HOW TO

# Make Good Decisions About Police and Public Safety Budgeting

BY SHAYNE KAVANAGH

**Local governments need a way to reach good decisions about police funding. The traditional local government budgeting system—take last year's budget and make changes around the margins—is not up to the task for several reasons:**

- The traditional approach is based on historical precedent. It tends to freeze past practices in place. It does not provide a way to thoughtfully reexamine what is working well and what isn't and then make changes accordingly.
- Relying on historical precedent can reduce conflict because it reduces the amount of possible change, but the question of police funding seems to have reached a point where conflict is inevitable. That conflict can either be constructive or destructive, and the traditional budget process does not provide good outlets for constructive conflict.
- The traditional budget process works best in times of revenue growth because distributing new revenue is less controversial than deciding what to cut or how to reallocate funding—but we're currently facing revenue declines and demand for a departure from past practices.
- Decisions are largely driven by professional staff, with little input from the community. Less than half of people have a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the police,[1] which means that the experts within the police department may not enjoy the same legitimacy they once did.

Clearly, a better approach than the traditional budget is needed, and, fortunately, one is described by GFOA's *Financial Foundations for Thriving Communities* (**gfoa.org/special/financial-foundations**). It is based on a Nobel Prize-winning body of work about how to make good decisions on shared resources, like a local government and its budget. This article is based on the Financial Foundations research.


POLICE

# Establishing a long-term vision

A long-term vision defines a community's common desire for a better future. This common vision brings people together and provides the cohesion needed to move forward. The vision is where a consensus is formed among elected officials, staff, and the public that the local government should think about (and budget for) public safety differently.

It has been said that a problem well-defined is a problem half-solved. The long-term vision must define the police and public safety issues that local government and the public will work together to address. Defining these issues as just "annual budget" or "police" issues might close off the potential for thinking longer term and more creatively about how to deal with homelessness, street and domestic violence, and other "public safety" issues that have been assigned to police—and where there might be different and more cost-effective solutions available.

A local government must ask what long-term policing and public safety goals are important to its community. Achieving these goals may be too much to try for in one annual budget (especially one already complicated by revenue shortfalls); attempting to do so would be like trying to design and build an airplane while in flight. A long-term vision creates the space for better decisions and provides the basis for an orderly approach to carrying out these decisions over successive annual budgets.

Street-level violence provides a visceral example of why a long-term vision is needed. There has been much talk about finding alternatives to traditional policing for this problem. One proven alternative is Cure Violence (**cvg.org**), which sees community violence through the lens of epidemiology: Violence is like a disease, and the spread can be stopped by intervening with the carriers. The program trains community members to recognize signs of impending violence in their neighborhood, along with ways to intervene and de-escalate. The optimal location for this program is in a public health department because it needs to be staffed by career employees with expertise in public health; it also frames violence as a disease and treats it accordingly. But if a city even has a public health department, it probably isn't up to the task of administering the program. As a result, Cure Violence is sometimes treated as a "special project" in the mayor's office, which leads to another problem: Community violence will not be eliminated during the term of office of any mayor. An ongoing effort is needed to keep the "disease" in check. It needs an institutional home to survive changes in political office holders and deliver the sustained effort needed to have a lasting impact.

Police departments need a long-term vision as well. For example, the "Memphis model" of critical incident training blends social work skills with policing to create more cost-effective responses to disturbances by people who are mentally ill. A long-term plan can be used to start a program like Cure Violence or the Memphis model as a special project and provide the path for transitioning it to a long-term, institutional capability.

A long-term vision should not be limited to policing and public safety. Public safety is influenced by factors such as unemployment and poverty, segregation, social relationships, and mental illness. Therefore, governments should develop a true community vision that addresses the quality of life and economic issues that citizens care about. Many of these issues are interrelated with public safety, so a broader vision will support both better public safety and a stronger financial foundation for local government and a thriving community.

The core capabilities of traditional police are enforcing the law and applying force when needed. While these capabilities have their place, they are not the best answer to all public safety concerns. A broader vision helps a city's department managers look beyond their own interests. In addition, being able to put departmental interests aside opens up new possibilities to make better use of resources and to work together for better public safety and other community goals.


A protester shakes hand with a police officer during a peaceful demonstration in Denver, Colorado in 2016. Community trust in police is one of the measures that can help define long-term public safety goals.

JOHN LEYBA/THE DENVER POST VIA GETTY IMAGES

## Long-term planning for police and public safety

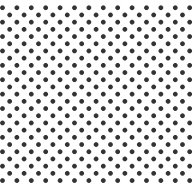
Policing and public safety are complex topics. Local governments must bring together a diverse representation of stakeholders to have a conversation about the vision for public safety, including members of the public—especially those who may have had negative experiences with police or who have been historically marginalized. Stakeholders from these demographic and geographic communities will have different views and lived experiences than the budget staff when it comes to the police. They will likely have different preferences for how policing and public safety services are delivered. These views must be part of the conversation if we're to reach resource allocations that are fair and meet the community's needs.

## THE FINANCIAL FOUNDATIONS FRAMEWORK

GFOA's Financial Foundations Framework helps facilitate collaboration and support for public policies and programs. The framework is organized into five pillars that show you how to improve your financial position now and create a strong foundation for a thriving community over the long term.

Each pillar includes different leadership strategies and/or institutional design principles. Local governments cannot order people to collaborate, so leadership strategies are needed to help inspire pride and public support for a strong financial foundation. Institutional design principles, meanwhile, are the "rules of the road." They provide the context for leadership strategies and ensure continuity of good financial practices through changes in leadership.

Learn more about GFOA's Financial Foundations for Thriving Communities at **gfoa.org/special/financial-foundations**.



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This conversation must also include the police themselves. We must recognize that police may have views that differ substantially from those of the general public. For example, surveys have shown that approximately 70 percent of police officers thought the deaths of Black people in encounters with police officers were isolated instances, compared to 39 percent of the general public. Approximately 30 percent of police officers thought these deaths were a sign of a broader problem, compared to 60 percent of the general public.[2] Although police officers may see the world differently than much of the public, they have expertise that can help inform better approaches to public safety. Without the support of the police, reform efforts will likely flounder, and attempts to allocate resources in a new and better way will face a bumpier road.

Police might be eager to participate because a new vision for public safety could in fact have positive outcomes for them. For instance, the roles and responsibilities of police have come to include many tasks that are best classified as social work,[3] but police have not received the training and resources to be successful in these expanded roles. Many police recognize and would welcome a more limited role that is in line with their capabilities or training, along with compensation for taking on new responsibilities.

Once all the participants are at the table, the policing and public safety conversation should start by reaching an understanding of the community's needs and how the police are (or are not) responding to them—along with the historical contexts and current inequities that influence people's views of the police. A conversation about policing that is informed by public safety data can also help distinguish between actual and perceived problems.

## Measurements are crucial

A shared set of facts about the status quo is the basis for envisioning a better future and defining long-term goals for public safety. Goals that are measurable and accompanied by specific deadlines support better budgeting. Measurable goals enable local officials and the public to monitor progress and track which programs and initiatives are working, pointing to where resources should and should not be allocated.

Measures and metrics matter a lot. Many budget documents include traditional measures of safety that don't lead to smart decision-making. For example, the total number of police officers is a common measure, even though it is not clear that higher headcounts reduce crime.[4] Most people agree that there is a minimum number of officers needed to accomplish the work of policing, but does headcount meaningfully reduce uncertainty about performance-improved public safety? Measures are only useful if they inform a decision, and the only decision informed by headcount is whether or not to hire more police officers against an arbitrary staffing standard.[5] This squanders an opportunity to use resources more wisely and cements in place an assumption that traditional policing is always the best approach to public safety.

Crime rates are another common measure. Unlike headcount measures, crime rates attempt to measure public safety directly; however, local government should consider what is considered a crime. For example, homelessness, minor drug use, and mental health issues are often deemed crimes, but law enforcement isn't necessarily the best response—much research suggests that criminalization is not cost-effective.[6]

Local governments should start determining the best response to crime by defining the categories of crime the community is most concerned with. For example, neighborhoods with higher crime tend to be lower income. Often, these neighborhoods are where there are tensions with police, including people feeling "overpoliced." Local governments should then consider the role of non-policing *preventative* strategies (keeping in mind that preventative strategies often require new ways of allocating resources). How can traditional policing be applied in a way that builds and maintains trust in the community? It might be worth investing in new resources for measuring and monitoring trust.

Another common measure is the perception of safety, or how safe people feel. This too is potentially faulty because people's perceptions don't always match reality. Surveys conducted since 1989 show that most Americans said there was more crime compared to the year before—yet, during that same period, the United States has experienced an almost uninterrupted decline in crime. These misperceptions have real-world impacts. For example, the presence of homeless people reduces perceptions of safety, which leads to the criminalization of homelessness. Again, this is cost-ineffective.[7]

So, what measures would work? This will vary by community, but below are some that could be useful.

- *Response time to calls.* This traditional measure is linked to the police's role in responding to crime and to use of resources. It can be disaggregated to response time for different types of calls and by demographics and/or geography.
- *Community trust in police.* This gets to the heart of many of the concerns that some members of the public have with the police. The Cambridge Police Department in Massachusetts is prototyping statistics to compare personal interactions between officers and minority and non-minority residents. For many communities, it will be important to measure trust by neighborhoods or racial groups. There could be large differences, and it is important to understand those differences so local government knows where to direct its trust-building efforts.
- *Clearance rates, particularly for violent crimes.* The rate at which violent crimes are solved has an unambiguous connection with public safety.
- *Representativeness of the police force.* Making a police force representative of the racial/ethnic composition of the community it serves can help make police adaptable to changing service needs, improve public perceptions, and increase trust.[8]

Once the right measures are agreed on, the next step for local governments is to identify the sources of the data and ensure their validity and reliability. The measures and data should be made publicly available and communicated so that all stakeholders can see what progress is being made each year toward the long-term goals and vision. Progress, or lack thereof, suggests whether the current resource allocation strategy needs to change.

# Building trust and open communication

Trust and open communication are needed for people to work together toward a shared vision; however, building trust between government and citizens is not easy, especially given the historical context of policing. Trust is built or eroded interpersonally (as in, how the police officer treated me during our encounter) and more broadly (as in, the public's view of how well the department fights crime and whether there is accountability for abusive officers).

How can the budget help local governments build trust? We need to consider the main contributors to how people gauge trust: competence and values. Competence is the ability of a person or institution to achieve goals and perform tasks. One step toward demonstrating competence is to align the police and public safety budget with the needs and desires of the community. Values address underlying motives and speak to citizens' emotions and moral intuition. Local governments can demonstrate competence and good values by communicating concern. When a government official listens to citizens in a way that shows thoughtfulness and compassion, they are seen as more trustworthy.

Policies that govern the way police behave may address many of the public's issues with policing. Getting the public involved in developing these policies shows local officials' concern. A good illustration is the use of force. The Camden County Police Department in New Jersey worked with community stakeholders to develop and adopt a use-of-force policy that goes beyond minimal constitutional principles for use of force.

Instead, Camden's policy states that officers must do everything possible to respect and preserve the sanctity of human life, avoid unnecessary use of force, and minimize the force that is used, while still protecting themselves and the public (for more, see **policingproject.org/camden**).

Some policing policies might have direct budget implications, while others may not—but if the public's immediate anxieties about how policing is conducted are not addressed, it will be hard to have trusting and open conversations about the budget. The community may find budget discussions irrelevant, unsatisfying, or even antagonizing, if it believes local government is avoiding a conversation about the public's day-to-day concerns.

**EXHIBIT 1.** CAMDEN COUNTY USE-OF-FORCE POLICY

| | Old Policy | Revised Policy |
|---|---|---|
| Does the policy go beyond the minimal constitutional standard of when force may be used? | ⊗ | ✓ |
| Does the policy emphasize de-escalation tactics? | ⊗ | ✓ |
| Does the policy require officers to stop and report uses of force that violate the law or the CCPD's policy? | ⊗ | ✓ |
| Does the policy have comprehensive reporting requirements? | ⊗ | ✓ |

Policies that govern the way police behave may address many of the public's issues with policing.

# Using collective decision-making

Making hard choices about where to allocate funds requires bringing people together. In a June 2020 YouGov survey, 64 percent of people believed "bringing people together" is the best way forward for the United States (as opposed to more "law and order"). Collective decision-making and citizen involvement for controversial issues are difficult under the best of circumstances—and in 2020, local governments do not find themselves in the best of circumstances. But progress can be made despite the challenges. Here is guidance on how.

**Provide the public with a forum to discuss how they experience police services.** The millions of dollars and myriad programs that go into a police budget will seem abstract to the public. Their concerns with how police behave have to be addressed directly in order to have productive budget conversations (Camden County's use-of-force policy is a good example).

**Establish a common set of facts.** Policing is a topic that provokes strong opinions on all sides, and on top of that, we now live in a "post-truth" environment where people don't trust information, especially if it contradicts their worldview. Nevertheless, there must be some common understanding of reality for a conversation to take place.

Another important piece of context is how money is being spent on public safety. Breaking down the traditional budget into *objects of expenditures* like salaries and benefits is a useful start. The limitation is that these categories aren't relevant to how citizens experience public services. Programs are a better way to present the way money is spent because they are more relevant to how citizens experience services. Exhibit 2 provides a list of common programs in police departments across 80 U.S. cities ranging in size from 11,000 people to 727,000 people (average 108,000). The table shows the typical portion of the police budget taken up by the largest programs.

Inventorying programs can produce some surprises—the size of "patrol," for example. The patrol program typically includes a variety of police activities. This suggests the need to further disaggregate the way police spend their time so the community can make informed decisions about this resource.

**Have the conversation.** Data, like those provided by a survey or a program inventory, are the start of a conversation, not the end of it. To have productive conversation, local government decision-makers must be sincere in their desire to hear from the public and be committed to using the public's input to shape decisions. There will be many different viewpoints, so the format of the conversation must provide space for different views. Also, "public input," as it traditionally has been practiced, is an unsatisfactory experience for both public officials and citizens. Therefore, we must design a better method for public engagement. Here are goals local governments should consider:

- *Gain deeper understanding of the public safety issue and the tensions within it.* Some tensions will be unresolvable, so it is important to know what those are. A good example is in cities where there are concerns about some neighborhoods having a disproportionate amount of contact with police (for example, arrests)—the tension is that these neighborhoods may be the same neighborhoods that generate more calls for police service.
- *Create insight into different points of view.* It's necessary to engage all members of the community, including those who have been historically marginalized. Marginalized community members may have lower trust in local government, especially on policing issues, so extra effort will be needed to bring them into the process and show them that their participation has been worth their while.
- *Understand the trade-offs that people are willing to accept (or not).* Reaching a resolution will require compromise.
- *Find a starting point for citizen action, both individual and collective.* Citizens will need to be part of some of the solutions to public safety issues. For example, if trust needs to be rebuilt, then citizens will need to be part of that.

**EXHIBIT 2.** AVERAGE PORTION OF BUDGET TAKEN BY LARGER PROGRAMS IN POLICE BUDGETS IN 80 U.S. CITIES

| | |
|---|---|
| 39.7% | Patrol |
| 11.3% | Investigations |
| 10.6% | Administration |
| 9.4% | Dispatch |
| 6.1% | Community-oriented policing, outreach |
| 2.4% | Drugs, narcotics |
| 2.0% | Special weapons (SWAT) |
| 2.0% | Evidence, crime lab |
| 1.9% | Training |
| 1.8% | Records |
| 1.8% | School resource officers |
| 0.9% | Internal affairs |
| 0.9% | Canine unit |
| **90.8%** | **Total*** |

*Jails are excluded because many cities do not operate their own jails. The remaining budget is composed of smaller programs such as hazardous material response, bomb squads, gang units, etc.*

SOURCE: DATA PROVIDED BY CHRIS FABIAN AT RESOURCEX

- *Establish effective guidance for policymakers, who need information to support decisions about how to allocate resources.* If the information provided is not clear or useful, it will be hard for policymakers to follow through, and the public will be disappointed.

**Institutionalize public engagement.** Local governments need to have ongoing engagement with the community rather than ad hoc engagement when a controversial issue arises. Since high-quality public engagement is not easy, making engagement a habit will allow best practices to become second nature to a local government. Imagine if it were necessary every two or four years to explain why voting is desirable and how to conduct elections![9] Also, regularly engaging the public helps leaders to keep in tune with the public's perspective and avoid unpleasant surprises. It also demonstrates to the public that local officials have an ongoing interest in hearing what the public thinks.

# Creating clear rules

A budget process must be guided by rules for how decisions will be made and translated into action. The traditional budgeting process is not up to the task of dealing with the community's demands for public safety reforms, especially in a time of revenue shortfalls. Following are some "new rules" for budgeting that are better suited to the problems local governments are facing than the written and unwritten rules of the traditional budget process.

1. **Historical precedent should not determine future spending.** Instead, focus on how to cost-effectively achieve community goals. Direct spending to programs that achieve the community's public safety goals at an affordable cost and establish a long-term vision that defines the public safety goals.

2. **Departments and divisions are not the best decision units for budgeting.** Instead, disaggregate spending and use granular decision units for budgeting based on an inventory of programs for use in budget decision-making. For example, one study showed that in a city widely thought of as "high crime," police officers spent only about 11 percent of their time dealing with crime.[10] In smaller cities and towns, crime can take up two percent or less of an officer's shift.[11] Another study found that the top five problems officers deal with are disabled vehicles, traffic accidents (without injuries), domestic arguments, alarms (not fire), and medical assistance.[12] These findings illustrate that a large portion of police officer activity does not require law enforcement or the application of force, which are the core capabilities of police officers.

3. **Think outside of department "silos" and look for multidisciplinary solutions.** Another limitation of using bureaucratic units for budgeting is that it tends to reinforce thinking about local governments in terms of those units. For example, "public safety" becomes synonymous with "police." Traditional policing doesn't play the only role in public safety. A root cause behind the current public dissatisfaction with policing is that police officers are asked to deal with social problems for which they are grossly underprepared, such as substance abuse, mental illness, homelessness, domestic disputes, and even civil unrest.[13] Training in most departments is mostly focused on learning what the law is and how to use force. Therefore, the budget should be used as a forum for bringing other perspectives to the issues that make up public safety work.

4. **Give prevention a chance.** The local government budget often prioritizes remedial services over preventative services because a response to a problem is more visible than a problem that never happened. The new rule is to give preventative services a chance because they are often more cost-effective and humane.

5. **Identify what works.** Few local governments explicitly tie data and evidence to the budget process. When allocating resources to public safety, local governments continue to fund programs that do not achieve intended outcomes and long-term goals. The new rule is to fund what works. Local governments can start by asking departments to identify how the funding they request achieves the public safety vision and goals, and next, require data analysis and new funds, including money for evaluation.

6. **Look for smart, strategic ways to save money.** Saving money in the public safety budget is important not just because many local governments simply have less money to spend now, but also because many public safety reforms require spending *more* money. For example, for local governments to be more discerning about what kind of assistance they dispatch in response to emergency calls (like police, social workers, etc.), the dispatch function must become more capable and/or first responders must have a wider array of capabilities. The money for enhancing public safety capabilities can come from reallocating funds from things local government


can stop doing or start doing differently. Traditional ways of saving money include across-the-board cuts to services or cutting nonessential line items, like training. Both of these strategies are arbitrary and have the effect of dumbing down all services, regardless of their value. For example, reducing investments in training could result in officers committing more mistakes, leading to litigation and ultimately increasing costs! The new rule is to look for smart, strategic ways to save money.

Fortunately, the other rules we outlined for the budget process set a government up to find smarter, strategic ways to save money. You can see how thinking outside of silos, granularity in budget decision units, thinking preventatively, doing what works, and breaking from past precedents are reflected in the examples of money-saving opportunities below.

Above, a Minneapolis Police officer checks a structure before clearing it to be destroyed as a homeless encampment is cleared in July 2020. People living in the park were given 72 hours notice to vacate after a decision was made by the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board to dismantle the camp.

STEPHEN MATUREN/GETTY IMAGES

- *Centralize support services.* Efficiencies could be realized by centralizing maintenance of police vehicles, information technology, or other support services that police run separately from the rest of government.
- *Wider use of non-sworn staff.* Sworn officers may perform tasks like parking enforcement that could be performed by lower-cost, non-sworn staff.
- *Share services with overlapping or contiguous agencies.* Services like animal control, city jails, and warrant delivery could potentially be shared with other agencies, like a county sheriff.
- *Prevent rather than remediate.* Prevention is often cheaper. For example, cycling homeless people through the justice system is more expensive than helping them get housed, and the financial impact on society of major property and violent crimes is substantial.[15]
- *Get rid of low-value services.* An example is school resource officers; research suggests they are often not effective for many of the roles they are asked to take on and can have detrimental effects on students.[16]

- *Review special units.* For decades, the common response to a specific public safety problem (such as prostitution, crack cocaine, opioids, gangs, or gun violence) has been to create a special unit. Departments may find that they have as many as a dozen special units. These units may be inefficient because they fragment the response to what are multifaceted and complex problems. One police department was able to redirect resources to preventive patrol and community policing by combining multiple special units and cross-training officers.
- *Remove the barriers to doing the right thing.* Departments in municipal governments have been known to do things like spend out remaining budgets at the end of the year or pad the budgets. These "budget games" are often rational responses to the rules of budgeting. Many local governments have found that a change in the rules can change the incentives to engage in these kinds of behaviors for all departments, including law enforcement.

**7. Don't budget "either/or," budget "both/and."** A budget is framed as a competition between two competing views, and only one can win. The new rule is to evaluate spending decisions in a way that encourages a balanced portfolio of public safety services. A balanced portfolio is usually the best way to meet the local government's goals in a cost-effective manner.

We are in an unprecedented moment of severe financial distress amid calls for serious reforms to the largest area of municipal spending. There are no "ready-made" budgeting methods that incorporate all seven rules; however, budget officers can borrow techniques from budgeting methods like priority-driven budgeting and zero-base budgeting to design a process that works for them.


**Social media** may not be reality, but it can feel like it—which means that social media shouldn't be ignored. Social media is useful for determining community issues of great concern, or for quickly getting a general sense of an issue. For example, a hot issue might start trending on social media. More representative and deliberative methods could then be used to explore the issue further.

# Treating everyone fairly

Up to this point, we have discussed budgeting for police largely as a dispassionate and rational exercise, which of course it is not. Emotions can run high, especially when people perceive that they've been treated unfairly. Of course, it isn't possible for everyone to get what they want from a local government budget, which means there is a risk of people feeling unfairly treated. But a body of research shows that if people feel they have been fairly treated, they are often willing to accept outcomes other than their preferred outcome.

Half of the fairness equation is the process that is followed. There are four features a process must have to be perceived as fair:[17]

- Decisions are based on accurate information. Methods include developing measures of public safety that speak to the community's biggest concerns and reporting performance against those measures; providing detailed information about the amount of money spent on public safety; using units of analysis that citizens can easily relate to; using surveys to accurately gauge sentiments in the community; and asking community members about the trade-offs they are willing to make.
- A transparent and consistent set of decision-making criteria are applied to everyone equally.
- All affected stakeholders are given the opportunity for input.
- Mistakes are recognized and corrected.

Having a fair process is half of the fairness equation; the other half is fair results. Different constituencies may have different needs, which means that "fair" results are not always "equal" results. Rather, fair results might be better defined as "equitable" results. This means that results might need to differ for one group versus another in the interest of achieving

## Having a fair process is half of the fairness equation; the other half is fair results.

good public safety results for everyone. For instance, constituencies can be defined by geography and by populations (for example, race or socioeconomic class). This distinction is useful because services can vary by the specific geography or population served. A local government can assess how well different constituencies are being served according to the measures established in a community vision.

Many local governments must contend with the dual imperatives of rethinking public safety services while balancing the budget, in some cases in the face of large revenue declines. *Financial Foundations for Thriving Communities* is a proven way to address the potential for conflict that is inherent in public budgeting, including in high-stakes situations that cities and counties currently confront with public safety. Public safety is facing a watershed moment in the public's expectations. As a result, a well-considered and systematic approach is needed to better align expectations and budgetary reality.

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**FIND OUT MORE**

This article was adapted from a GFOA research paper, "Time for Change: A Practical Approach to Rethinking Police Budgeting," by Shayne Kavanagh. Read it at gfoa.org/rethinking-police-budgeting.

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