

Chicago launches new fig leaf police oversight agency

By George Marlowe
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On September 15th, the city of Chicago launched a new police oversight agency, the Civilian Office of Police Accountability (COPA), to replace the widely discredited previous agency, the Independent Police Review Authority (IPRA).

The formation of the new agency is a cosmetic reform aimed at placating growing opposition to violence by Chicago police. The toothless character of the new “civilian oversight” agency was underscored by the fact that it was launched without the Civilian Advisory Board proposed by some critics of the administration.

The Chicago Police Department is one of the most brutal in the country, synonymous with police murder and the use of CIA-style “black sites” to interrogate suspects, such as the infamous facility on Homan Square exposed by investigative journalists two years ago. The Obama Justice Department report in January documented a long history of unconstitutional practices and crimes committed by Chicago police. The Justice investigation found that IPRA was complicit in helping officers hide evidence and maintain a code of silence, “causing officers to believe there is not much to lose if they lie to cover up misconduct.”

As always, the report did not result in federal civil rights charges being filed against Chicago police officers or administrators, consistent with the Obama administration’s defense of killer cops. Instead, it recommended the city enter into a court-enforced consent decree, to enact reforms, which was opposed by the incoming Trump administration.

The creation of COPA and the phasing out of IPRA was in response to the mass outrage over the police murder of teenager Laquan McDonald by officer Jason Van Dyke in October 2014. McDonald’s murder, which was caught on video, was covered up for over a

year by Rahm Emanuel, the Democratic mayor of Chicago, and the rest of the political establishment. The mayor’s office, the State Attorney Anita Alvarez and the Chicago Police Department (CPD) conspired to keep the tape a secret. The video of McDonald’s was only released after protracted court proceedings initiated by an independent investigative journalist.

IPRA was implicated in the cover-up of McDonald, as well as systemic police abuse and violence. It worked with the Emanuel administration to keep the video of McDonald’s murder from surfacing. Alongside the city’s other police review organizations—including the Bureau of Internal Affairs (BIA), the Chicago Police Board and the Inspector General—the leadership of IPRA under Scott Ando failed to investigate or stop systematic police violence in Chicago.

Since its creation in 2007 by previous Democratic Mayor, Richard Daley, IPRA failed to investigate incidents of police violence or hold officers accountable. Investigations of police shootings in nearly every case ended with the agency ruling the officer’s use of force justified. Of more than 400 police shootings, IPRA found only three to have violated the use of force guidelines set by the city. Many other cases still remain open without investigation. According to a *Chicago Tribune* investigation, the agency recommended punishment in only 1.7 percent of cases—out of 2,000 it handles each year.

IPRA also repeatedly ignored its own data on repeat offenders. Jason Van Dyke, the police officer that shot McDonald sixteen times, had over twenty citizen complaints against him. The organization’s *de facto* code of silence enabled a reign of police violence to continue with the full sanction of two Democratic administrations.

IPRA itself was created in response to popular outrage over an earlier cover-up in 2007 by the police department's internal Office of Professional Standards (OPS), which IPRA replaced. In February of that year, officer Anthony Abbate brutally beat bartender Karolina Obrycka, but was only arrested following the release by Obrycka's attorneys of security video of the assault. Obrycka later won \$850,000 in damages in a civil suit after a jury found that Abbate and his superiors conspired to cover up the incident, in line with the department's longstanding "code of silence" over police violence.

IPRA inherited the same staff as the OPS, which had systematically protected police officers from any independent oversight. According to one statistical study by the University of Chicago Law School, investigations carried out by the OPS between 2002 and 2004 did not result in any "meaningful discipline" and "only two out of every 10,000 incidents in which civilians believe that they have been abused."

COPA, in turn, inherited much of the former staff from IPRA, including Sharon Fairley, the former head of the agency. The new organization currently has at least 25 other officials who previously worked in IPRA. The rest of the current executive leadership of COPA consists of figures who worked closely with law enforcement or worked as former police officers. Mia Sissac, who will serve as its Public Information Officer, served previously under Fairley in IPRA; her background includes public relations and "crisis management." Helen O'Shaughnessy, the General Counsel of COPA, has a history of providing legal defense for police officers.

On the day before COPA took over its responsibilities from IPRA, and in an apparent maneuver designed to promote the creation of COPA as a new era in police oversight, officials released a dashcam video of a police shooting. The video shows a police sergeant shooting and wounding a teenager during a routine traffic stop, which reportedly occurred on the same street as the victim's house. However, no charges or internal discipline have been announced against the officers involved in the shooting.

Fairley has recently stated that she will resign her position as the head of COPA and run for Illinois Attorney General. While Emanuel has not named an official interim replacement for Fairley, it is rumored

that Walter Katz may take her place. Katz, a former independent police auditor from San Jose, was initially slated to become the city of Chicago's deputy chief of staff for public safety and liaison to the CPD, to a tune of \$165,000.

In the weeks after its launch, COPA is still hiring investigation supervisors. Investigation supervisors are required to be certified lead homicide investigators. The positions will be filled by those with past law enforcement experience, figures close to the police apparatus or even former police officers.

Recently, Attorney General Lisa Madigan, daughter of Illinois Speaker of the State House Michael Madigan, filed a federal lawsuit against the city of Chicago to negotiate a court-enforced consent decree. Emanuel has said that he is ready to skip litigating Madigan's suit and begin negotiating a consent decree.

Whatever terms are agreed upon between Emanuel and Madigan will do nothing to curb the endless violence unleashed upon the working class by the police in Chicago. Such proposals for court-enforced reform, as well as the creation of a new agency of police oversight, speak to the nervousness of different layers of the political establishment to the widespread anger of the population to the endless police violence seen around the country. However, those political figures chiefly responsible for the violence unleashed by the capitalist state—including Emanuel—have not been held accountable in any form.

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