

A solid majority of Americans oppose abolishing police departments, but there are real differences in public opinion regarding the reallocation of resources.

> n response to the police killing of George Floyd, protestors across the nation have rallied to demands for local governments to "defund the police." If the purpose of a slogan is to call attention to an idea, then the "defund the police" movement has been a remarkable success: The call has led local governments to reexamine funding for police agencies and alternative structures for safety and justice services in their communities. This outcome tracks with public sentiment: in a June 2020 survey, nearly three-quarters of Americans said police violence against the public was a problem.1

If the purpose of the slogan is to win majority support for a specific policy response or series of policy responses, however, it has been less effective and potentially counterproductive. The same survey found that just 15 percent of respondents support abolishing police departments, and fewer than half support reducing funding for police departments and reallocating those funds to other programmatic responses that impact crime and social challenges.2

While a solid majority of Americans oppose abolishing police departments, polling does reveal real differences in response to the question of reallocation of resources. Though less than a majority of Americans support funding reallocation, nearly four out of five Democrats support reducing police funding and shifting money to social programs, compared to just five percent of Republicans. As a result, in heavily Democratic local jurisdictions, it is not surprising to see much greater support for changes in funding. For instance, 53 percent of Seattle residents support defunding the Seattle Police Department by half, and 36 percent strongly support such a cut.3

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These changes and differences in public opinion have important implications for local governments and those who lead and manage their finances. The reality is that "defund the police" means different things to different people. Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti recently said, "You ask people what does defunding the police mean—you ask three people, you'll get three different opinions..."4 But for budget officials, it clearly means that there is a new debate about just how to fund core functions of local government designed to support public safety and justice. It is a debate in which budget officials need to actively engage.

Decades of Growth in the Number and Funding of Local Police

Before engaging in the current debate it is helpful to start with some history.

Stemming from the "tough on crime" response in the late 1980s and early 1990s, governments across the nation spent increasing sums on criminal justice and police. For local governments, sworn police officers increased from approximately 375,000 in 1992 to nearly 470,000 in 2016. This growth roughly tracks population change; however, the increase in staffing continued even as crime declined significantly from the mid-1990s to present.⁵

As a result, police departments are frequently the largest—or one of the largest—departments in U.S. cities. In good fiscal times, the size of the police force grew with the rest of government. In bad times, police departments were frequently treated as sacred cows. Even as other parts of city government were suffering cuts, police would frequently be the last on the list—if they were on the list at all.

For instance, our work in Memphis, Tennessee in the immediate aftermath of the Great Recession found that the city had increased its police department personnel by 11.8 percent over a five-year period but decreased its non-public safety employees by 17.4 percent during the same period. This resulted in the city government essentially becoming a public safety department that also provided a few other services.

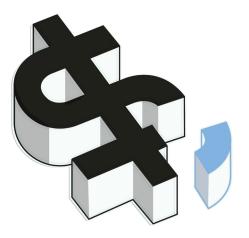
The case for holding police departments out of reductions in force is based more on politics than data. Threatened budget cuts to the police department almost always prompt cries about the likelihood of increased crime. Mayors and city councils are confronted with a simple choice: Would you like to cut non-public safety services, or would you like to risk an increase in crime? As a result, in the years after the Great Recession, the number of local government police officers increased by nearly 3 percent, while non-police employees in local government decreased by more than 5 percent.6

When local governments have made reductions to police department staffing, it has frequently taken the form of reductions in civilian employment. This generally resulted in the worst possible outcome for many local governments, as sworn officers were simply assigned to perform duties previously performed by lower-cost civilians. For those police departments, this meant that fewer officers were available for primary patrol, and the cost of performing non-sworn officer functions increased.

In reality, the links between the number of police officers and crime rate reduction are, at best, elusive. Different studies have found different relationships, and data suggest variation by city. Other approaches related to crime prevention, prosecution, and punishment may have as much, if not more, of an impact on crime reduction and often come at a lower cost than sworn police officers.

In recent years, some cities effectively used increases in police department budgets and personnel to drive down crime, while others drove down crime without nearly the same amount of personnel or monetary resources.

Franklin E. Zimring meticulously detailed New York City's experiences in reducing crime in his book *The City That Became Safe*. Zimring's analysis found that policing strategies played a role in the city's crime reduction but were not responsible alone for New York's unrivaled decrease in crime.



THE REALITY IS THAT "DEFUND THE POLICE" MEANS DIFFERENT THINGS TO DIFFERENT PEOPLE.

Similarly, when we worked with the City of Memphis, we found that, from 2006 to 2011, among cities of 500,000 or more residents with the greatest violent crime reductions, Memphis had the largest percentage increase in sworn officers (nearly 30 percent), but the lowest percentage change in violent crime rate.

Another complicating factor is that the failure to reduce the size of a police force when crime goes down allows for more proactive policing. This could be a good thing—if deployment strategies and training enable officers to focus on problem solving. But the combination of more officers and less crime can also lead to strategies that rely on greater "zero tolerance" policing—more traffic stops, more enforcement of low-level non-violent offenses—that does little to increase safety and raises real issues related to justice.



Finally, there is no one accepted formula to determine the "right" size of a police department. When local government finance professionals and elected officials are annually asked by citizens, reporters, and employees, "what is the right size police force for our community to reduce crime?" there is no convenient metric to point to in order to provide an easy and digestible answer.

Instead, the short answer to this important question is "it depends." We frequently see—and use—oft-cited statistics for comparison, but each has meaningful limitations that make it more informative than dispositive. For example:

Sworn officer per capita analysis: A useful analysis for drawing comparisons to other jurisdictions with readily available data from the Federal Bureau of Investigations on most jurisdictions. This analysis has its merits, but it has significant limitations due to issues related to significant changes to daytime and evening populations among jurisdictions.

Calls for service analysis:

An important analysis to understand workload and drivers in a given jurisdiction, but there can be important differences between jurisdictions' response policies. For instance, does a one department send a sworn officer to all traffic incidents, whereas another department only sends a sworn officer to traffic incidents with injuries (or sends a civilian in lieu of an officer)?

Moreover, both approaches are limited by department differences in deployment practices. For instance, a police department that engages in community policing may have more officers due to the personnel-intensive nature of proactive policing, but a lower calls-for-service figure. Similarly, a police department operating with a policy of two officers per patrol car will have a very different per capita result and calls for service result than a police department with a policy of one officer per patrol car.

People walk down 16th street after "Defund The Police" was painted on the street near the White House on June 8, 2020 in Washington, DC.



THE SACRED COW

Police departments are often protected from budget cuts or reductions in force. In the immediate aftermath of the Great Recession, Memphis increased its police department personnel by 11.8% over a five-year period but decreased its non-public safety employees by 17.4% during the same period.



With all of this history and context, what does the "defund the police" movement really mean for local government budgets? By our count, there are at least five possibilities for how local governments could approach a debate over defunding the police.

Abolition. Few people are arguing for abolition of the police function and all associated funding. But some people are. Not every city or town in the United States has a police department. A number of smaller places have eliminated police departments because they can no longer afford to pay for them. Often this is driven just by the cost of personnel and supplies. In other instances, elimination of the police department happened because of the cost of lawsuits, insurance, or both that were due to incidents of police abuse or misconduct.

What happens when a department is abolished? In the case of smaller places, it is easier to envision at least two different scenarios. In some states, the likely answer is that the state police would assume full patrol services, like they did in Pennsylvania. One could also envision another alternative. While most parts of the United States have some form of professional police service, that is not the case for other public safety functions. Allvolunteer operations of fire and emergency response departments serve nearly two-thirds of American communitiesbut cover just 17 percent of the total U.S. population.9 Could such an all-volunteer approach work for policing? There is little precedent, and there would likely be significant challenges due to state and local laws and regulatory issues to even

begin exploring the idea; however, the option exists at the extreme of one end of the policy continuum. Moreover, it is hard to see how either state police response or a volunteer response would work in larger jurisdictions.

Reorganization. For some, the call to defund the police has really meant a call to fundamentally reorganize departments responsible for policing. Reorganization could take at least three forms—and likely more—that already exist across the United States.

 Consolidation or regionalization. Some cities that have eliminated police departments have turned the function over to a county police department really a reorganization of one department under the auspices of a new department. The most notable example is Camden, New Jersey. In 2012, the city disbanded its police department. At the same time, Camden County (the surrounding county, which is a separate governmental unit from the city) created its own police force, which hired some of the former city officers at significantly lower salaries. The move was framed as a budget necessity: By separating and rehiring officers as county employees, the city saved upwards of \$90,000 per sworn officer. The county force—one that all other county municipalities could elect to use instead of providing their own police services—serves only one jurisdiction, the City of Camden. To date, reviews have been mixed. On one hand, crime rates have decreased in a city frequently cited as one of the most dangerous in the nation. On the other hand, the high

number of county police in Camden led to increases in arrests and summonses for minor violations. While the Camden County Police Department adopted different, more community-oriented strategies than the former Camden City Police, that change—and the city's budgetary savings—were the principal effect of eliminating the city police department.

• Department of Public Safety. In cities like Cleveland, Ohio, and Providence, Rhode Island, a Department of Public Safety houses both police services and fire/EMS services. Currently, public safety departments are characterized by a centralized set of support functions. Departments of public safety may also have civilian leadership.

It is easy to envision that a public safety department could have a much broader mandate. For example, the Public Safety Department in St. Louis, Missouri, includes police, fire, and the management of the local jail, but the director of public safety is also responsible for code enforcement and a Neighborhood Stabilization Team (NST). The primary objective of the Neighborhood Stabilization officers that staff NST is to "utilize problemsolving skills...to aggressively and proactively address physical and behavioral issues [and]...to share proper problem-solving tools and mechanisms with citizens."10

 Public safety officers. In a small number of American cities that have a public safety department, there are no police officers. Instead, there are

public safety officers who perform both police and fire response functions. Cities like Sunnyvale, California, and Kalamazoo, Michigan, cross-train employees to perform both duties. This form of reorganization would likely require extensive study and, for jurisdictions with civil service and/or collective bargaining agreements, the process could be lengthy, litigious, and challenging before even considering the transition process for current fire and police personnel. However, there is little question that potential budget savings could be meaningful and could create additional capacity to invest in non-police strategies to improve safety and justice.

Divestment. In some ways, reducing police funding is the most straightforward explanation of "defund the police" a simple call to reduce the size of the department in personnel, budget, or both. This is also the approach that has garnered the most headlines and consideration in recent months. According to a survey of police departments by the Police Executive Research Forum, a non-partisan research organization, almost half of 258 responding agencies reported that their funding had already been cut or is expected to be reduced—with most of the reductions in the 5 to 10 percent range.11 The report concluded that much of the funding is being pulled from equipment, hiring, and training accounts, even as a number of cities also are tracking abrupt spikes in violent crime."12 As noted in the report, the combination of the police reform movement and the fiscal realities of the COVID-19 recession are leading to cuts—though, generally, not yet to existing staffing.

Change the role of the police.

In this case, the demand to defund the police is really part of a strategy to change the scope of responsibilities of the police. Many would agree that the police should be responsible for enforcing the law and acting to deter crime, but too often police have been asked to do much more. In the absence of other essential services, police are sometimes asked to engage in extraordinary duties.

Advocates of this approach to defunding would argue that it does not make sense

to put police departments in charge of initiatives designed to improve quality of life in a neighborhood simply because they are the only resource available and that, because of a lack of other alternatives, police have become the answer to every problem. This approach suggests that rather than adding responsibilities to police departments, shifting resources to other parts of local government or the nonprofit sector could lead to better outcomes and more efficient use of local government dollars.

Considerable attention has focused on the role of police as first responders to reports of individuals with serious mental health issues. This role for the police has been the result of the absence of adequate investments in community-based mental health services. More broadly, the criminal justice system has become the point of service for the provision of a large percentage of mental health services. In most cases, the local jail is the largest mental health provider in the community.

Cities are now examining whether they can use social workers instead of police officers as the first responders to calls related to individuals with mental health issues and to calls related to homeless individuals. After all, it generally makes no more sense for police to respond to these calls (even with crisis intervention training) than it does to send a social worker (even one trained in firearms) to respond to a bank robbery.

In Eugene, Oregon, the CAHOOTS model has been in use for nearly 30 years, providing mobile crisis intervention designed as an alternative to police response for non-violent crises.13 The program is staffed and operated by a community clinic, and the city funds the clinic for services. In 2019, CAHOOTS responded to approximately 24,000 calls, or 20 percent of total 911 dispatches and estimates that it saved local government about \$8.5 million in public safety costs and an additional \$14 million in ambulance and hospital emergency department costs.

Following the CAHOOTS model, Albuquerque, New Mexico recently announced its intent to create a new Department of Community Safety that will use specially trained, non-police

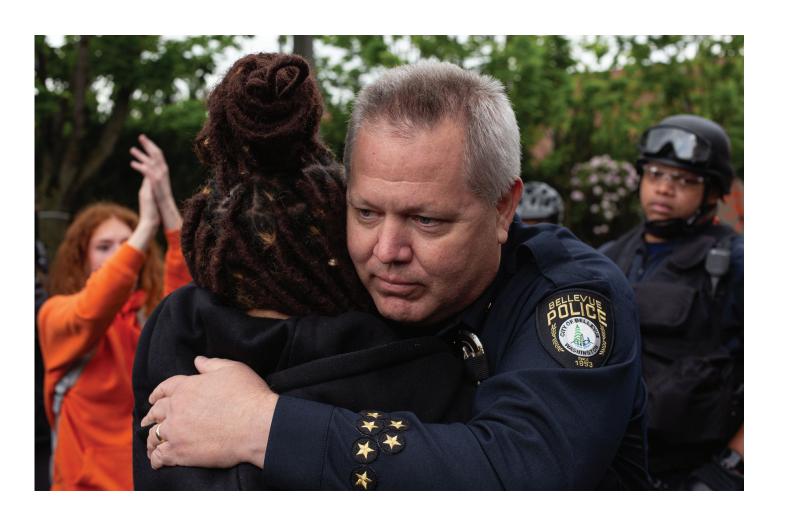
employees to respond to calls for service that involve mental health, drug addiction, homelessness, and traffic management, among others.14 The city's goal is to better focus what police should actually do and why police should do those functions.

The CAHOOTS and Albuquerque approaches are consistent with past efforts to civilianize positions in police departments where sworn officers are not needed as first responders. Examples include the use of Teleserve—where civilians can take reports of nonemergency crimes by phone in lieu of deploying sworn officers—and use of police service technicians to respond to auto accidents without injuries and to perform traffic control functions.

Divestment and reinvestment. Defund the police advocates have sometimes called for a combination of divestment—funding cuts—and reinvestment. Rather than focusing solely on the police, this strategy acknowledges that prevention-first strategies can be more effective and more efficient in achieving outcomes related to safety and justice.

In some cases, the reinvestment strategy could focus on broader initiatives designed to reduce risk factors that may be related to criminal activity. For example, individuals who commit crimes resulting in incarceration are disproportionately unemployed, living in poverty, or both. As a result, strategies to increase economic opportunity over the long term-education, workforce development, early childhood educationcan lead to more safety and more justice.

Community redevelopment strategies also can be directly tied to increases in public safety. Some have attributed New York City's aforementioned crime reduction in the 1990s to investments in additional police. Other scholars have suggested that there is a direct linkage between the city's massive investment in renovation and rehabilitation of city-owned housing and its reduction in crime. For example, the revitalization process allowed the city to reduce high concentrations of vacant buildings and vacant lots that became crime hot spots.15



THE CALL TO DEFUND THE POLICE IS REALLY A CALL TO RETHINK HOW LOCAL GOVERNMENTS BUDGET FOR SAFETY AND JUSTICE.

Above, Bellevue Police Chief Steve Mylett hugs a demonstrator during a gathering to protest the recent death of George Floyd on May 31, 2020 in Bellevue, Washington. There are also potential reinvestments that are more directly tied to individuals involved in the criminal justice system. For instance, some cities invest in employment and housing opportunities designed to reduce recidivism by offenders returning to the community from jail or prison. A recent review of a Los Angeles County Office of Diversion and Reentry's Supportive Housing Program found that the program resulted in 91 percent of individuals having stable housing after six months; 74 percent had stable housing after 12 months, and 86 percent had no new felony convictions after 12 months. ¹⁶

Another targeted avenue for investment is programs that divert individuals with substance abuse or mental health issues from arrest and incarceration. In too many communities, there are insufficient community providers to meet the needs of residents. As a result, mental health and addiction services sometimes fall to the county governments or municipal governments where resources are constrained. Freeing up resources—or working in collaboration across

governments—to invest in diversionary treatment services may both increase safety and decrease long-term costs.

Defunding the Police and Budgeting Best Practices

Setting aside calls for abolition and demands for arbitrary divestments that are not based in data or research, our view is that the call to defund the police is really a call to rethink how local governments budget for safety and justice. This approach rejects antiquated measurement of success as the amount of spending allocated to law enforcement and instead recognizes that a prevention-first approach may be a better investment. The smartest budget policy is almost always the one that most advances justice.

The reality is that many of the approaches sought by the defund the police movement are completely consistent with several best practices in budgeting. Budget officials have the opportunity to define the call to defund the police in a way that aligns with these best practice approaches.

- There can be no sacred cows: To the extent that police departments are treated like other departments in budget decision-making, this is consistent with the idea that there should be no sacred cows in any strategic approach to local resource allocation.
- Prevention first: The local government example of an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure: Prevention is almost always less costly than response. As such, budget officials have long advocated for a prevention-first approach to services that can improve outcomes and reduce demand for police services, fire services, capital investment, risk management, public health, and other types of common local government spending. Defund the police efforts in this vein are entirely consistent with efforts to maximize efficient use of resources.
- Civilianization: Efforts to change the role of sworn officers are fully consistent with other efforts to more efficiently deploy scarce and costly resources in local government.

Fundamentally, the movement to defund the police can alter the debate over justice and safety budgeting. Rather than asking "how many police do we need," local governments should ask, "what are the best and most efficient ways to increase justice and safety in our community?"

This outcomes-based approach to budgeting is what can drive change in both spending and policy. After all, budgets are not math; they are the clearest and most concrete way that most local governments have to set forth their priorities on an annual basis. Rather than an incremental budgeting approach, outcomes-based budgeting can lead to better decisionmaking and investment strategies.

Conclusions

More than anything, the movement to defund the police should lead to a good debate in every community—and it's a debate that is overdue. Every community will have a different answer to what "defund the police" really means within its local context, but no one should shy

away from the discussion. As local governments reckon with the challenge of systemic racism and face unprecedented economic impacts from the COVID-19 recession, a robust debate over how to respond is essential and budget officials must be at the table and be fully engaged.

In some communities, this debate will raise issues and feelings that are hard. As is often the case today, extreme positions will be staked out on both sides. Moreover, decision-makers will need to resist the notion that the results of efforts to defund the police however defined—will be a panacea.

Abolition will often be impractical. Reorganization may be messy. Divestment without reinvestment may leave communities at risk. And efforts to change the role of the police or reinvest resources in other approaches to increase safety and justice will only be effective with thoughtful, evidencebased policy design and strong and sustained implementation.

A new policy paradigm that substitutes measuring how little we spend on police and how much we spend on other programs will be no more effective than the outdated approach that equates success with how much we spend on law enforcement. Nevertheless, this is a debate whose time has come. And with the right approach, it is an opportunity for smarter, more efficient, more humane, and more effective policy changes to increase safety and enhance justice in communities across the nation.

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