social forces that acted to move the BBUF to confront the carceral state on many fronts at once, just as they led to the societal changes that drove the harsher approach to criminal justice. The fact that the BBUF understood the interrelated nature of these forces at such an early juncture, and was able to organize against them, speaks to the foresight of their leadership and the lived reality of Boston’s Black community in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The War on Poverty of the 1960s and the War on Drugs of the 1980s were significant extensions of police power in the United States, but were driven by economics, housing, and demographic change as well as the racism that has persisted since the first days of the republic. Balto’s analysis of Chicago’s growing police power during the twentieth century concludes that these punitive federal projects were not recruiting unwilling or incapable police departments. Rather, these “wars” piggybacked on the expanded powers and more aggressive stance that urban police departments had been developing for years.\(^{36}\) Growth in

\(^{36}\) Balto, *Occupied*, 125.
police brutality and racialized notions of who criminals were extended into the efforts and resources put forth by the federal government. Boston was no exception to these trends. By the early 1970s, a federally funded report had deemed the BPD one of the worst police departments in the country due to its “notorious reputation for corruption and brutality.”

Massachusetts’ carceral state did not appear overnight but, as in Chicago, was the result of decades of urban change coupled with racist police, judges, prison administrations, and city officials.

In the early 1970s, the carceral apparatus in Massachusetts had not yet grown to the extent that it would later that decade and in ensuing decades. Yet, the BBUF were working against the earliest manifestations of what scholars would later term the carceral state. There were two reasons that the BBUF was able to identify and challenge the problem of treating poverty with punitive solutions. The first was that Boston’s Black community and the BBUF had been the victims of an unjust criminal justice system for decades prior to the 1960s. The racism of the police was certainly not a new occurrence. A second reason that the BBUF identified and sought to stymie the worst effects of the carceral state was that they understood the connections between race, economics, demographics, and crime. Their leadership knew that “the experience of the Negro in American cities has been quite different from any other group.”

Most previous inner cities inhabitants, many of them recent immigrants, had the expectation of moving upward economically and outward spatially, and many did. But, for African Americans, “the ghetto simply expanded” and became “more segregated every year.” While not as large as some other northern cities, Boston still saw

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37 Fischer, “Place,” 17.
39 Wade, 489-90.
similar social forces operating in its inner city, and the effects and responses to those changes mirrored what was happening elsewhere.

In Boston, like in other Black communities, crime and its prevention were of particular importance. The BBUF saw crime as something to be prevented with or without help from the police, but in other cities scholars have found that Black communities contributed to the growth of the carceral state by electing tough-on-crime politicians and advocating for stricter prison sentences. Focusing on New York City, Michael Javen Fortner’s *Black Silent Majority: The Rockefeller Drug Laws and the Politics of Punishment* finds that the root cause of mass incarceration was not racism, economics, urban change, demographic growth or federal policies, but the conservative backlash within the Black community to crime and drug abuse. Calling this group of middle-class Black Americans the “Black Silent Majority,” Fortner argues that following the civil rights movement, Black Americans in Harlem drew on their traditional morals in reaction to urban crime to call for harsh punitive measures. Central to the author’s claim is that African Americans were the most likely victims of crime in the 1960s. This suffering at the hands of criminals, the argument continues, turned them toward the immediate solution of incarceration. The development of this view is presented in contrast to that of white liberals who continued to embrace rehabilitation to a far greater extent. Fortner raises an interesting and controversial idea in this book: how much of mass incarceration can be attributed to the actual desires of African Americans communities?

One important goal of Fortner’s work is to provide historical agency to the Black community. Gilmore, Alexander, Clegg and Usmani, Norton and Stein, and Hinton all see
outside forces and people acting upon African Americans to thrust them into the penal system. Fortner attempts instead to look at the forces and people acting within the Black community. While Fortner acknowledges that the Black Silent Majority was not the only cause of mass incarceration, his book minimizes factors outside of the community that were important to the creation of a punitive solution to poverty. The agency of Boston’s Black community has been overlooked in past histories of the carceral state; nonetheless, outside social forces played a major role in shaping the carceral state as well.

As part of their criminal justice activities, the BBUF were concerned with the treatment of prisoners and the injustices of the carceral state at the community level. Like Alexander, the BBUF saw the intrinsic racism of the criminal justice system in Boston, but they also saw economic and political factors as fundamental factors as well. Fortner’s emphasis on the agency of the Black community is important when analyzing the BBUF’s response to the increasingly punitive turn of the state; but, as Hinton notes, “the version of the War on Crime that many Black activists imagined involved community control, oversight, and inclusion” in law enforcement.41 So, while Boston’s Black community, acting through the BBUF, certainly exercised agency, they more closely resembled Hinton’s description than Fortner’s. The BBUF’s response to the racial, economic, and political forces that were shaping their reality was to first attempt cooperation with certain facets of the carceral state, but to turn to community-based solutions as those attempts failed over and over again.

41 Hinton, From the War on Poverty, 9.
Social Justice Movements in Boston Prior to the BBUF, 1930-1970s

Many waves of African American community organizers sought to address education, economics, housing, and other aspects of mid-century urban social conditions in Boston. More ephemeral than the BBUF, these groups arose to fight specific challenges that Boston’s Black community was facing at a specific time, and then faded once their goals had been achieved or lost momentum in the community. In contrast, the BBUF would exhibit relative staying power, lasting for almost a decade.

Still, the organization comfortably inhabited a place within the history of the evolution of Boston’s activist circles. The targets of the earlier reform movements would continue on in the BBUF, but more importantly, they served as crucibles for future BBUF leaders to cut their teeth and as sources of established tactics. Notably, no group of Black activists prior to the BBUF had opposed the carceral state in a systematic manner. This attests to the growing impact of the carceral state on Boston’s Black community by the late 1960s, but also the perception among BBUF leadership that previous reform attempts in education, business, welfare, and housing were connected to criminal justice.

From 1930 to 1960, increasing Black activism in Boston coincided with an almost tripling of the African American population over the same period. During this early phase of community organizing the focus was on improving the lives of residents of Roxbury and Dorchester, goals more nebulous than the Twenty-One Demands later put forth by the BBUF. Some of the primary objectives of Black leaders at the time included racial uplift, urban planning, and interracial alliances. Muriel Snowden, a Roxbury activist involved in Boston activist circles from the 1940s through the 1970s, linked racial uplift to reinforcing democracy. If conditions were to be improved for Boston’s African Americans, in
Snowden’s view, democracy had to be strengthened in the Black community as well as more generally in the United States. Urban planning and interracial alliances, too, were on Snowden’s agenda and linked, particularly when it came to Boston’s Black middle class and the white officials who ran the city’s government.  

The 1960s was a decade of Black activism in Boston that focused more on specific issues to improve everyday conditions than before, but ended with many becoming disillusioned with previous tactics, especially after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Reforming public schools was one such area of potential improvement that gained steam in the early 1960s and still remained relevant in the era of the BBUF. A major component of this movement, the Stay Out for Freedom boycotts of 1963 and 1964 were an attempt to fix the deplorable conditions of the segregated Boston Public Schools. Estimates of students staying home during the first boycott ranged from 2,000 to 5,000 and during the second around 20,000 students or about twenty percent of the public-school population remained home.  

These protests raised awareness about educational inequalities in Boston’s public schools, taught organizers how to rally a significant portion of their community around a cause, and received attention from newspapers which brought the issue to the notice of people outside of Boston’s Black community—all tactics that the BBUF would later incorporate into their toolkit. The school reform movement continued through the late 1960s and early 1970s with a walkout of 2,000 students in 1971 to protest the dire state of their schools. While the student movement did not achieve all of its goals, it eventually managed

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to get culturally relevant courses included in the curriculum, raise awareness of the need for Black faculty, and set the stage for later integration. The BBUF was directly involved in this latter phase of the school reform movement and some of its future leaders were involved in earlier phases. The power inherent in rallying the community behind an emotional issue was not lost on them and would become particularly relevant later when they would harness that power to combat police shootings.

Economic issues presented another front in the battle for justice in early 1960s Boston. The Boston Action Group (BAG) formed in 1962 to compel businesses to hire Black workers. Their direct-action approach to activism influenced the BBUF. BAG’s mix of social workers, community activists, and mostly white college students resembled the interracial approach to change that was favored during this period but abandoned later in the decade. Starting with Wonder Bread, BAG first went door-to-door campaigning with flyers explaining the disparities between Black and white workers. Next, the group approached the company multiple times to request that more Black workers be hired, but to no avail. Then, the group mobilized the Black community in a boycott of Wonder Bread. Under this mounting economic pressure and bad press, the company yielded and hired more Black workers with promises to continue the practice.

Other movements for economic justice like Mothers for Adequate Welfare (MAW) and Centralized Investments to Revitalize Community Living Effectively (CIRCLE) continued in Boston throughout the 1960s. These were largely protest movements that sought

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to rally community members to show collective support for justice. This was a tactic that the BBUF would employ later.

CIRCLE, the most influential Boston activist group in the 1960s, played a similar role to the one the BBUF would play in Boston’s Black community beginning in 1968.46 Started in 1966, CIRCLE was “an organization of organizations which would pool efforts toward community development and initiate joint projects.”47 While operating solely in the economic arena, this idea—of an umbrella organization for various movements within the Black community—would find purchase two years later in the BBUF as it brought together disparate organizations and individuals from Boston’s Black community to identify and address injustices of all types.

Another antecedent to the BBUF was Boston’s housing reform movement of the 1960s. The Community Assembly for a United South End (CAUSE) was ostensibly formed to fight for fairness in urban development. It did so by organizing tenants’ associations and protesting unfair housing practices. CAUSE’s larger significance to the BBUF, though, lies in its attempt to create a governing body for Boston’s Black community that would use its political power to fight for their interests. Despite being limited to housing issues, the foundational concept of CAUSE, the idea that a group would unite other groups and act in the interest of all Black Bostonians, paralleled the later approach of the BBUF. CAUSE achieved some success on specific issues, but its long-term impact was as a source of inspiration to later activists.48

46 King, 51-61.
47 King, 61.
48 King, 64-78.
As the 1960s wore on, the civil rights movement picked up momentum and there were concrete gains in Boston and other parts of the United States, but many activists became embittered by the recalcitrance of the white population and the slow progress that Black Americans were making with collaborative efforts. As a leader in Boston’s Black community—and a reflection of it—Snowden too made the shift from racial uplift, urban planning, and interracial alliances to focus on Black consciousness and self-reliance.49

The BBUF, forming at the end of the 1960s, was firmly within the latter camp. The organization and its leadership retained some of the features of the earlier era like urban planning and occasional interracial alliances, but it tempered them with a distrust of the white power structure and the assumption that they themselves were ultimately responsible for building power within their community in order to achieve any significant change. This perpetual tension within Boston’s Black activist circles would continue during the BBUF’s battles to reform the early carceral state.

**Rhetorical Response to the Carceral State**

Since it was chanted by a segment of the demonstrators during the 1966 Freedom March across Mississippi, the Black Power slogan has rhetorically and ideologically influenced groups like the BBUF. The Black Power movement may have been born of the civil rights era, but it grew in strength in the period immediately afterward. By some accounts, Black Power was an inward turn for African Americans, the result of disillusionment and hardening among activists, especially after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; however, this understanding is far from a settled debate in the historical literature. Black Power can also be viewed as part of the long, diverse lineage of

African American political thought.\textsuperscript{50} No matter the interpretation of the origins of Black Power, Stokely Carmichael’s speech at the Roxbury YMCA and Dr. King’s assassination directly influenced the foundation of the BBUF, placing the organization squarely in the Black Power era.

The BBUF, however, was not purely a Black Power group; other factors like the history of Black activism in Boston and lived conditions of Black Bostonians must also be considered. Its diverse constituents, grounded in prior local social movements, and conditions specific to Boston, meant that it had to balance between Black Power’s ideological pronouncements and more pragmatic concerns. Black Power provided a framework for the BBUF to mount a rhetorical response to the carceral state, but for the group it was not a rigid ideology. The BBUF used Black Power rhetoric to inspire, recruit, and mobilize community members for operations, but were willing to go outside of its strictures to try to achieve their goals.

In \textit{Black Power: The Politics of Liberation}, Kwame Ture (formerly known as Stokely Carmichael) and Charles V. Hamilton laid out the foundation of Black Power as an ideology that enables African Americans to achieve the goals of the civil rights movement without relying on the white power structure. Collaboration, as the authors see it, corrupted previous attempts to improve the conditions of Black Americans, and therefore new institutions had to be formed within the Black community so that they can “bargain from a position of strength.”\textsuperscript{51} Ture, as the leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee,


participated in countless protests in the 1960s and traveled around the country giving speeches. Ture’s speech in Boston in 1967 was but one stop on that tour.

Throughout their existence, and particularly in the area of criminal justice reform, the BBUF wrestled with the idea of collaboration. Whether their focus was police shootings, courts, prisons, or crime, the BBUF always sought to build institutions in Boston’s Black community that were independent of the white power structure. At the same time, however, there were numerous attempts to work with the mayor, prison wardens, the city council, and other institutional powers. In many cases, the turn toward the Black Power ethos for the BBUF was a reaction to failed attempts at change through traditional channels. Notably, the BBUF did work as part of an interracial alliance to help prevent construction of a highway that would have destroyed many Black neighborhoods in the heart of Boston. However, this alliance was with like-minded anti-highway activists, rather than those in positions of governmental, business, or political power.\footnote{Crockett, \textit{People Before Highways}, 1-18.} Actors within the carceral state proved particularly difficult to work with and thus the BBUF often ended up eschewing collaboration.

This is where the rhetoric of the Black Power movement heavily influenced the BBUF. Although the BBUF never completely opposed collaboration with the larger white power structures of Boston, nor were they an exclusively working-class movement, their focus on empowering the Black community, nationalism, and self-reliance was in line with other Black Power groups of the time. As the organization developed its ideological foundations in 1968, Black laws, political philosophy and nationalism became important
conceptual touchstones. These ideas were put to use largely in building institutions within the Black community rather than as outward facing documents for wider public consumption.

Outside of their base in Boston’s Black community, BBUF rhetoric was decidedly more nuanced. Some of the calls within the Twenty-One Demands issued by the group in April 1968, such as all white owned businesses in the Black community should be turned over to the BBUF immediately, for example, were stunning in their audacity. The BBUF’s quick public diminution of the Demands, however, revealed a shrewd leadership that was not rigid in their commitment to them. Such ultimatums used tactically were just a starting point for negotiations. 53 Similarly, calls were made for the complete abolition of prisons within the internal documents of the BBUF while leaders attempted to work with prison administrators to make small gains for Black prisoners.

The code switching of the BBUF’s rhetoric was in some ways more along the lines of one of Black Power’s greatest critics, Martin Luther King, Jr. Writing in 1967, Dr. King was an early and powerful voice against the movement. He mostly found fault with the rhetoric of Black Power, rather than with its goals. King believed that Black Power as a slogan “carried the wrong connotations.” 54 According to him, use of the phrase in public would isolate Black activists and give racist whites another excuse for their segregationist beliefs. The civil rights leader warned that only through federal intervention would African Americans be able to overcome the economic and political barriers placed in front of them, and that the Black Power slogan jeopardized this assistance. King also famously rejected violence as a means to

achieve the goals of the civil rights movement in contrast to some Black Power leaders who were more open to its use.\textsuperscript{55}

King’s criticisms of Black Power were incorporated, consciously or not, into the BBUF. It is notable, however, that he was more concerned with the appearance of isolationist tendencies than with why they were being promoted in the first place. While Dr. King remained steadfast in his support of collaboration and integration, he understood the frustration and anger that motivated Black Power advocates. Much of the rhetoric espoused by the BBUF was that of Black Power; nevertheless, the group’s actions belied a pure isolationist worldview. More accurately, the BBUF attempted to work with Boston officials, accepted funding from wealthy white Bostonians, and welcomed moderate and conservative Black businesses and organizations to their ranks. By taking this perspective seriously—a combination of the legacy of the civil rights movement, Black Power, and local circumstances—the many motivations of the people and organizations behind the BBUF can best be understood. Black Power was neither dogma nor anathema. Rather, it was a tool to advance their cause.

Because a complex negotiation of ideals and pragmatism existed within the Black Power movement itself, there is not one definition to sum it up. The Black Panther Party (BPP) of Oakland, California, like the BBUF, exhibited these complexities. Comparing the BPP and BBUF provides insight into two contemporaneous Black Power organizations and shows that there were many shared elements between Black Power groups. But just as often, local conditions dictated a group’s outlook. In this comparison, a distinction must be made between the BPP before and after 1968. During the earlier period, the BPP was largely

\textsuperscript{55} King, Jr., 25-64.
concerned with directly combatting the carceral state. Their primary methods for doing so were police patrols and armed self-defense. The later period saw a shift to community-focused programming like free school lunches and liberation schools. Some scholars have argued that this lack of a direct challenge to the carceral state represented an acknowledgement that the BPP had lost the battle. Historian Donna Jean Murch, however, argues that the later period was a return to the roots of African American organizing in California that emphasized “churches, sororal/fraternal groups, mutual-aid societies, ‘welfare rights’ organizing, and electoral representation.”

Both the pre-1968 BPP and the BBUF in the 1970s were concerned with combatting the carceral state. They both took on some of the powers of local government when they could not get justice through them, created coalitions with white allies, and had community roots in waves of Black migrants to their cities. At the same time, the BPP fielded police patrols, had a great deal of internal conflict, stuck with a stricter Marxist orientation, and used a democratic centralist organizational structure, none of which were features of the BBUF. The BBUF organized street patrols to combat crime and organized against police shootings, but never took a direct role in policing the police. There is also no evidence of any major conflicts within the leadership of the BBUF. At least in part this can be attributed to the democratic nature of the organization. There were committees like in the BPP, but matters were settled by voting within the committees and in community meetings. Contrastingly, the BPP was a top-down organization where conflicts between leaders and members abounded. Likewise, the BPP’s Marxist worldview was less dynamic than the

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57 Murch, 119-68.
BBUF’s simultaneous embrace of pragmatic actions and Black nationalist rhetoric. Interestingly, unlike either the BPP or BBUF, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, another Black Power group headed by Stokely Carmichael, did not coordinate with white allies at all.58

The BBUF embraced Black Power’s rhetoric, but its operations differed drastically from better-known Black Power adherents. The conditions in Boston throughout the 1960s and the long history of community-based social movements prior to the BBUF’s formation exercised just as much influence on the group as Black Power. The negotiation between these forces occurred within the BBUF throughout its history, in contrast to the BPP shift from a carceral focus to one of community. As Russell Rickford argues in his examination of Black Power in Harlem’s schools, for the BBUF, Black Power was never an extremist or rigid philosophy. Instead, it was a tool that the community used to understand power structures through “multiple, intersecting channels.”59 In scrutinizing the historical role of the BBUF, the multifaceted roles of Black Power as ideology and rhetoric need to be considered as important elements of the BBUF’s operational paradigm, both in its internal workings and how it interfaced with Boston’s white power structure.

Operational Response to the Carceral State

The operational responses of the BBUF to the nascent carceral apparatus were simultaneously rooted within Boston’s activist history and indicative of the new Black Power movement’s more aggressive approach to injustice, particularly in policing and prisons.

58 Murch, 156.
While there is no evidence that the BBUF armed themselves to protect their community against the police like the BPP, their actions on carceral issues in the late 1960s and early 1970s placed them, albeit uncomfortably, within the same camp. Instead of confronting the carceral state in Massachusetts with guns and police patrols, the BBUF favored rallies, poster campaigns, community meetings, petitioning white leaders, and protecting Black citizens and businesses from criminals.

The BBUF’s focus on criminal justice itself was a departure from prior reform movements that had acted on education, housing, welfare, jobs and other issues, but largely left policing, prisons, courts, and crime alone. One reason for the BBUF’s new focus was that the processes of inner-city economic decline, urban renewal, and demographic change had yet to lead the state to take a carceral approach to urban poverty prior to their era. Racism among police had always been a problem, but in the 1950s and early 1960s the fights were against the issues that affected the day-to-day lives of Black Bostonians. The Stay Out for Freedom protests, BAG, CIRCLE, and CAUSE all sought to improve things that people dealt with regularly, like schools, businesses, and housing. The increasing impact of the carceral system on Black lives during this period, however, would add it to the list of important topics to address by the end of the 1960s.

Another reason that the BBUF’s response to the carceral state was innovative was that it reflected a larger shift among Boston activists from racial uplift, alliances with white activists, and large-scale urban planning projects to focus on promoting and protecting the Black community from within. The belief that working with the white power structure for the betterment of Boston’s Black citizens had fallen out of favor. The BBUF era was one of self-reliance. After decades of opposition from white people to the integration of schools and
neighborhoods, lack of access to fair jobs and wages, and experiencing violence at the hands of police and other racists, alternative approaches became desirable.

Police violence was one part of the carceral state where the BBUF would focus a large portion of their energy. A string of shootings of unarmed Black men between 1970 and 1972 was met by the BBUF with rallies, trials, posters, and demands to city hall. Petitioning for Black judges was another important prong in the BBUF approach to fixing the carceral system. Attempting to place African Americans in positions of power within the carceral state had not always proven fruitful for activists’ goals, but many believed that it was required to begin to create a fair process. Prison reform was another area in which the BBUF actively sought to change the direction of what would eventually become the mass incarceration of Black men in America. They worked on this issue both by approaching prison administrations and by directly helping to uplift prisoners’ lives. Finally, community security patrols were favored by the BBUF in order to protect Boston’s Black community from criminals. This spoke to a rising concern about crime in their neighborhoods, but also a lack of faith in the police and the larger carceral system, a theme that ran through all of the actions that the BBUF took.
CHAPTER 3
THE BBUF IN CONCEPT AND OPERATION

Structural Problems and New Organizational Methods

At the heart of the BBUF were two ideas. One was that the problems facing Black Bostonians, and the failure of years of protest to solve them, were structural and deeply ingrained in city life. The truth of this knowledge was borne out by individual experience as well as the violent backlash to the civil rights movement from segments of white America. The indignities suffered by Boston’s African Americans—including the inferior schools they were forced to send their children to, the good paying jobs that were denied to them by colluding companies, and the impunity with which police officers could harass and assault them—were equally considered within the BBUF alongside the large scale mid-century social movement that sought to improve and empower Black lives through marches, sit-ins, and boycotts.

The second idea animating the group was that new organizational methods and strategy were needed to face these perpetual roadblocks to progress. Carmichael’s Black Power exhortations, Dr. King’s assassination, Boston’s history of community activism, urban change, and the burgeoning carceral state were all interwoven into the tapestry of Boston’s Black experience and the formation of the BBUF. What was new about the BBUF was its attempt to unite the community, and organizations that served it, under one umbrella. This was a bold idea for two reasons. For one, Boston’s Black community was ideologically and
culturally diverse. This meant that there were those who embraced Black Power, others who
eschewed it, and many between these two poles. Likewise, some favored what could be
called a socialist agenda, while others thought that small businesses and Black ownership
were the keys to a better future.

Initial funding for the BBUF came from an unlikely source: wealthy white
businessmen. Although alliances between wealthy liberals and Black Power activists were
not unprecedented, it was often an uneasy partnership.\textsuperscript{60} The BBUF’s most prominent donor,
Ralph Hoagland, a co-founder of CVS, led a group of Boston businessmen who formed the
Fund for Urban Negro Development (FUND), the key source of the BBUF’s early funding.
Over the course of four years, FUND transferred a half million dollars to the BBUF. The
BBUF distributed the bulk of the money to Black-owned businesses and kept the remainder
for operating costs. The irony of taking significant funds from wealthy white business
interests was not lost on BBUF leadership, but the desire to invest that money in Boston’s
Black community was too great to let the opportunity pass.\textsuperscript{61}

To put their ideas and funding into action, the BBUF’s founders created a sweeping
activist organization meant to be a direct reflection of the concerns of Boston’s Black
community. Many actions during the civil rights era in Boston were headed by different
organizations—albeit often by the same activists. Coordination across the community and
diverse issues required a high degree of bureaucratic organization. The BBUF was headed by
a Steering Committee of veteran activists like Chuck Turner, Leroy Boston, George
Morrison, Bertram Alleyne, Drew King, Chuck Williams, Daleno Farrar, and Francine Mills.

\textsuperscript{60} Karen Ferguson, \textit{Top Down: The Ford Foundation, Black Power, and the Reinvention of Racial Liberalism},
\textsuperscript{61} King, \textit{Chain}, 107-9.
Beneath them sat committees that were focused on specific issues like crime, justice, prisons, education, housing, mobilization, and internal operations. These committees were the means by which the BBUF organized. About eighty-five organizations participated in the BBUF including the New Urban League, Freedom Industries, the Roxbury Historical Society, Tufts Afro-American Society, St. Cyprian’s Episcopal Church, and the Black Panther Party. What united these diverse people and organizations was their desire to see positive political, economic, and social changes for Black Bostonians.

To a large extent, the BBUF’s successes were due to a high level of organization, attested to by the substantial documentation in their archive. This was also a factor in their longevity. As Mel King, a leader with the Urban League and BBUF, describes in Chain of Change, the lifecycle for activist organizations in Boston was typically only a few years. While the BBUF eventually faded away in the mid-1970s as support from wealthy white businessmen waned, they had been active in Boston for the better part of a decade. This allowed them to have a large impact in many issues significant to Boston’s Black community, none more so than criminal justice reform.

Organization by Committee

Immediately after forming the BBUF, its leadership, member organizations, and individual participants went about addressing the most pressing issues facing Boston’s Black citizens. Each area of focus was spearheaded by committees which were then overseen by the Steering Committee, a collection of the most influential community leaders in the BBUF who were able to coordinate the diverse array of actions that their program called for. The

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62 King, Chain.
63 “Minutes of the Steering Committee,” Boston, MA: Boston Black United Front, December 2, 1968-March 6, 1972. SC1, Box 2. Roxbury Community College Library Special Collections.
structure and breadth of the BBUF organization reflected the experiences of activists who had been involved in many of the civil rights actions of the preceding two decades and the wide-ranging community support that allowed them to field groups that could take on these issues. If activism in Boston’s Black community during the civil rights era had been a collection of disparate and ephemeral groups, the BBUF, in contrast, was built to be a long-lasting umbrella organization.

Most committees met regularly in the late 1960s and into the early 1970s. The Steering Committee, in its role as the executive level meeting for the organization, addressed issues from the other groups and acted as the BBUF decision making body. On January 13, 1969 alone, the Steering Committee took up issues as diverse as a funding proposal from CAUSE, protests against a TV show, activities for Malcolm X Day, Turner’s interview on a radio show, boycotting a Volvo dealership, organizing Black churches, and internal problems with other community organizations. As evidenced by the wide range of meeting topics, energy and ambition ran high among the leadership of the BBUF. More concretely, however, this vigor was translated into tangible results by the committees that worked under the direction of the Steering Committee.

Out of sixteen total committees, the BBUF devoted four to criminal justice issues. Having put so many of their resources toward this effort, it is apparent that this was a major issue for the group, if not the most important one. The Justice Committee was one of the most active BBUF committees and was most heavily involved in the actions that the BBUF took on police shootings. The Defense Committee, Prison Committee and the Committee on Crime similarly worked on criminal justice issues. In the case of the last of these, the group

64 “Minutes of the Steering Committee.” Boston, MA: Boston Black United Front, January 13, 1969. SC1, Box 2. Roxbury Community College Library Special Collections.
developed a detailed plan to organize, finance, and recruit a Black security corps to protect the community. This ultimately came to fruition in the security patrols that would begin walking Boston’s streets in 1970. The police shootings of unarmed Black men that would rock Boston’s Black community between 1970 and 1972 were addressed by the Justice Committee. Letters to city officials were sent, reports of eyewitnesses to the shootings were read, and organization and procedures for community trials were hammered out at committee meetings.\(^{65}\) When taken as a whole, the BBUF’s work on carceral state reform was channeled through these groups.

Unfortunately, there are only two full sets of meeting minutes for the BBUF Justice Committee, along with several ancillary documents like membership lists and draft letters in the BBUF archive. Despite this dearth of written material, what is available shows deep involvement in the events of the day, and it is clear that the committee’s biggest concerns were police abuse, repercussions for said abuse, and publicizing their response to garner further support.\(^{66}\) The “Poster Day” that followed the murder of Franklin Lynch was perhaps the Justice Committee’s biggest undertaking. The coordination and planning for this event were done by Justice Committee mobilization of individuals and business owners. One draft letter notes that those businesses that hung posters in their windows were harassed by city police officers or had their posters stolen.\(^{67}\) Nonetheless, the posters became a common site within the Black neighborhoods of Boston.

\(^{65}\) “Minutes of the Justice Committee,” Meeting minutes. Boston, MA: Boston Black United Front, April 3, 1970. SC1, Box 2. Roxbury Community College Library Special Collections.

\(^{66}\) “Minutes of the Justice Committee,” Meeting minutes. Boston, MA: Boston Black United Front, May 1, 1970. SC1, Box 2. Roxbury Community College Library Special Collections.

\(^{67}\) “Draft Letter from Justice Committee Chairman Leroy Boston,” Boston, MA: Boston Black United Front, May 4, 1970. SC1, Box 2. Roxbury Community College Library Special Collections.
The BBUF Committee on Crime, like the Justice Committee, played a part in fighting the carceral state’s effects on Boston’s Black community. Spurred to action by the robbery of Unity Bank in December 1970 and the murder of two security guards at Freedom Foods in 1971, the most significant document produced by the Committee on Crime was “An Outline Proposal for the Establishment of a Community Crime Commission.” This detailed document proposed to create a political arm to fight crime alongside the Community Security Agency (CSA), the action-oriented outgrowth of the Committee on Crime. Working together, these two sub-organizations of the BBUF were to oversee crime prevention in a community seeing increasing crime rates.

An initial $15,000 was allocated by the United Front Foundation to get the Community Crime Commission started. The charges of the commission were to hire employees, collect funds, wage a publicity campaign against crime, push their agenda in the media, work with the BPD and the Attorney’s Office, receive complaints from community residents, and write a proposal for funding. Job descriptions and a budget were drawn up as part of the plan too. The recommended commissioners in the proposal included reporters, business people, a Muslim minister, community leaders, and politicians. The broad swath of community members asked to work on this issue as well as the broad mandate for the commission indicates how dire the situation had become for the community and what little faith Black Bostonians had that the white power structure would respond accordingly. The liaison duties of the commission speak to some degree of willingness to cooperate with authorities, but it is obvious that this was the work of a frustrated community attempting to come up with their own solution to an intractable problem rather than waiting on a cavalry

that would never arrive. Unlike those of the CSA, the Community Crime Commission’s specific activities are not well documented, but the attempts to work with the BPD and mayor’s office during the string of police shootings of unarmed Black men indicate that to some degree the committee was at work.

Like the Justice Committee and the Committee on Crime, the Prison Committee was most active in the early 1970s. Just as those committees focused on discrete areas of the carceral state, police reform and crime respectively, the Prison Committee sought changes in the prisons and jails of Massachusetts. Due to the separation of inmates from society, however, the Prison Committee did not operate like other BBUF committees, typically collections of leaders and activists from Boston’s Black community. Instead, the Prison Committee focused on the conditions and rights of prisoners, especially incarcerated African Americans, with the long-term goal of prison abolition. In 1971, the Prison Committee dedicated itself to working as the arm of the Act Committee, a group formed by prisoners at Norfolk Prison.69 In this role, the BBUF’s committee served as a liaison between Boston’s Black community and those on the inside.

Although mass incarceration was in its infancy, the BBUF recognized the importance of working on prison reform due to its disproportionate effects on African Americans. The intertwining threads of the carceral state were only beginning to form during the BBUF’s active period, but it was already apparent to activists and community leaders that the changes were necessary. This understanding placed the BBUF ahead of their time. While most politicians, judges, police officers, and city bureaucrats were largely unaware of or indifferent to the suffering of those in Boston’s Black community, the BBUF was attempting

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69 “Prison Committee Meeting,” 107 Elm Hill Avenue, Boston, MA: Boston Black United Front, June 23, 1971, 8 pm. SC1, Box 2, Folder 2. Roxbury Community College Library Special Collections.
to address the growing carceral state decades before white America acknowledged what was happening.

**Ideology for a “Non-ideological” Organization**

When activists, politicians, revolutionaries, business owners, community organizations, and concerned citizens came together in 1968 to form the BBUF, their short-term goal was “operational unity.” In concept, the BBUF was to transcend ideology to achieve the goals that were shared by all Black Bostonians. In practice, this meant that there was room for ideological diversity, even conflict. Intermediate goals included creating or strengthening Black organizations and controlling funds that would benefit the Black community. In due course, though, the BBUF sought to separate completely from Boston by incorporating its African American sections as an entirely new city. Leaders acknowledged that this would not solve all of the Black community’s problems, but they believed that it was the only solution that would give them a chance to bypass the white power structure entrenched in the local, state, and municipal governments.70 Even though their ultimate goal was never achieved—separation from Boston was attempted during the 1980s Mandela referendums—the BBUF’s smaller scale organizational aspirations did eventually become a reality.

Operational unity was resoundingly successful for the BBUF. Churches and trade groups sat at the table with the Black Panthers and the Malcolm X Foundation.71 This speaks to the shared legacy of racism that Black Bostonians had endured throughout their lives as well as the continuing obstacles that discrimination had placed in their paths regardless of

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70 “Goals of the Boston Black United Front,” Boston, MA: Boston Black United Front, June 9, 1970. SC1, Box 1. Roxbury Community College Library Special Collections.
71 “Organizational Membership,” Boston, MA: Boston Black United Front, n.d. SC1, Box 1. Roxbury Community College Library Special Collections.
their ideal conception of society. The decentralized and single issue-based approaches that Boston activists had taken during the 1950s and 1960s gave way to a more unified approach embodied by the BBUF. When understood within the larger context of African American activism up until 1968 in Boston, the BBUF’s doctrine of operational unity was a direct rejoinder to what many viewed as insufficient progress.

Indicative of the unified approach that gave name to the BBUF, each member organization’s president or representative officer was required to sign a statement of commitment to a “Black United Front in Boston.” With this pledge, the signee agreed to identify a voting representative from their organization. Furthermore, this representative was required to identify as Black and the organizational member would commit to a program of majority rule within the umbrella group. Committing to sending a Black representative ensured that organizations were either already part of the Black community or were at least integrated enough to have a Black person in a leadership position. As for the internal machinery of the BBUF, the promise to abide by majority rule indicates a commitment to democracy as the means of governing a wide-ranging organization.

In many ways, the BBUF was the executive, judicial, and legislative branch for Boston’s Black community, and, although community members were victims of gross injustices in a democratic nation, the organization remained committed to democracy anyway. Community-based democracy was substituted for state-based democracy in reaction to the abuses of power by Boston’s white dominated institutions. The commitment to democracy was important for the BBUF, but the injustices of American democracy meant they needed to apply this principle in new ways. Like the concept of democracy, in the

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72 “Statement of Commitment,” Boston, MA: Boston Black United Front, n.d. SC1, Box 1. Roxbury Community College Library Special Collections.
impulse to attempt reconciliation with carceral institutions, and as community trials and security patrols would later show in their fight for criminal justice reform, the BBUF did not find fault with the ideas of policing, prisons, and courts in theory, but found the iniquities within these institutions and how they had been used to control and exploit Black Americans to be the true problem.

In spite of the BBUF’s claims to ideological transcendence, unity was not created around shared grievances alone. A great deal of effort was made by the BBUF to also create shared principles that would unite Boston’s Black community and pave the way for a Black separatist future. Throughout the BBUF’s history of actions, including those seeking reform in the carceral state, organizers would continually refer back to those foundational documents in which they envisioned a new society. These seminal papers included proposed laws, statements of political philosophy and Black national principles, and culminated in twenty-one public demands to the city government. This aspect of operational unity informed the BBUF’s future actions against the growing carceral state.

On November 2, 1969, the BBUF’s eight Black Laws were ratified by a vote of those attending a conference at the Urban League Barn. Laws one and two deal with encountering “enemy authorities.” The first of these dictates that Black people must help one another whenever someone is in trouble with oppressive authorities. The second law prohibits Black people from giving any other Black person’s name to the police. Following those laws, the third and fourth laws establish the supremacy of the “high council” and forbid Black people from seeking justice outside of that body. The fifth, sixth, and seventh laws explain how Black people are to protect the rights of the entire community. The final law exhorts Black people to disregard worldly desires, especially the desire for money, in favor of solidarity.
An addendum of “intolerable offenses” was attached to the Blacks Laws. Those offenses included raping, killing, betraying, luring into drug use, or assaulting any Black person.\textsuperscript{73} Upon a cursory glance, these laws may seem like the rules of an imagined Black separatist state. In fact, they quite closely hewed to the principles that the BBUF would put into practice not long after their creation as they sought to provide alternatives to the carceral state.

One area in which the BBUF’s ideology guided their operations was in combatting police brutality. From 1970 to 1972, the BBUF was engaged in direct action following four police killings of unarmed Black men, the details of which will be discussed in the next chapter. In these instances, the Black Laws were transformed from words on paper to action among Boston’s African American community, creating solidarity around an alternative justice system in which Black people could find fairness. Nothing exemplified this alternative like the trials that the BBUF held for the offending officers in two cases.

Following what was seen as an inability or unwillingness on the part of white authorities to hold officers accountable, the BBUF held their own trials, invoking the supremacy of the community’s judgement over that of white society, and attempted to hold those found guilty responsible. Distrust of the white power structure and self-reliance came to the fore in these laws and became the primary means by which justice would become reconceptualized by the group.

\textsuperscript{73} “Black Laws,” Boston, MA: Boston Black United Front, November 2, 1969. SC1, Box 1. Roxbury Community College Library Special Collections.
1. A Black Brother or Sister must aid one another in trouble with the enemy authorities representing the controllers, enslavers, oppressors and exploiters of our people.

2. A Black Brother or Sister must not knowingly reveal one another's name even to any authorities representing enemies or exploiters of Black People.

3. A Black Brother or Sister must obey the decisions and commands of the high council, accept and respect the laws of the Nation.

4. A Black Brother or Sister must accept his or her People's supreme and just protection and punishment as their official discipline and respected law, therefore; under no circumstances, should he or she appeal to the police, the courts or any authorities of the oppressor to get redress from the just will of the people.

5. A Black Brother or Sister must consider, any offense against another Brother or Sister, as an offense against himself and the entire Black Nation, however small or large the offense or whoever commits it.

6. A Black Brother or Sister must stand and defend whenever possible, the lives and property of Black People.
   a. We must defend the rights of a whole Black Nation to choose, govern, protect, punish and pursue their course of action for their people, declare war or peace, decide and determine its enemies or friends.
   b. We must defend the rights of the Black Nation to independence, freedom and justice for all Black People under the Black Law.
   c. We must defend the rights of the Black Man to have as many wives as he can afford, according to his religion, culture and/or his economic condition as long as all parties are in agreement.
   d. We must defend the rights of the Black Woman to live as a mother and wife with her need of security provided for her by her children's father, who is also her mate.
   e. We must defend the rights of the Black Children to grow up in his or her own environment without needs or fears of being classed in such unjust terms as a bastard.
   f. We must defend the rights of the Black Elders to live and die in peace, going on safely, without fear of their needs or frightened, in their community.
   g. We must defend the rights of leaders to teach or express what he sincerely believes is in the best interest of the Black Masses without intimidation or fear of safety for their bodies.
BLACK LAWS continued

h. We must defend the rights of an offender to be punished as quickly as he has offended.

7. We should be anxious and honored when an opportunity presents itself through life to aid, show courtesy to, or save another Brother or Sister from a trap that he or she has accidently or deliberately fallen into with the oppressors or controllers of Black People.

8. The Black People's needs should have priority over all wants. Wants have personal and selfish roots and therefore can never surely satisfy the person or people.

Needs have natural, relevant, biological and cultural roots. They are direct opposites in motivations. NEEDS and WANTS should be lived by categorically.

A Black Brother or Sister should not force Black Women into disgrace of themselves or their Nation for money.

A Black Brother of Sister should not disgrace themselves or their Nation for money.

INTOLERABLE OFFENSES - CAPITAL CRIMES

1. It is an intolerable offense to rape a Black Woman.

2. It is an intolerable offense to kill a Black People's leader.

3. It is an intolerable offense to betray Black People by spying, knowingly informing on and leading into traps, physically harming, intentionally killing any Black man, woman or child for the oppressors, controllers and enslavers of Black People.

4. It is an intolerable offense to destroy any Black Man, Woman or Child by means of any drug habit through encouragement, sales or force sales.

5. It is an intolerable offense to kill, assault or harmfully torture any Black Man, Woman or Child for personal gratification, in forms of anger, willfulness, intoxication or bulliness.

The BBUF political platform was a list of eight things that they believed they needed to control to address the plight of Black Bostonians: land, politics, security, justice, schools, economy, housing, and communication. Comparable to the other ideological formulations for operational unity, the BBUF political platform most directly called out the insufficient state of security and justice in Boston for African Americans and identified what needed to be done. Security included protection from crimes and invasion. Later, as the BBUF created the Community Security Agency (CSA) this concept was put into practice. The CSA patrolled Black businesses in order to prevent crime, but also to provide an alternative to the Boston police, viewed as an external threat to the community. The other prong of the political platform relevant to the carceral state was the administration of justice. This declaration presaged the community-controlled courts that would soon be needed after police who shot unarmed Black men were acquitted in white courts.

Human rights, too, were an important element of the BBUF’s belief in how justice would be achieved. The rights of people were placed above those of property as this alternative system of justice was formulated. The inhumanity of the Black experience in the American justice system connected the BBUF movement to all those who sought the basic rights to which all individuals and groups are entitled.

Less tangible than the Black Laws or BBUF political platform, but just as influential on the BBUF’s movement for a fair criminal justice system, was its Nation Building Concept. Likely created around the same time as the Black Laws, BBUF ideas for a Black nation were just as relevant to the criminal justice initiatives of the group in the coming years. According to the drafters of the Concept, a Black nation was to be based on the seven

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74 “Political Platform,” Boston, MA: Boston Black United Front, n.d. SC1, Box 1. Roxbury Community College Library Special Collections.
principles of Kwanzaa: umoja (unity), kujichagulia (self-determination), ujima (collective work and responsibility), ujamaa (co-operative economics), nia (purpose), kuumba (creativity), and Imani (faith). Taking criminal justice into their own hands, the BBUF embraced what they saw as the principles that would guide them as an autonomous people, separate from the system that had oppressed them for so long. The balance between combatting the racist carceral state and visions of a utopian future were not separate. Creating the principles of the society that they hoped to achieve one day gave the BBUF and Boston’s Black community measuring posts by which to compare the current state of affairs.

Contrasting the philosophical bent of the aforementioned documents, the Twenty-One Demands issued to Mayor Kevin White by the BBUF in April 1968 were a concrete manifestation of their guiding ideology. Externally, the Demands were issued to get the attention of the wider world with the hope of gaining concessions. Internal to the Black community they served to further create unity and provide guideposts for progress like previously issued steering documents. Above all other Demands, the one for police departments in Black areas to be overseen by Black captains most directly spoke to the future push for greater Black representation within the criminal justice system.

In general, however, the Demands were a cry for control over the destiny of the Black community and an end to its exploitation along political, economic, educational, and policing lines that reverberated in the actions of BBUF activists as they sought a criminal justice structure outside of what they perceived as the failed American one. In fact, the opening lines

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75 “Nation Building Concept,” Boston, MA: Boston Black United Front, n.d. SC1, Box 1. Roxbury Community College Library Special Collections.
of the Demands declare a state of emergency for Boston’s Black community, going so far as to declare it unsafe for African Americans to go about their normal lives.\textsuperscript{76}

**Rallying the Community**

In the early days of the BBUF a lot of energy was spent creating solidarity around the idea of the BBUF and the issues it championed. Issuance of the BBUF’s attention-grabbing Twenty-One Demands and Black Solidarity Day, a rally against racism and repression, were the two most prominent events that created a sense of unity and heralded the beginning of a new community-focused power. In addition to their rallying effect in the Black community, these events sent a message to white Bostonians—the Demands directly and Black Solidarity Day less so—that society needed to change. The Demands were reprinted in the *Boston Globe* and caused a stir among other groups within Boston and the surrounding area. They also got the attention of Mayor White, who later met with the group to discuss them. In light of the later actions by the BBUF, these events can also be viewed as precursors to the rallies that would help bring attention to the issue of police violence.

In April 1968, the BBUF held a packed rally at White Stadium, a 10,000-seat venue in Franklin Park. At the event the leadership presented the Twenty-One Demands to the Black community and implored Boston’s Mayor White to heed their call for justice.\textsuperscript{77} In *A People’s History of the New Boston*, Jim Vrabel argues that the BBUF’s demands “could hardly have been more extreme” and that they were put forth by “militants.” The author goes on to argue that the NAACP put forth another set of demands, and that because these were well received by City Hall, they were moderate and realistic.\textsuperscript{78} This treatment of the event

\textsuperscript{76} “Statement of Demands,” BBUF.
\textsuperscript{78} Vrabel, *People’s History*, 94.
and the organization ignores several factors. For one, the BBUF certainly contained members who could have been considered militants, like the Boston Black Panther Party, but much of its membership was far from it, including organizations such as Freedom Industries and the New Urban League. A second problem with Vrabel’s interpretation is that the BBUF had the explicit support of 10,000 Black community members and many others who did not attend the rally, demonstrating that this was a mainstream movement.

Another problem with Vrabel’s understanding is that he ignores the rhetorical purpose of the Twenty-One Demands. The BBUF’s subsequent negotiations with Mayor White showed the more pragmatic approach that BBUF leadership would use time and time again. On April 11, 1968, following the rally and the issuance of the Demands, Mel King, Chuck Turner, Leroy Boston, and other BBUF leaders met with the mayor, but stated that the demands that were read at the rally, sent to the mayor, and published in the Boston Globe were only an opening salvo in an attempt to start a dialogue.79 The rally and the Demands had gained the attention of Boston’s mayor and the newspaper reading public, but BBUF leadership was willing to negotiate. This pragmatic approach to the BBUF’s Demands eventually led to most of them being put in place in some form, albeit many of the changes took decades rather than months or years.80 Vrabel completely ignores this fact.

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80 “Historical Note,” Collection Overview, Boston, MA: Boston Black United Front, Roxbury Community College Library Special Collections.
GENERAL STATE OF EMERGENCY

Boston’s Black Community is presently in a state of general emergency. It is unsafe for white people to move and do business within and throughout the Black Community. The Black Community is making every attempt to maintain peace and order.

STATEMENT OF DEMANDS

1. As of 12:00 A.M. Monday, April 8, 1968 all white owned and white controlled businesses will be closed until further notice, while the transfer of the ownership of these businesses to the Black Community is being negotiated through the United Front.

2. Every school in the Black Community shall have an all black staff – personnel, principals, teachers, and custodians.

3. All Police Stations in the Black Community are to be in the command of Black Captains.

4. ABCD is to be abolished as an umbrella agency in the Black Community. The anti-poverty program is to be completely controlled in the Black Areas, by the Jamaica Plain APAC, SNAP, Dorchester APAC, and the Roxbury-North Dorchester APAC’s.

5. Community control of both Summer Work Programs (14 - 15 year olds and the 16 - 21 year olds).

6. All schools within the Black Community are to be renamed after Black heroes. The names will be selected through the United Front.

7. The Black Community is to immediately receive control of the BURP and TURN KEY HUD Programs. The contracts should be negotiated with Black owned and controlled housing development corporations, designated by the United Front.

8. The Model Neighborhood Board is to have complete control of the Model Cities Program.

9. The Black Community is to have complete control of all publicly financed housing programs, e.g., Academy Homes, Whittier Street Housing Development, Orchard Park Housing Development and Elm Hill Housing Development.

10. The South End - Roxbury Boy’s Club are to be administered by Black Directors and Black Staff personnel.

11. The Mayor’s office is to mobilize the Urban Coalition, the National Alliance of Business and the White Community at large to immediately make $100,000,000 available to the Black Community.

12. Contracts for street repair, garbage collection and maintenance in the Black Community are to go to Black Contractors.

13. There are to be established immediately, operating School Board which will have control of hiring staff, (teachers, principals, custodians, etc.) and be responsible for all curriculum development.

14. The Patrick T. Campbell Jr. High School is to be renamed the Martin Luther King Jr., Jr. High School, in addition the present structure is to be razed and replaced with a new campus type Jr. High School.

15. Contracts for repair and maintenance functions by utility companies, e.g., Boston Gas Co., Boston Edison Co., New England Telephone and Telegraph Co., in the Black Community are to be given to Black Contractors or these companies are to have all Black crews working for them in the Black Community.

16. Increase the quota of employment of Black personnel in State and City agencies, departments, divisions and bureaus.

17. The Black Community must have representatives on the Mayor’s Public Service Board, to be elected by the United Front.

18. Establishment of a local park and recreation department in the Black Community.

19. The planned construction of the Inner Belt and Southeast Expressway are to be halted immediately and their continued planning and construction negotiated with the Black Community since both of these highway projects will radically affect the lives of the people in this community.

20. The Black Community must have control of all public, private and municipal agencies that affect the lives of the people in this community, e.g., City Sanitation, Health, Housing, UCS, Boy’s Club etc.

21. The South End Urban Renewal Plan is to be halted immediately (the relocation planning and demolition) and the continuation of this Urban Renewal Plan is to be renegotiated with an elected Urban Renewal Committee.

(Khadijah)
Black Solidarity Day was held on May 19, 1970. The day included awareness sessions, a march through Roxbury, workshops, music, speakers, and a showing of the film “Battle of Algiers.” An African ceremonial feast at the Roxbury Boys Club wrapped up the day.\textsuperscript{81} It was an event that brought Boston’s Black community together in pride and consciousness. Mel King, then the head of the New Urban League in Boston, was one of the keynote speakers. The theme of King’s speech was self-taxation, but underlying it was the sense of self-reliance and limited help from the white community that underpinned BBUF efforts on criminal justice. In fact, King’s ideas for community control through self-taxation included decriminalizing some illegal activities. In particular, he called for the legalization and taxation of “numbers,” the illegal lottery run by the mafia according to King.\textsuperscript{82} The connections between crime, community control, and justice were clear to King as they were to the other leaders of the BBUF.

Through committees, rallies, and ideology, the BBUF were able to unite Boston’s Black community on a range of issues. Criminal justice reform was at the top of the group’s list and each of these tactics were used to garner support for other actions around police shootings, court appointments, prison reform, and community security. The rally for the Twenty-One Demands and Black Solidarity Day set the stage for the protests and trials against police brutality that the BBUF would lead. Likewise, the BBUF committees would be the springboards used by the group to act. Finally, the Black Power inspired ideology developed by the BBUF was used to create community cohesion and would reverberate in

\textsuperscript{81} “Agenda for Black Solidarity Day Against Racism and Repression,” Boston, MA: Boston Black United Front, May 19, 1970. SC1, Box 1. Roxbury Community College Library Special Collections.

\textsuperscript{82} Mel King, “Black Solidarity Day,” Franklin Park, Boston, MA: Boston Black United Front, May 19, 1970. SC1, Box 1. Roxbury Community College Library Special Collections.
their agitations for Black judges and the fair treatment of Black prisoners, as well as in community security patrols.

While BBUF leadership was able to unite individuals and organizations from across Boston’s Black community on a range of issues, they were ultimately unable to stop the growth of the carceral state in Massachusetts. Due to the systemic nature of the carceral state, a community-based response had serious limits, but it was the primary type of response that the BBUF had available to them. As the 1970s wore on, the end of funding from wealthy white donors, a national recession, school desegregation, and the City of Boston’s near municipal bankruptcy either made it more difficult for the BBUF to stop the encroaching carceral state or meant that activists and city leaders were focused elsewhere. Compounding these multiple crises was the continued flight of white residents, jobs, and capital to locations outside of the urban center. The growth of the carceral state paralleled these social processes and was inextricably bound up with them. The social conditions that made it difficult to offer a community-based alternative to the carceral state in the 1960s and 1970s are what make today’s reforms difficult to implement as well.
CHAPTER 4

THE BBUF AND POLICE VIOLENCE, COURTS, PRISONS, AND CRIME

Criminal Justice Reform

The BBUF was acutely aware of the interrelated nature of police shootings, court appointments, prisons, poverty, government, and racism and how these social forces burdened their community. Contemporary scholars have developed the concept of the carceral state to describe the intersection of communities and criminal justice institutions, but, as early as the late 1960s, the BBUF was already working against it. At the height of their activity, the BBUF took actions on police shootings, court appointments, prisons, and community security—all at roughly the same time. The breadth and scope of their organizing speaks to an energized, well-funded organization as well as leadership that recognized the systemic nature of the problems stacked against Boston’s Black community. Both their successes and failures in combatting the carceral state are important historical antecedents to current attempts at reform, as well as valuable lessons on the limits of institutional cooperation and resistance.

Disturbing parallels exist between the circumstances that launched BBUF direct action and the police killings of so many unarmed Black men in recent years. The brutal nature of the early 1970s killings—and the lack of consequences for the officers involved—are familiar to anyone who reads newspaper headlines today. What is often
overlooked today is that neither police shootings of Black people nor the outrage that follow them is new. In the four killings by police in which the BBUF sought justice, only one resulted in what could be considered success at the institutional level: the dismissal of the offending officer.

The three other kinds of reform efforts that the BBUF undertook—in courts, prisons, and security—similarly offer lessons for those seeking justice within the network of institutions that deal with crime. Here, too, the BBUF struggled to find success at the institutional level and, in the case of community security, eschewed working with city and state institutions almost entirely. The gap between what Boston’s Black community wanted for its members and what white-dominated institutions were willing to provide attest to the systemic racism that is at the heart of the carceral state. Police killing with impunity, judges who justified the violence, prisons that sought only to dehumanize, and neighborhoods left unprotected were the symptoms as well as causes of this cycle in Boston, with each aspect of the carceral state feeding off the others.

At the community level, the BBUF achieved a great deal of cooperation and, for a time, inspired thousands to believe that change was possible. Their protests set the template for the organization and publicity that would be used in later decades to protest the same injustices. Likewise, their demands for accountability from city government and suggestions for reform would not be taken up in many cases until the present. Their calls for greater Black representation on the police force, in court rooms, and in decision-making bodies echo reforms that continue to be advocated for today. The BBUF were ahead of their time and their struggles offer lessons about which strategies work as well as where some of the pitfalls may lie for anyone seeking to end the injustices inherent in the carceral state. Studying the
BBUF’s rallying of a broad coalition, development of innovative tactics and strategies, and attempts to work across racial divides provides new insights on the history of Boston as well as the Black American struggle.

**Police Shootings**

Beginning in 1970, the BBUF acted as an investigative body and court for police shootings that they believed would not otherwise have received proper scrutiny. At the same time, the frequency of police shootings of Black men in Boston in the early 1970s demonstrated to all the impunity with which the BPD was able to mete out violence without fear of repercussion. While shootings and other acts of police brutality were not new to Boston, what was new was that the BBUF could channel the community’s anger into a single resounding plea for reform.

Similar movements had taken on incidents of police brutality in other cities in the 1960s. In one example from North Richmond, California in 1967, police shot Denzil Dowell, a Black teen, multiple times and fled the scene. Dowell’s body was discovered hours later by his family, who sought help pursuing his killers from the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Like the BBUF after instances of police brutality, the Panthers first attempted to work with city officials to find justice for Dowell and his family, but finding none along that path, and like the BBUF a few years later, the Panthers held rallies that attracted large crowds in protest.\(^83\) Over the long-term too, the ideas that germinated in BBUF circles eventually became mainstream in Boston. In another parallel example from New York City, activists spent decades trying to establish an independent review board to investigate incidents of

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police brutality.\textsuperscript{84} In the end, the BBUF concluded that community members from outside the BPD needed a say in matters of police misconduct. Many direct actions of the BBUF were due to a lack of accountability from city and police leadership, but the group continually pressed for formal oversight by Mayor Kevin White and the city government regardless.

The first, and most famous, police shooting that the BBUF became involved in investigating, trialing, and redressing was that of Franklin Lynch. The attention given to Lynch’s killing can be attributed not only to his regional celebrity, but also to the senselessness of his death at the hands of a police officer. Lynch lived in Georgia and New Jersey before coming to Boston to pursue a career in music. Once settled in the city, he jumped headlong into the emerging soul music scene, and shortly before his death released his first single, “Young Girl.”\textsuperscript{85} By many measures, Lynch was on his way to a successful singing career, but tragically, he would be gunned down by Patrolman Walter Duggan at Boston City Hospital before getting the chance to reach his full potential.

On March 7, 1970, Lynch was a patient at City Hospital due to a bout of odd behavior over the preceding few days. The events that would quickly unfold that day attest to the fact that something was wrong with Lynch’s mental state. The \textit{Boston Globe} reported two days after the shooting that what resulted in Lynch’s killing started as a fight between Lynch and another patient, John Condon. After having broken up the fight one time, Duggan became frustrated when it resumed. At that point, the patrolman pushed Condon down, breaking his leg, and aimed his gun at Lynch. According to the \textit{Globe} reporter, who was an eyewitness to the shooting, five fatal shots came after Lynch snapped a towel at Duggan’s gun. The bullets


not only tore through Lynch, but one hit another patient who happened to be the father of another patrolman. The second victim died twelve days later. The brutal force with which Duggan killed Lynch stirred outrage in Boston’s Black community and, in response, the BBUF took up Lynch’s cause.

Suspicious of the ability of the police department and the court system to act impartially in investigating the death of an unarmed Black man at the hands of a patrolman, the BBUF began their own inquest on March 25. The organization put out a call to any lawyers within their community who could serve as judges during the proceedings. The result of the inquest was a charge of murder against Duggan. Meanwhile, the fears that Lynch’s killer would not face justice were confirmed by Boston Municipal Court Judge Elijah Adlow. The judge’s report “completely exonerated” Duggan and found that he was justified in the shooting because the officer needed to impress upon Lynch the futility of his actions. The obvious absurdity of killing someone to get a point across sparked disgust among Boston’s African Americans and led the BBUF to convene a “Black People’s Court” to try the patrolman.

“People’s courts” were not unique to the BBUF. In July 1967, following the killing of three young Black men by police officers during the Detroit Rebellion at the Algiers Motel, a tribunal was held to try the officers involved. The trial attracted over 2,000 attendees and

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88 “Black People’s Inquest into the Death of Franklin Lynch,” United Front Justice Committee, Boston, MA: Boston Black United Front, March 19, 1970. SC1, Box 13, Folder 8, Roxbury Community College Library Special Collections.
89 Stephen Curwood, “Murder of Franklin Lynch,” *Boston After Dark*, May 26, 1970. SC1, Box 13, Folder 8, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.
international media coverage.\textsuperscript{90} In other instances, community trials took on issues other than police killings. In December 1970, the Met Council, Black Panther Party, and Young Lords put New York City’s mayor, housing officials, and bank executives on trial for the abysmal conditions in minority neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{91} Trials like these were a manifestation of the frustration with traditional institutions that activists felt during the Black Power era. In Detroit in 1967 and Boston in 1970, mainstream courts had failed to find police officers guilty of any wrongdoing even though the evidence strongly suggested otherwise. Likewise, the New York City trial over housing drew attention to the failures of city government and businesses to provide adequate housing for poor people. Although the murder trials were spurred by specific events, like the housing tribunal, the belief in institutional failure had been sown long before.

The outline of Duggan’s trial in the Black People’s Court shows a meticulously crafted legal proceeding that relied on the BBUF’s “Black Laws” for its jurisprudence and witness accounts as evidence.\textsuperscript{92} Obvious parallels with the mainstream American justice system aside, \textit{Black People versus Walter Duggan} was a radical reconceptualization of criminal justice. Rather than relying on federal, state, or municipal outlets as the loci of the judicial process, the BBUF brought it to the community level, the only place where they believed they would find fairness. The fact that neither the defendant nor several of the witnesses (Mayor White was called to testify) appeared shows the legal limits of the BBUF’s


\textsuperscript{92} “Black People vs. Walter Duggan: Order of Trial,” SC1, Box 13, Folder 9, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.
trial strategy; however, its emotional impact may have been the real point. According to an internal BBUF evaluation of the trial, “people left with a sense of pride and progress.”

The Black People’s Court found Duggan guilty of murder in the first degree in front of an estimated 700 attendees. While there were some within the community who saw the Black People’s Court as an exercise in futility, the BBUF believed they had exposed the hypocrisy experienced by African Americans in the “white man’s court.” The high number of attendees for a trial that would have no legally enforceable sentence shows the support that the BBUF received among Boston’s Black community in their efforts and the vast frustration that existed with police. The detail with which the trial was executed—having a presiding judge, allowing witnesses to testify for the prosecution and defense, and providing closing arguments—attested to the community-wide desire for justice. By following the typical proceedings of a “white” court, the Black People’s Court incisively modeled the impartiality that they believed should be given to all, knowing that they themselves were not granted such basic rights.

At the trial’s conclusion, Duggan was found guilty of murder. Having been exonerated in the municipal court by Judge Adlow, however, Duggan was to remain on the police force without consequence. The injustice of the white court’s decision and the lack of power to hold Duggan accountable in the case of the Black People’s Court left the BBUF limited options for seeking justice. So, as a community-based response, the group settled on a “Poster Day” that would “out” Duggan for his crime. The posters included Duggan’s

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93 Brother A. Hassan, “Evaluation: in terms of short, medium, long range effects,” April 10, 1970. SC1, Box 13, Folder 9, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.
94 Hassan.
95 “Black People vs. Walter Duggan.”
96 Leroy Boston, “Poster Day Letter,” May, 6, 1970, SC1, Box 13, Folder 9, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.
Stephen Curwood, “Murder of Franklin Lynch,” *Boston After Dark*, May 26, 1970, SC1, Box 13, Folder 8, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.
conviction as a murderer in the People’s Court, as well as his photograph and home address.97

Two conflicting notions of justice arose from the BBUF’s actions in the case. One is that they were protecting the African American community from a dangerous predator and publishing his picture and address would keep the community wary. Another possible purpose was that the BBUF was endorsing vigilante action against Duggan, although this was denied by BBUF leader Chuck Turner.98 Perhaps both were true at once. In a twist of bitter irony, at the end of his career, Duggan would become the assistant commander of the Community Disorders Unit, the division of the BPD charged with investigating hate crimes.99

Lynch’s killing was not the last time the BBUF would investigate and challenge the official narrative of a police-involved shooting of a Black man. In the two years following Lynch’s murder, Raymond Grady, Derek Culbert, and Thomas Cornell would all be shot by Boston police. Cornell was the only one of these three to die from his wounds, but the other two suffered permanent physical and psychological trauma. While the BBUF investigated the circumstances of each of these shootings, they would only hold a community-wide trial again in Grady’s case.100 As for Culbert and Cornell, the BBUF sought justice through more official channels than they did in the case of Lynch, surprisingly with some success. These victories, however limited, may have been the reason that the leadership of the BBUF did not go to the same lengths that they did in the Lynch case again.

97 Curwood, “Murder.”
98 Turner interview by Carly Caroli.
99 Rakowsky, “Hate Crimes.”
On May 22, 1971, Raymond Grady was shot by a Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority policeman. As in Lynch’s case, a fairly minor squabble escalated to a shooting and took place in a setting—a crowded city bus—that begs one to question the reasoning of the police officer involved. The major difference between Grady and Lynch’s cases was that the former miraculously survived, although part of his brain was removed.101 The damage would ultimately cause Grady to suffer a severe change in his personality and cognition. Deckle McLean of the Boston Globe was skeptical of the officer’s reasons for inserting himself in a conversation between Grady and another passenger, Joseph Jones, going so far as to write that “in no version of this story would the events that produced the shooting have occurred without the instigation of the transit policemen.”

McLean’s investigation found four plausible scenarios that led to Grady’s shooting. The first posited that a fight started between Jones and a white man on the bus. From there, the fight escalated, with two other men getting involved, one Black, and the other white. During the uproar, the second white man, who was an undercover MBTA police officer, shot Grady between the eyes. The second story of what led to the shooting came from the BPD. In this account, Jones swore at a uniformed police officer and then physically assaulted him. Grady joined in to help Jones, and then another white non-uniformed police officer stepped in to help the first one. The third account of the events came from a man who was walking down the street as the events unfolded and interviewed bus passengers afterward. According to witnesses on the bus, Jones was joking around and was told to shut up by a white MBTA policeman. The policeman then grabbed Jones and a fight ensued. Another pair of men, one being Grady, the other a white man in plain clothes, stood up and became involved. The

101 Sister Khadijah, “Brother Shot on MBTA Bus!,” n.d., SC1, Box 13, Folder 5, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.
second white man then shot Grady. All witnesses agreed that neither Black man was armed.
The fourth and final account of the shooting came from the MBTA police. In this telling, Grady and Jones started a fight with a policeman, and encouraged all of the bus passengers to attack the police officers. Then, the uniformed officer fired a round into the roof to scare the crowd. At this point, even though most of the passengers had fled, according to the MBTA police, Jones went for the officer’s gun while Grady attacked the second, plainclothes officer with a razor. The second officer then shot Grady in self-defense.¹⁰²

The findings of the BBUF investigation would later confirm the first and third stories that McLean heard. Witness testimony for the inquest included the driver of the bus, the police, and Grady. According to the bus driver, an MBTA officer had shot a Black teenager and a Black man on the bus, but it was so crowded he could not see what happened until it was over. He did note that he saw the bullet hole in the first victim’s head and that parts of his brain were scattered in the aisle. In a second account from police, a passenger had pulled a gun on the bus driver and the MBTA officer had responded with force.¹⁰³

Finally, in Grady’s account, the facts of the case match the Globe versions of the story where the shooting started as a minor altercation. As he attested from his hospital bed, the problem started when the MBTA officer told Jones to shut up and be quiet. Jones talked back to the officer saying that he was not doing anything wrong. The officer perceived Jones as being insolent and proceeded to grab him. Grady said that he intervened to help Jones because Jones was not doing anything wrong. After that, the plainclothes officer appeared

¹⁰² Deckle McLean, “Four versions of a shooting story…they prove one thing,” Boston Globe, June 29, 1971, SC1, Box 13, Folder 7, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.
¹⁰³ “BBUF Versions of Raymond Grady Shooting,” n.d. SC1, Box 13, Folder 5, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.
and started beating Grady over the head with his gun. Grady did not remember much after that.  

Because the driver’s account so thoroughly differs from that of the police in this case, the idea that someone held up the bus driver can be dismissed. Thus, the likely account is some version that corresponds to the accounts of Grady, the bus driver, and other witnesses. Although the findings of the BBUF shed light on the true events on that MBTA bus, the only action taken was to ask the community to write or call MBTA police headquarters. Even though justice for Grady proved elusive, the following police shooting would yield more tangible results for the BBUF in their fight against police violence.

The next police shooting of a member of Boston’s Black community occurred less than two months later. This time, Derek Culbert was “accidentally” shot on July 19, 1971 while inside the new Dudley Street Police Station #2 by Patrolman Anthony J. Giorgi. Unlike in the murder of Lynch or the permanent crippling of Grady, however, the BBUF would, surprisingly, find a modicum of justice for Culbert. Calling on the Afro-American Patrolman’s League (AAPL) for support, BBUF leadership rallied Black police officers to get Giorgi dismissed. The AAPL was founded in Chicago in 1968 after Officer Edward “Buzz” Palmer was ordered to “shoot to kill” during the uprising following Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination. Initially, the AAPL was led by Palmer and sought to align Black police officers with the needs of their communities, but this stance proved too radical for some and Palmer was eventually forced out. In 1972 the AAPL was merged into the National

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104 Raymond Grady, “Account of Shooting on May 25, 1971,” n.d. SC1, Box 13, Folder 5, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.
105 Khadijah, “Brother Shot.”
106 “Boston Police Shoot 18 Yr. Old Brother,” n.d. SC1, Box 13, Folder 5, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.
107 Turner, “Afro-American Patrolmen.”
Black Police Association. The AAPL’s support furthered the BBUF’s case that police violence against members of the Black community was recognized as a problem by some in their own ranks.

On August 2, 1971, the police commissioner heard from Deputy Superintendent Arthur C. Cadegan regarding complaints against Giorgi, charging him with violating the rules and regulations of the BPD. Giorgi was found guilty and dismissed. In part, credit for the successful removal of a violent police officer can be attributed to the pressure exerted by the BBUF. In contrast to the previous two shootings, the BBUF worked within the existing power structure, rather than the community, to get results. This demonstrates the flexibility with which the BBUF was willing to act in order to improve conditions for African Americans. The frequency of unarmed Black men being shot in seemingly innocuous locations—the hospital, a bus, now a police station—by police may have also finally led the city administration to give in to the Black community’s calls for justice.

Cornell Thomas was the fourth and final unarmed Black victim of a police shooting for whom the BBUF would seek justice. The official narrative of events that led to Thomas’ death was told in several Boston newspapers. According to these accounts, on February 9, 1972, Thomas, a nineteen-year-old, was driving a Volkswagen bus the wrong way down a one-way street. At the same time, Patrolman Richard Armstead was driving in the correct direction and the two narrowly missed each other. Next, the officer opened the driver’s door on the Volkswagen and asked Thomas for his license and registration. In the BPD’s telling,

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109 Police Commissioner Edmund L. McNamara, “Personnel Order No. 3184,” Bureau of Administration, City of Boston Police Department, August 2, 1971, SC1, Box 13, Folder 5, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.
this is the point at which Thomas drove the bus toward Armstead. Fearing for his life, the officer opened fire, hitting Thomas. He died the next day in the hospital of his wounds.\footnote{Bob Di Iorio, “Policeman Shot Fatal to Roxbury Youth, 19,” \textit{Boston Herald-Traveler}, February 11, 1972, SC1, Box 14, Folder 7, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.}

The escalation from a seemingly banal encounter with a police officer to a shooting echoed the Lynch, Grady, and Culbert cases. Just as in Grady’s case, Thomas was also accused of attempting to harm a police officer and thus the BPD argued the violence was justified. In all three of the previous police shootings the BBUF had become involved in, the perpetrating officer was white. In the Thomas case, however, the police officer was African American, further complicating ideas of who can commit acts of police brutality and murder.

Whatever the official news story and BPD accounts of the shooting of another unarmed Black man, the BBUF was determined to gather their own facts as they had in the past. In this case, there were three witnesses who were in the Volkswagen bus when Thomas was shot. Their stories did not mesh with the mainstream narratives and would lead the BBUF to again call for action from the city’s power structure. The three witnesses to Thomas’ shooting, Jerry Kelley, Robert Corry, and Michael Brook, gave BBUF investigators largely identical accounts of how the shooting transpired. Their story conflicted with the official narrative in a few key aspects. First, none of the three said that Thomas drove his Volkswagen bus at the officer. In fact, they claimed that Armstead had already gotten back in his car. It was only after Thomas blocked Armstead from driving off in order to write down his license plate that the officer came over to Thomas again. Second, all three witnesses testified to a disturbing degree of harassment from Armstead. As they remembered it, the officer was angry that Thomas was driving the wrong way down a one-way street and did not immediately show his license and registration to the non-uniformed officer. After Thomas’
refusal to comply, the witnesses stated that Armstead held a gun to Thomas’ head. Furthermore, after shooting Thomas, Armstead ran to the other side of the van, and pulled out Corry at gunpoint. The escalation of this minor traffic infraction into the killing of an unarmed Black man is hard to fathom without attributing gross wrongdoing to the officer involved.

Based on the facts uncovered in their own investigation, the BBUF employed both of the strategies that they had used in the past to seek justice for Thomas. First, they went to the community with the evidence they had gathered. The community concluded that there needed to be an open inquest, that Armstead should be charged with murder, and that he should be suspended from the police force for the duration of the proceedings. Beyond the details specific to the Thomas case, the BBUF also demanded that Mayor White establish a community review board to investigate police violence and to appoint a new police commissioner who would be supportive of that effort.

Mayor White’s response to the BBUF’s demands was less than enthusiastic. On the matter of the investigation into the Thomas shooting, he replied that there was an ongoing inquest at the time of the BBUF’s demands and that the officer had been relieved of duty pending the results of said inquest. He disagreed, however, that any further action should be taken at that point. As for as the larger issues of reform raised by the BBUF, the mayor was strongly opposed to both a community review board or finding a new commissioner. His resistance to a community review board arose from his belief that the head of an organization, in this case the police department, should have full control over who is in his

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111 Jerry Kelley, Robert Corry and Michael Brook, “Witness Testimonies Regarding the Shooting of Cornell Thomas,” February 11 & 14, 1972, SC1, Box 14, Folder 7, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.
112 “Press Release,” Boston, MA: Boston Black United Front, February 23, 1972, SC1, Box 14, Folder 7, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.
employ. The issue of removing the police commissioner was glossed over by stating that his term had expired, but that he would be replaced when the mayor found someone else or he retired.\textsuperscript{113} From this response, it is apparent that Boston’s “progressive” Mayor White was not going to pursue meaningful change in the face of Thomas’ killing.

The successes of the BBUF between 1970 and 1972 in getting justice for police killings were paired with bitter disappointments. Only Grady’s shooting garnered any favorable action from the city power structure. For the others, protests by the BBUF over the shootings were met with hostility or, at best, indifference by the courts, BPD, and City Hall. Rather, most of the BBUF’s success in getting justice for the victims of police violence came from within the Black community. In particular, Lynch’s case, and the protest that followed it, found strong support among Boston’s African Americans. It was in that instance that the BBUF was best able to muster the power of the community to form institutional alternatives to unjust white ones. At the same time, the publicity of the trial, conviction, and poster campaign against Officer Duggan raised awareness among the general public that injustices continued to be perpetrated against Black citizens by the police. The BBUF’s demands for police reform continue to reverberate into the present day with former Mayor Marty Walsh planning to create a civilian review board of police misconduct.\textsuperscript{114}

The shooting of Thomas, in particular, demonstrates the complications of solving racialized policing by simply hiring more Black officers. In Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s, Black officers were hired under the assumption that they would bring their experiences as Black Americans to policing and thus reduce the historic white supremacy rampant in the

\textsuperscript{113} Mayor Kevin H. White, “Letter to the Boston Black United Front,” City of Boston, Office of the Mayor, City Hall Boston, May 3, 1972, SC1, Box 14, Folder 7, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.

police force. Evidence suggests, however, that sometimes even Black police officers thought
that the solution to the problems plaguing their own communities was violence.\textsuperscript{115} This same
problem emerged in the case of the BPD when Armstead killed Thomas over a minor traffic
dispute. Although the BBUF took actions on this killing as well as three others, their holistic
approach to the carceral state was a result of the recognition of the limitations of reforms like
hiring more Black BPD officers. There was an entire power structure working against
Boston’s Black community and other avenues were pursued to chip away at it piece-by-

piece.

\textbf{Black Judges}

Shortly after the acquittal of Officer Duggan in the killing of Lynch, the BBUF would
turn their attention to the matter of Black judges in the Massachusetts court system. This was
not simply a matter of greater representation for the BBUF; it was a matter of life and justice.
Like the BBUF, the BPP also doubted the ability of African Americans to receive fair trials
in the court system. The difference between the two groups, though, was that the BBUF
attempted to create changes through the power structure while the BPP directly challenged it.
In 1968, BPP members rallied in Oakland to protest Huey Newton’s imprisonment for the
killing of a police officer.\textsuperscript{116} Later, in 1970, protests against Bobby Seale’s murder trial
directly challenged the legitimacy of the charges against him in the first place.\textsuperscript{117}

The BBUF’s methods were less confrontational than those of the BPP, but more
systemically focused. Nonetheless, both challenged the legitimacy of a court system that
excluded members of their community from positions that exercised power over Black lives.

\textsuperscript{115} Balto, \textit{Occupied}, 117-122.
\textsuperscript{117} Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, \textit{Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther
Both cases also demonstrated the need to build Black political power, a goal that appeared more realistic in Boston as the black population rapidly grew in the 1960s.

In an appeal to the governor of Massachusetts penned by BBUF leaders, State Representative Royal Bolling and City Councilor Tom Atkins, the United States Constitution was put forth as foundational to their belief that “a man should be judged by his peers.” Continuing, they wrote that the only way to achieve justice in the courts was to have judges who are “sensitive to and understanding of those whom they judge.”118 The message was clear and supported by elected officials from the community: Black people should be judged by Black judges.

The Lynch case drove this point home for the letter’s authors, but also for all the people who supported Duggan’s conviction in the “Black People’s Court” and hung his “wanted” poster outside their homes and businesses. How could a police officer who shot and killed an unarmed Black man in a hospital (and who also accidentally killed another patient) face no legal consequences and retain his job? Viewing the entirety of the criminal justice system as rotten, the BBUF demanded not only change and oversight of the police department, but within the courts as well. This appeal received mainstream media coverage due to its support among prominent Black Bostonians.

The request that the governor appoint Black judges received immediate notice in the Boston Globe. On December 11, 1970, the newspaper noted that the BBUF was particularly interested in seeing the appointment of Black judges to a vacancy in Boston Municipal Court and to a chief clerkship in Dorchester District Court. As quoted in the article, Atkins and Bolling, coauthors of the letter written to the governor, disagreed over the chances of getting

Black judges appointed to these positions. Atkins thought that the governor would be receptive to their request and understood the urgent need for reform. Bolling, on the other hand, was not optimistic, and had heard that a deal had already been made to appoint a “non-Black” person to the open clerkship.\(^{119}\) This divide was reflective of the divide within the BBUF. Its leaders felt the need to continually press for reforms within the local and state justice systems, but also understood that racial biases and historical power imbalances were systemically stacked against them.

According to BBUF leadership, statistics proved that the Massachusetts court system reflected the biases that they associated with white judges overseeing cases involving Black people. Out of a total of 260 judges in the Commonwealth, only three were Black.\(^{120}\) These three judges were only slightly more than one percent of the total, and were not representative of Massachusetts’s African American population. In the estimation of the BBUF, were minorities to be properly represented in the judiciary, their number would comprise closer to ten percent of all judges.\(^{121}\) Furthermore, BBUF leadership protested the beginnings of mass incarceration which, according to them, followed from this disparity. BBUF leaders wrote to Governor Sargent that among the prison population, a growing number included African Americans far beyond their percentage in the general population.\(^{122}\) Black citizens were becoming more entangled with the carceral state, and data supported that contention. In their estimation, one piece of the puzzle for finding justice would involve putting their peers in judgeships in order to give Black defendants a shot at impartiality.

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\(^{119}\) “Black district judges, clerks called for,” *Boston Globe*, December 11, 1970, SC1, Box 13, Folder 4, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.

\(^{120}\) Turner, “Sargeant.”

\(^{121}\) “WILD Memo Regarding Black Judges,” n.d., SC1, Box 13, Folder 4, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.

\(^{122}\) Turner, “Sargeant.”
Boston’s Black community, as in much of the action taken to address police shootings, was the foundation of support for the BBUF in the matter of judicial reform. A petition campaign was launched in order to show citizen support for “being judged by [one’s] peers.” These petitions were then sent to Governor Sargent to show the community’s support for the appointment of more Black and minority judges. Accompanying the petition was the argument from the BBUF that there were plenty of qualified African American lawyers who could be appointed to these positions. However, neither community support nor a qualified pool of candidates could persuade the governor to give the BBUF what they wanted. Throughout the early 1970s, journalists in the Boston Globe would continue to argue that Black judges made up a woefully inadequate percentage of the Massachusetts bench.

In the area of judicial reform, the BBUF were ahead of their time. The white power structure in Massachusetts was much slower to embrace the idea of the judiciary as a reflection of the population, at least as far as that sentiment was extended to the state’s African Americans. However, the recognition that the Black community was increasingly at the mercy of the criminal justice system was on the minds of BBUF leaders well before it was studied in depth and identified as part of the carceral state. It is in this sense that the BBUF’s activities with respect judicial reform can be considered successful. They were unable to change the makeup of Massachusetts’ courts through community-based actions, but in the realm of ideas they planted the seeds of changes advocated by future activists.

123 “WILD.”
124 Turner, “Sargeant.”
Prison Reform

Like the activism that followed police shootings of unarmed Black men in Boston, the BBUF’s Black Community Prison Committee pursued immediate, measurable goals while always keeping in mind the wider ranging societal changes that were their ultimate purpose. Conscious of the importance of both to the community, the committee released a statement of purpose, writing that:

In working for prison “reform” it is important to recognize that “reform” is only a temporary measure. The cries all of the country for “reform” must not be allowed to confuse our real goal, that is, the destruction of the entire institution that permits wanton and unmitigated assault on human decency. Our efforts for “reform” are justified by the reality of a long and arduous [sic] struggle for destruction of the prison system. We must somehow make our concern meaningful to those who will not live to see our goal achieved. It is clear that our goal to free our brothers and sisters from the prisons is synonymous with the struggle to free ourselves from the claws of this decadent giant of a country.126

Embracing this ethos in the early 1970s, the BBUF worked to change conditions in prison as well as for those who would soon finish their sentences. The Charles Street Jail, Deer Island Prison, and Norfolk Prison were the three correctional institutions where they focused their efforts.

Other African American activist groups of the same era recognized the connections between urban poverty, the imprisonment of Black Americans, and the carceral state as well. Most famously, the BPP placed prison abolition in their 1966 Ten Point Program.127 Prominent BPP members like Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, Emory Douglas and others all

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126 “Statement of Purpose,” Black Community Prison Committee, August 16, 1972, SC1, Box 2, Folder 2, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.
127 Murch, Living, 128-9.
had personal brushes with the carceral system as youths and then again as adult activists.\textsuperscript{128} On the receiving end of the United States’ shift from federal responsibility for welfare to the states, Black communities and activists became concerned by the increasing incarceration of Black men. From the perspective of those most likely to be imprisoned, it was not difficult to see the role that prisons played as inner cities sought to deal with poverty by imprisoning the most vulnerable. The BBUF similarly concerned themselves with this piece of the carceral state and had the inspiration of the BPP from a few years prior to help guide them to their ultimate aim of prison abolition.

The Charles Street Jail was the first piece of the Boston prison complex that the BBUF saw as ripe for reform. Built in 1848, by the early 1970s conditions in the jail were so deplorable that two commissions had called for its complete demolition and two others had called it inhumane. Nonetheless, the jail continued to hold approximately 300 prisoners awaiting trial.\textsuperscript{129} Attempting to improve conditions at the jail, the BBUF appealed to Suffolk County Sheriff Thomas Eisenstadt, the person in charge of the facility, but with little success. In an April 30, 1970 letter to Eisenstadt, the Prison Committee thanked him for his assistance with creating rules and regulations for inmates and personnel, something that had not previously existed at Charles Street, but lamented his unwillingness to meet with them to continue the work.\textsuperscript{130}

In a terse response on May 1, 1970, Eisenstadt offered to arrange a meeting between the committee and Master Edward V. Handwerk, an official at the jail.\textsuperscript{131} The committee did

\textsuperscript{128} Murch, 66.
\textsuperscript{130} John T. Williams, “Charles Street Jail,” The Prison Committee of the Black United Front, April 30, 1970. SC1, Box 2, Folder 2, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.
\textsuperscript{131} Thomas S. Eisenstadt, “Letter to Mr. Williams,” May 1, 1970. SC1, Box 2, Folder 2, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.
meet with Handwerk on May 14, but had expected Eisenstadt to attend as well. The sheriff never showed up. Adding to the insult was the fact that Handwerk first denied knowing about the rules and regulations submitted by the committee. Later, upon reflection, Handwerk recalled the proposal, but said he knew nothing of its status within the sheriff’s office. This was the end of the BBUF’s first attempt at prison reform. While unsuccessful, this experience, as well as the one with Deer Island Prison, would inform the group’s tactics as they continued to work on other prison reform efforts.

Deer Island, a peninsula in Massachusetts Bay not far from Boston, served as a prison from Massachusetts’ colonial era until its demolition in 1991. In the twentieth century, the prison was known to be rat-infested and dirty. One member of the demolition team went so far as to equate conditions in the prison to those in a dungeon. Nonetheless, almost 1,000 prisoners were living there at the time of the renovations. When the BBUF fought for reforms twenty years prior to this assessment, the conditions were the same. In fact, for Black prisoners, Deer Island was not only terrible physically, but run by a racist administration that deprived them of their rights.

On July 23, 1970, prisoners at Deer Island began a hunger strike to protest degrading physical and psychological conditions. According to Robert Jackson, then an inmate at the prison, they were peacefully protesting for better food, medical care, family visitation rights, and an end to the racism and exploitation exhibited by the prison administration. Urging the BBUF to form a committee to assist incarcerated African Americans, Jackson was looking

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for an outside group that could advocate for their interests. Later that September, the group would meet with Dexter Eure of the *Boston Globe*, who urged the committee to expand their focus to all prisons, not just the one on Deer Island. The committee would go on to work on issues at Norfolk Prison and with soon to be released prisoners, but first they focused on Deer Island.

The actions that the BBUF Prison Committee took with respect to Deer Island continued the method they employed with the Charles Street Jail. Namely, appealing to the leadership of the prison’s administration. In the case of Deer Island, the BBUF again worked with Boston City Councilman Atkins, later a leader with the NAACP, to write an appeal to Commissioner Joseph McBrine of the Penal Institutions Department of the City of Boston. Atkins focused on the lack of jobs granted to Black prisoners during their incarceration, the racism of those in charge of the prison, abysmal sanitary conditions, and lack of adequate food. Strikingly, he noted, the accusation of racism had to be taken seriously because an estimated eighty-percent of the prison’s inmates were Black. There is no evidence that Deer Island changed its practices due to internal pressure from the prisoners or from the BBUF’s external efforts, but it would inform the group’s change in strategy at Norfolk and lead to their most successful effort at prison reform.

The conditions at Norfolk were not much different than the Charles Street Jail or Deer Island Prison. Inmates listed a diverse array of complaints regarding censorship, rule of law,
food, visitation, discipline, civil rights, education, work, medical care, and recreation.\textsuperscript{137} Likely due to the failures they experienced in trying to work with the administrators of Charles Street and Deer Island, the BBUF employed a different tactic when working on reforms at Norfolk. This time, the Prison Committee worked directly with the Act Committee, a group formed by Norfolk inmates. At the June 23, 1971 meeting of the Prison Committee, the group agreed unanimously to work as an arm of the Act Committee to facilitate action in the community and communication on prison reform.\textsuperscript{138} After a year of trying to work through official channels, the BBUF was fed up with the absence of progress.

This change in tactics acknowledged the BBUF’s failure to work through official channels, but it presented a new path forward to find justice in the Massachusetts prison system. Seven months prior to the June 23 Prison Committee meeting, the BBUF started the Pre-Release Assistance Program. In a candid assessment of the program, the BBUF acknowledged a great deal of frustration, but listed successes in employment and housing for those recently released from Norfolk. Suggestions for building on these successes included supplying the recently incarcerated with behavioral services, hiring more Black and “Spanish” prison personnel, hiring more Black parole officers, allowing inmates to have job interviews prior to release, and, for those who would soon be paroled, allowing them outside of the prison during the day.\textsuperscript{139}

After two failed attempts at reform, the BBUF turned to the area where they had the power to act: Boston’s Black community. If they could not get prison administrations to

\begin{footnotes}
\item[137] “List of Inmates’ Complaints: Norfolk Prison,” n.d. SC1, Box 2, Folder 2, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.
\item[138] “Prison Committee Meeting,” June 23, 1971.
\item[139] “Pre-Release Assistance Program Assessment,” June 17, 1971, Boston Black United Front, SC1, Box 2, Folder 2, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.
\end{footnotes}
budge, they decided to work with prisoners at Norfolk through the Act Committee and give them hope once they were paroled. It is significant that the suggestions the Committee made to continue to improve inmates’ conditions were once again aimed at reforming Norfolk at the institutional level, rather than at the level of individual prisoners. This indicates that members of the Prison Committee understood the realities of the power dynamics they were facing, but continued to believe larger changes could be instituted at prisons in furtherance of the ultimate goal of prison abolition.

**The Community Security Agency**

Unlike police shootings, judicial appointments, or prisons, BBUF efforts on security were focused entirely inward. Other BBUF reforms often tried to change institutions that affected the Black community—or at least gain concessions from them—but with the formation of the Community Security Agency (CSA), the BBUF took policing into their own hands. Community patrols were not unique to the BBUF, however, with discussions of street patrols occurring in California at least as early as 1966. Most famously, Huey Newton’s Black Panther Party (BPP) fielded armed patrolmen, but their primary purpose was to stop police violence. In contrast, the CSA’s purpose was to prevent street crime. Newton was also critical of earlier community patrols, specifically those in Watts, because they attempted to work with the police to some extent.\(^{140}\) The CSA, unlike the more militant BPP, made limited attempts to work with the BPD and therefore their efforts were more akin to the efforts in Watts than the insurgent model presented by the BPP.

What the CSA lacked in formal legal recognition it made up for in support from Black businesses, non-profits, and citizens. The Urban League, Roxbury Multi-Service

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\(^{140}\) Murch, *Living*, 132.
Center, Roxbury Action Program, and Tenants’ Association of Boston were among the organizational members of the CSA whose representatives were interested in preventing “Black People committing crime against Black People.” Safety was paramount in these efforts, but there was also explicit recognition by BBUF leadership that there could be no economic growth within the Black community if crime was allowed to continue unabated.

In this way, the CSA brought together the radical and moderate wings of their coalition by combining community-based policing and the protection of Black businesses. The CSA not only put security patrols on the streets of Boston, but also gathered data on crime in the Black community.

The robbery of Unity Bank in December 1970, along with the murders of two security guards at Freedom Foods on August 14, 1971, were the catalysts that brought the CSA to fruition, but the problem of crime had been on community member’s minds for quite some time. Seventy-two people from the Black community were surveyed by the CSA and the results showed a community ravaged by crime and lacking trust in the police department. Twenty-five percent of the respondents’ houses had been robbed. At the same time, over forty percent of respondents did not think that calling white police officers would do any good. Finally, over ninety-four percent of those surveyed said that they would support a Black police force within the community—effectively endorsing the creation of the CSA.

To protect themselves, CSA members sat down with Black Boston police officers to learn the extent to which they could operate while not running afoul of the law. Topics

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141 “Summary Minutes,” Community Meeting on Crime, Shaw House, November 10, 1970, SC1, Box 4, Folder 2, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.
142 “The Community Security Agency,” n.d., SC1, Box 4, Folder 2, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.
144 “Survey of Seventy-Two People,” Community Security Service, Boston Black United Front, n.d., SC1, Box 4, Folder 2, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.
discussed at the August 10, 1971 meeting included how the officers could best serve the community and the differences between community and personal property rights.\textsuperscript{145} In this case, the BBUF attempted to liaise with the BPD, but limited their focus to Black officers only. This was consistent with the findings of the survey that found vast amounts of distrust with white police officers among Boston’s African Americans. It would be another six months until Cornell Thomas was shot by a Black Boston police officer, even eroding the Black community’s trust in Black officers. The police shootings prior to Thomas’ had already divided the community from the BPD, but, in those cases, the offending officer had been white. When Thomas was shot by a Black officer, the notion that more representation in the BPD would lead to systemic change was challenged.

Beginning in 1970 and continuing into 1971, CSA patrols walked the streets of Jamaica Plain, Dudley, Columbia Point, and the South End, noting the racial make-up of the neighborhood and assessing security needs. According to some of these reports, it appears other community security services were already operating to some extent and that the CSA patrols acted as a liaison between them and the BBUF.\textsuperscript{146} This role was in keeping with the role of the BBUF as an “umbrella” organization that brought community members and groups together to act with common purpose. Fielding their own patrols, however, demonstrated their commitment to direct action as well.

When it comes to security, success is hard to measure. The CSA’s patrols may have prevented crime, but there is rarely evidence of a crime that someone did not commit. Therefore, the BBUF’s security efforts alone cannot be considered either a resounding

\textsuperscript{145} Mukiya, “Communication & Security Committee Meeting,” Elite Restaurant, August 6, 1971, SC1, Box 4, Folder 2, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.
\textsuperscript{146} Akbar Kuballah, “Community Security Service Information Report,” The Boston Black United Front, October 12-17, 1970, SC1, Box 4, Folder 2, Roxbury Community College Special Collections.
success or an abject failure. Rather, they must be viewed in the larger context of all the
criminal justice reforms that the BBUF undertook at the time. They were but one tool that the
BBUF sought to use in their arsenal to find justice in a system that offered very little to Black
people. While the CSA was operating, there was a large degree of support from Boston’s
Black community, so much so that business owners, concerned citizens, politicians, and
activists all contributed to it.\textsuperscript{147}

When contrasted with Fortner’s “Silent Majority,” the history of the CSA paints a
dramatically different picture of the Black community’s stance on crime—at least in Boston—and
the way that community members envisioned stopping it. In Fortner’s telling, the
carceral state grew from Black Americans’ victimhood at the hands of criminals in their
communities. Then, after experiencing rising crime in inner cities, it was African Americans
who wanted more punitive measures and hence the rise of the carceral state.\textsuperscript{148} The history of
the CSA shows that Black Bostonians were concerned with crime in their neighborhood.
However, the narrative departs from Fortner’s analysis after that point.

The BBUF and the residents of Roxbury, Mattapan, Dorchester, and the South End
did not look to the state for a solution. Instead, they looked to their community’s ability to
organize and operationalize security measures. When combined with the BBUF’s stance on
prisons, it is apparent that not all Black communities favored the punitive approach that
would continue to grow in coming decades, but that some actively worked against it.
Moreover, it raises the question of whether a true majority actually wanted the punitive
solutions that were handed down by the state. In the case of Boston, the answer was a
resounding no.

\textsuperscript{147} “Meeting on Crime,” Summary Minutes.
\textsuperscript{148} Fortner, \textit{Silent Majority}. 89
Police shootings, courts, prisons, and crime occupied the BBUF during their most active years in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Unlike prior activist groups in Boston, the BBUF was not focused on changing one aspect of a system they viewed as unjust. Instead, the BBUF focused on immediate issues like police violence against unarmed Black men and street crime as well as institutional sources of injustice like courts and prisons. Thus, their vision of reform and fairness on matters of crime was systemic. They were fighting immediate and long-term problems, but the goal was always a more just, and ultimately non-existent, carceral state. At the same time, BBUF leadership understood what was possible and sought to accomplish what they could while looking toward the future.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Capital flight, urban renewal, and migration drove the carceral turn in Massachusetts and Boston in the middle of the twentieth century. Combined with the long-standing racism of police, judges, prison wardens, and others in positions of power, Boston’s African Americans, like urban Black communities nationwide, were over-policed and under-protected. This dual effect was not well understood by scholars and activists outside the community at the time. It seems contradictory that Boston’s Black population would have been unsafe when encounters with the carceral state were increasing, but because those encounters were often violent in the case of individual officers or unfair in the case of courts and prisons, distrust and fear developed. As crime rose within Boston’s Black community the BPD and the criminal justice system were viewed as a threat rather than a solution.

Within this context, the history of the BBUF’s criminal justice activities offers new perspectives. For one, it shows that, for a time, Boston’s Black community was simultaneously concerned with Massachusetts’ carceral apparatus and the street crime that was plaguing their community. Most scholarship has focused on the institutions or social forces that led to the brutal policing and imprisonment of millions today. This has left out almost any accounting of what Black communities across the country did to try to stem the overwhelming tide of money and resources that were going into the carceral approach to managing society. Of course, Fortner does focus on the Black community, but largely to
show that the majority of Black Americans—at least in Harlem—favored the “tough on crime” approach that quickly became today’s carceral state.\textsuperscript{149} As the history of the BBUF establishes, this is not the whole picture. The BBUF’s example shows that their vision laid the groundwork for a form of justice that paired safety with freedom from state oppression.

Another historical aspect of the BBUF that has been overlooked is community cohesion. From rallies against police violence to community patrols, the BBUF was able to engage community members across class and ideological lines. Much of the groundwork began in the early 1960s protest movements, but the BBUF channeled that energy toward criminal justice like no one had before. The unity that the BBUF was able to achieve over a sustained period reveals a shared understanding throughout the Black community that something needed to be done about the carceral apparatus and crime. Debates occurred within community meetings and committees about what exactly the operational aspects of this change would be, but there was widespread agreement about what needed to change.

A third important aspect of the BBUF’s history is the confluence of economics and racism. While there is a debate in the literature over which drove the growth of the carceral state more, the history of the BBUF continues the conversation about how they are connected. Boston’s Black community was disproportionately affected by shifts in capital, construction, and demographics because of the long legacy of racism. In 1960s and 1970s Boston, a feedback loop between economic dislocation and racism occurred. Those who were most racially marginalized became the most economically marginalized. Economic vulnerability led to dislocation, which caused further fraying of the social fabric, and people

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\textsuperscript{149} Fortner, \textit{Silent Majority}.
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turned to crime out of desperation. The carceral state was then the white power structure’s solution to the problems of poverty and racism as the Keynesian era waned.

Fourth, the BBUF’s use of media like posters, newspapers, newsletters, and word of mouth to spread news of injustice within the community and to organize resistance strategy prefigured the social media organizing and doxxing of today. Publishing Walter Duggan’s photograph, name, and address on posters after Franklin Lynch’s murder was an especially bold move that finds direct parallels with Black Lives Matter. The BBUF may have been trying to protect their community by warning people about dangerous officers, but they also may have been insinuating that someone should take justice into their own hands. Much like protesters who “out” white supremacists and violent police officers today, the BBUF were outing racist cops in the analog age. There is a fine line between vigilance and vigilantism that all protesters must straddle. Some may believe they went too far in Duggan’s case, but at the heart of the matter was that the BBUF understood that change rarely occurs when those who are oppressed remain silent. Using the tools available, they made their community’s anger felt in such a way that both Black and white Bostonians could no longer ignore problems of criminal justice.

A fifth important aspect of the BBUF’s history of combatting the carceral state was their willingness to work both within relevant institutions and outside of them. To address police shootings of unarmed Black men, judgeships, and prisons, the BBUF tried to negotiate changes with the mayor, wardens, the governor, and other people in positions of power, often writing letters or requesting meetings. At the same time, however, the BBUF were realistic about the limits to which the white power structure would accommodate the Black

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community’s demands for justice. After the police shootings in the early 1970s, the BBUF was willing to investigate, litigate, sentence, and protest what they and many in the Black community saw as grave injustices. Likewise, in the case of prisons, the BBUF worked directly with inmates to try to spur change. The CSA was an entirely community-driven enterprise that protected African American sections of Boston in lieu of police support. The dichotomous nature of action by the BBUF showed a strong sense of realism when confronting the carceral state and demonstrates that long-term changes required a multipronged approach.

A final element of the BBUF’s approach that remains significant is their understanding of the systemic nature of the carceral state. This understanding extended not only to the interconnected elements of policing, the judiciary, prisons, and crime, but also to economics, politics, and quality of life. Leaders on the Security Committee made the connection between stopping robberies and killings and the ability of small businesses to thrive. The Pre-Release Assistance Program was another example of the link between the carceral state, prosperity, and, ultimately, freedom. The BBUF in the late 1960s and early 1970s understood these connections and the need to address them systematically because they and their community lived them on a daily basis.

At the same time, the history of the BBUF demonstrates the limits of a community-based approach to systemic social problems. The BBUF regularly turned to Boston’s Black community for support because they were rebuffed by the white power structure. In the long-term, however, this approach failed to stop police violence, mass incarceration, or street crime. It offered an alternative community-based model to the carceral state, but could only have been sustainable with support from federal and state governments. Without that support,
the problems of poverty were met with an increasing reliance on violent policing and increasing imprisonment, while crime continued unabated.

Even though the carceral state continued to grow after the BBUF’s demise, the accomplishments of the group continued to bear fruit over the long-term. In 2004, Lenny Durant, a former BBUF leader, provided the Roxbury Community College Library Special Collections with an assessment of their original Twenty-One Demands, finding that in some form or fashion almost all had been achieved. Addressing demand three, that all police stations in the Black community should be overseen by Black captains, Durant writes that the two precincts in Black districts of Boston had achieved that goal.151 This shows that the BBUF were ahead of their time in their assessment of the carceral state as a growing problem. By making these demands, considered radical by the white power structure and even the NAACP, the BBUF planted seeds that over time became accepted as reasonable solutions to the carceral state. The slow, piecemeal achievement of many of the goals of the Twenty-One Demands has not changed Boston the way the BBUF envisioned, nor has it oriented Boston away from carceral solutions. Nonetheless, the legacy of their achievements has opened up spaces and conversations for new activism and organizing.

The connections between contemporary activism around criminal and racial justice and the BBUF are clear. They are united across time in their opposition to the carceral state. What is different today is that many urban leaders are less equivocal in their support for police, judicial, and prison reform. Mayors in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Boston have all expressed solidarity with the goals of the BLM movement to a degree unheard of in

151 “Historical Note,” Collection Overview, Boston, MA: Boston Black United Front, Roxbury Community College Library Special Collections.
the late 1960s or 1970s. Some of this difference can be attributed to the greater diversity in city constituencies and leadership. Another part of increased scrutiny of the carceral state can be attributed to its sheer size. A final part can be attributed to groups that fought the carceral state early on. The BPP is the most famous example of resistance to police oppression, but the rich history of the BBUF’s activities show that it too is part of the legacy that has brought criminal justice reform into the American consciousness. As a significant part of Boston’s history, the BBUF’s legacy calls for a greater understanding among scholars and the general public. Their history is a crucial link that connects the civil rights and Black Power eras in Boston and reverberates in today’s ongoing protests against the carceral state.

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