

# The Minneapolis Park Police Explained: Issue One

On the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board and their police force



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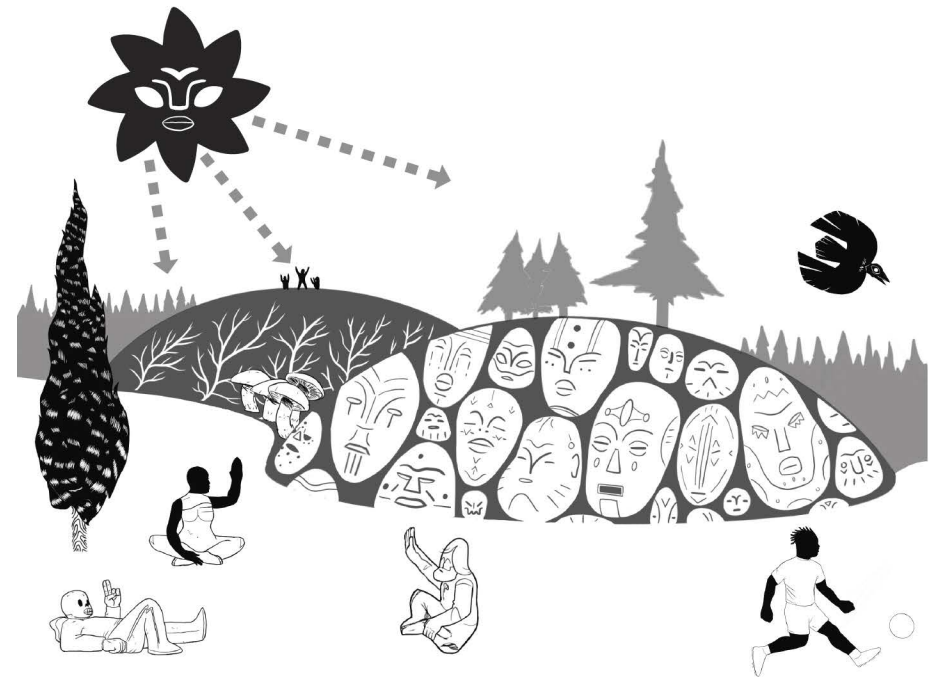
### About the Authors

Parks and Power is a long-term organizing campaign by Hope Community to find and support community leaders and community-led strategic actions to advance racial, gender, and economic justice in the Minneapolis parks system. Our team supports leaders and campaigns through outreach, one-to-one visits, accessible and learner-centered workshops, listening sessions, and other entry-point activities. We connect leaders with other leaders to build power and momentum for grassroots movements centered around safe, accessible parks for all.

Some recent work includes supporting Black homeowners in North Minneapolis facing expensive, forced tree removals ordered by the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB) and creating more community engagement in the budgeting process for the \$130 million MPRB budget. As a part of our park equity focus, we also organize around the Minneapolis Park Police and their impacts on community members' experience of safety in the parks.

This is the first part of a series of zines about the Minneapolis Park Police, their role in Minneapolis, their particular history, and what community safety programs that don't rely solely on police can look like. In this zine, we've pulled together some relevant background information about the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board and the Minneapolis Parks Police. In future parts of the series, we will use history, political analysis, and art to build a shared understanding of both the current landscape of policing in Minneapolis parks and what systems of radical community care can come next.

We envision a world where everyone has the freedom to enjoy green spaces without the looming threats of interpersonal or police violence. It is a fundamental democratic right to be able to gather safely and build community in parks, especially for people who were historically shut out and kept away from parks. We know systems of community safety rooted in solidarity, accountability, and meeting people's material needs are not only possible, but necessary.



Parks should be healing spaces where everyone feels safe, comfortable, and joyful, and we will continue educating and agitating until that is the case.

## What is the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board?

The Minneapolis park system is one of the largest in the United States. With over 180 parks spanning 6,800 acres of land, it was ranked as the third best park system in the country by the Trust for Public Land in 2023 based on park size, investments, amenities and access.<sup>1</sup> From 2013 to 2018, it was ranked as the #1 parks system in the country.<sup>2</sup> There is no question that the Minneapolis parks system is large – lots of people have access to at least some green space in their communities. However, since the parks system's founding, there have been decades of systemic inequities that still need to be addressed; by and large, parks have been planned, resourced, and managed by rich white folks, for rich white folks. This is partially because the Minneapolis parks system is governed by a political institution that historically has not listened to and engaged BIPOC and working-class people in a meaningful way; people who have very different experiences and needs of the parks as compared to their whiter, wealthier counterparts.

Instead of parks falling under the purview of city council, the Minneapolis park system has its own governing body, the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board (MPRB). The MPRB is an independent board of nine people who are elected every four years. They are responsible for governing, maintaining, developing, and managing operations of the Minneapolis park system. The decisions they make are carried out by park department employees.

So why does it matter that there is a separate board of people who make decisions about the parks system? One reason is that the MPRB is the largest landowner in the city, owning 18% of the land in Minneapolis.<sup>3</sup> This means they hold an immense amount of power and should be subject to the same amount of scrutiny as the Minneapolis City Council. Another reason is that the MPRB has their own armed police force, the Minneapolis Park Police, patrolling both Minneapolis parks and the city at large.

## Total Land Owned by MPRB

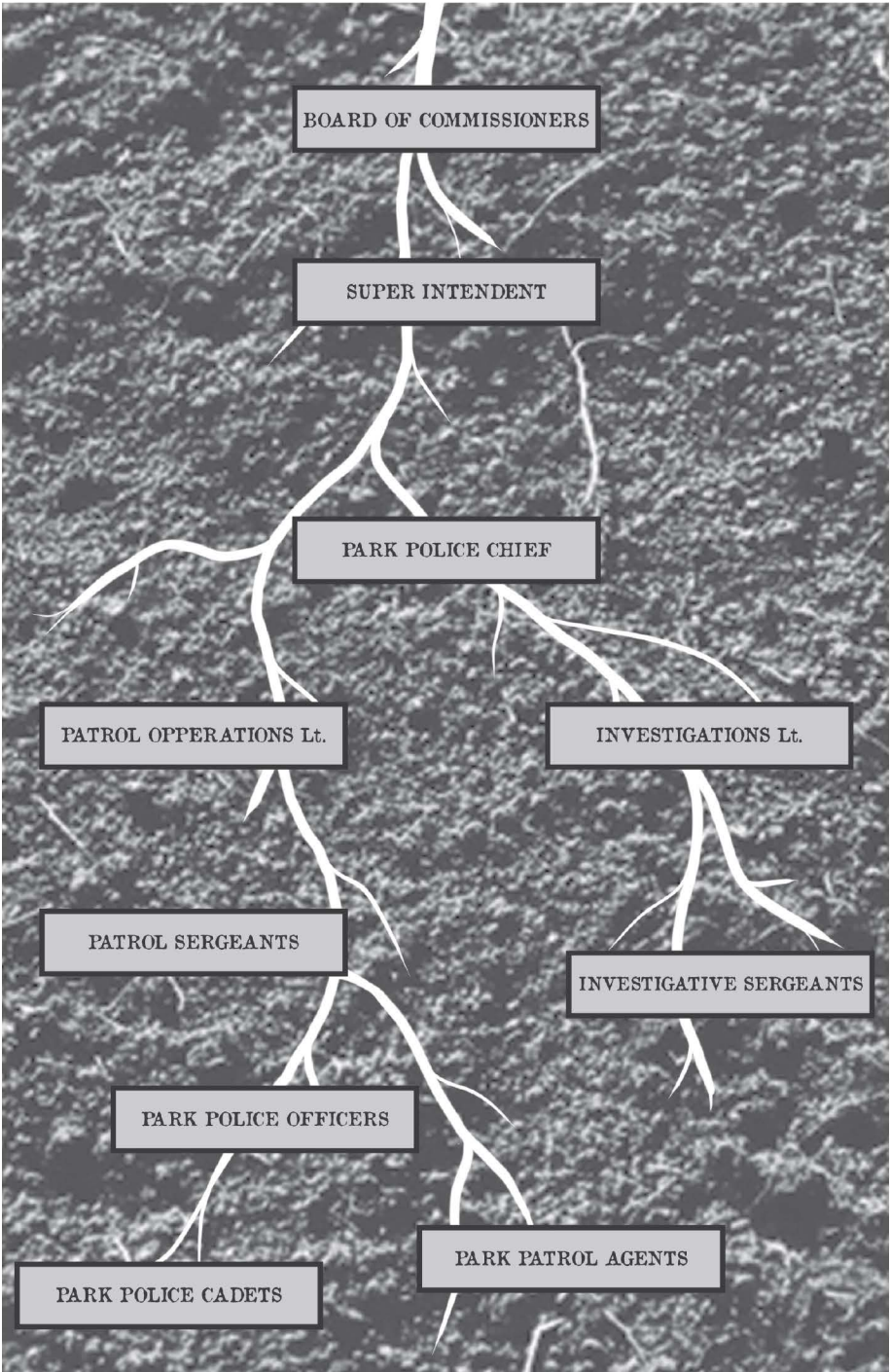
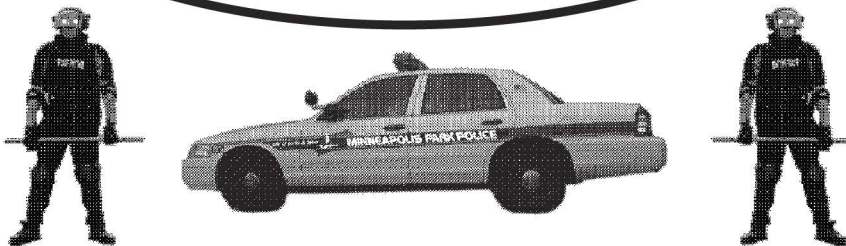


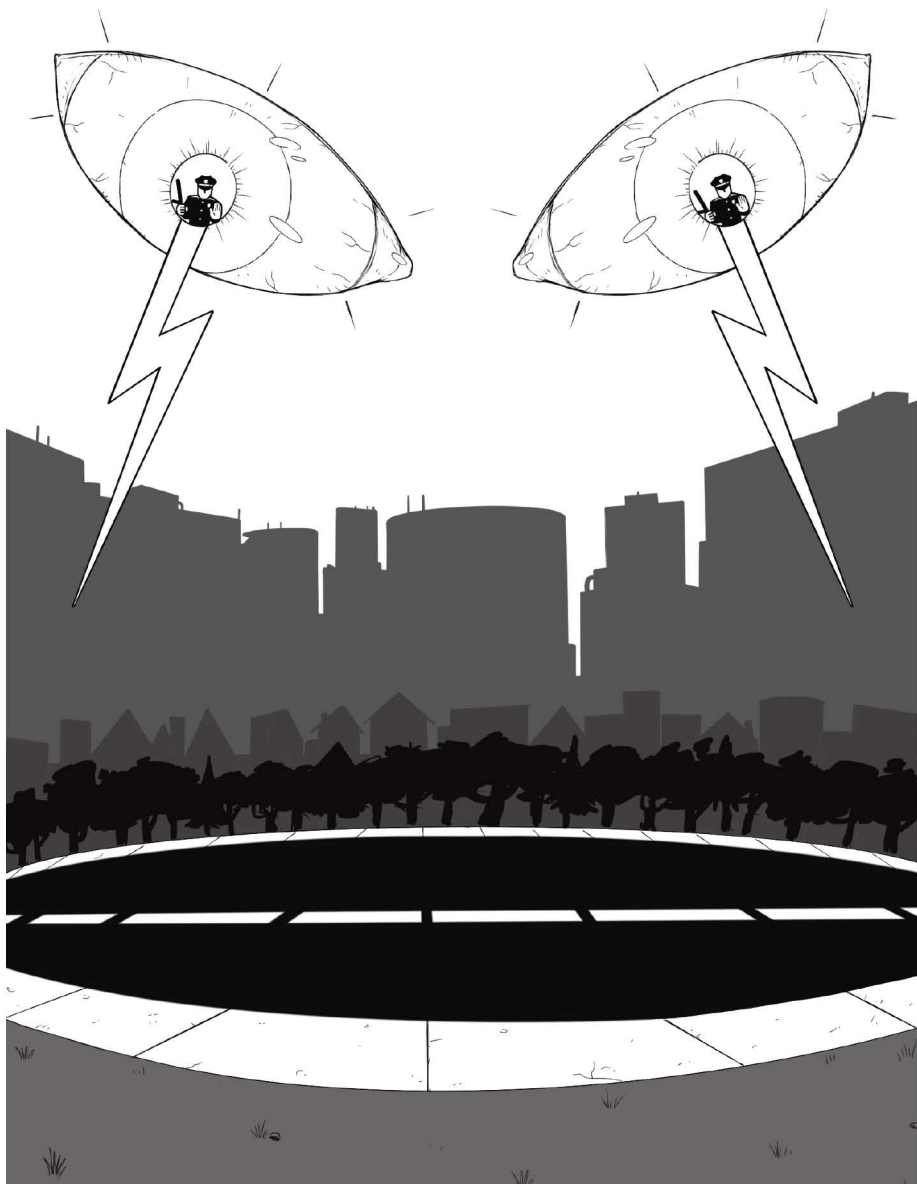
Who are the Minneapolis Park Police and how are they different from the Minneapolis Police Department?

The Minneapolis Park Police are the police force of the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board. They are responsible for enforcing the ordinances (i.e. local laws) of the MPRB. The Minneapolis Park Police are separate from the much larger Minneapolis Police Department (MPD). Overall, there are 34 sworn Park Police officers, with two more positions having been added in 2023.<sup>4</sup>

Although they train at the same academy, are a part of the same union, and respond to each other's calls, the Minneapolis Police Department and the Park Police are two separate entities that are accountable to different institutions. MPD is ultimately accountable to the Mayor of Minneapolis, while the Park Police are accountable to the Superintendent of the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board.<sup>5</sup> The Superintendent, in turn, is appointed by and accountable to the Board of Commissioners.

This is significant because the MPRB is a highly influenceable institution that many people overlook, but it has the power to lead the city in piloting methods to prevent crime that aren't police. For example, youth recreation and sports programs are a proven and cost-effective way to prevent crime and delinquency at the root.<sup>6</sup>





While accountability differs, the officers' jurisdiction does not. MPD officers have authority to patrol in parks and Park Police officers have authority to police throughout the city.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, working for the Park Police can be viewed as a stepping stone of sorts, since many officers begin with patrolling the parks and move on to work for MPD so they can grow into doing the investigative work that is mainly led by MPD.

Although they don't do the bulk of investigative work, the Minneapolis Park Police are armed, which is rare among park police forces in the United States. Only three of the most populous 25 cities in the United States have armed park police - San Antonio, TX, San Jose, CA, and Nashville, TN<sup>8</sup> (Minneapolis is not included on that list since it is ranked 46th in population size.)<sup>9</sup> This means the Minneapolis Park Police carry guns, they can arrest, and their jurisdiction isn't limited to the parks, allowing them to collaborate with MPD and other agencies across the city. Why is policing outside of the parks necessary if their mission is strictly relegated to "preserving and ensuring safe parks for all visitors and staff"?<sup>10</sup> Why is carrying guns necessary when less than 1% of violent crimes occur in parks when comparing the ten-year averages?<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the blurred lines between Park Police and MPD serve to increase policing coverage in the city as a whole, making sure that there is always an officer nearby no matter the uniform. For many white people, knowing an officer is always close by can make them feel more comfortable. However, for many Black, brown, and Indigenous peoples, the ever-present police in their communities can cause fear, discomfort, and unease.

## SOURCES

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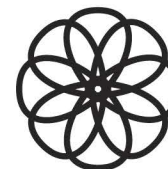
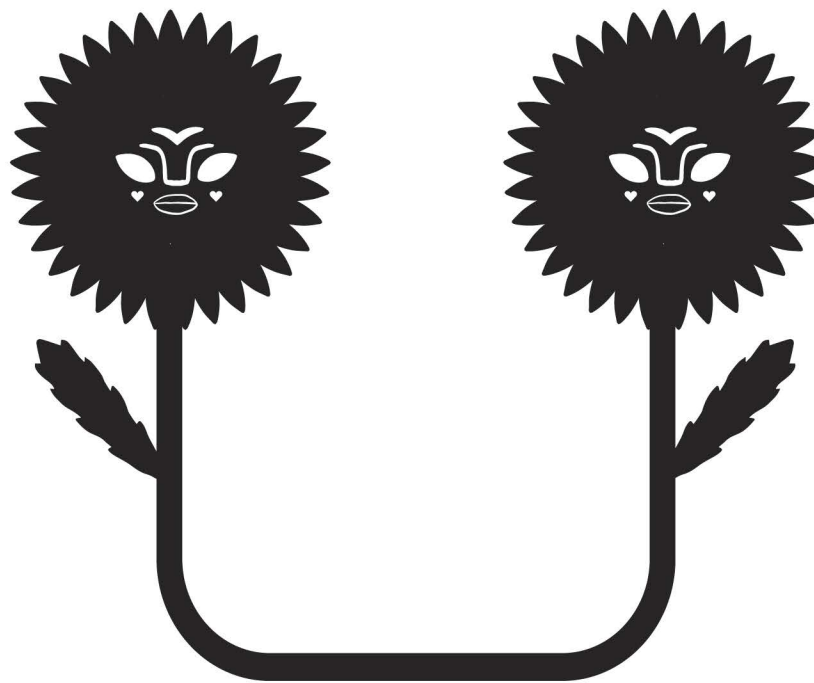
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How do your past experiences with police inform your reaction to seeing officers in your community? If you have questions, concerns, reactions, or testimonies of your experiences with the Park Police, please reach out to Parks and Power organizer Pierce (phastings@hope-community.org). For updates on the release dates of future issues in the Park Police zine series and other programming information, follow us on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook @parksandpower.