

Our tool is journalism. Our goal is justice.

Our reporting exposes injustice and examines solutions for a criminal justice system in crisis. To support our journalism, please consider a donation to The Marshall Project today.

DONATE

06.09.2020

NEWS

Support For Defunding The Police Department Is Growing. Here's Why It's Not A Silver Bullet.

Past budget cuts have had unintended consequences. Now, proponents say it's time to fundamentally reimagine the role of the police.

By SIMONE WEICHSELBAUM and NICOLE LEWIS

Minneapolis city council members made an historic pledge over the weekend when they vowed to dismantle the local police department and shift money to community-based strategies. The pledge to develop a new system of public safety— supported by a veto-proof majority — follows weeks of protests across the country in the wake of the police killing of George Floyd. Officials in other cities, including New York and Los Angeles, have also said they would cut police budgets, though neither has echoed Minneapolis city council members's statement that the city's police department is beyond reform.

Once a radical notion, the push to defund the police is gaining ground. Across the country, organizers, celebrities, and former city officials are calling on lawmakers to reimagine the role of police in public safety.

Proponents of taking money away from cops say cities cannot simply reform their way out of the current policing crisis. And in the wake of the pandemic, some have highlighted a deadly disparity: many cities spend millions more on law enforcement than they do on most other services, including public health.

Opponents say it is too soon to abandon the progress police departments have made to curb officer violence and improve their relationships in communities of color. Some point to the effects of the 2008 recession, where cities cut police funding with no real plan, with unintended consequences, including increasing complaints over use of force.

But what do people mean by defunding the police? It doesn't just mean slashing budgets. One of the main ideas is that police departments are often the only agency to respond to problems — even if the problems are not criminal in nature. Police handle mental health crises. They enforce traffic laws. They patrol public school hallways and contract with colleges and universities. In many small towns, police answer 911 calls about barking dogs and loud parties. Advocates of defunding the police argue that many of these functions would be better left to other professionals, such as social workers.

Decades of over-policing in black and brown neighborhoods has led to black and brown people being disproportionately victims of police violence and overrepresented in prisons. A better approach, proponents of defunding the police argue, redirects law-enforcement funding to social services programs such as public housing, early childhood education and healthcare. By equitably distributing resources, they say, the need for police could be dramatically reduced.

Molly Glasgow, a volunteer with MPD150, a grassroots initiative to abolish the Minneapolis Police Department, said decades of previous reform efforts have not broken a cycle of violence followed by unrest and promises of improvement that have failed.

“What we are asking is that we step out of that cycle,” Glasgow said. “When we say dismantle: Yes, we mean divest and defund, but also invest in community programs and initiatives that are actually supporting people's needs.”

Past attempts to cut police spending or alter police policies offer cautionary tales of how some efforts backfire, and entrenched aggressive tactics and racially discriminatory attitudes remain.

Previous Marshall Project investigations into cases of attempted police reform in cities like Memphis and Chicago found that cutting law enforcement budgets did not reduce police violence or produce healthier relationships with the neighborhoods they patrol.

After 2008, cities reduced police spending as the Great Recession depleted their coffers. Departments that once had record numbers of cops, bankrolled by a Clinton-era federal hiring grant, were forced to downsize. (The single largest line item in most police budgets is personnel.)

As dollars dried up, police manpower plummeted, more crimes went unsolved, community outreach dwindled, and the cops that were left were forced to work high amounts of overtime.

In Memphis, complaints about use of force rose as overtime costs nearly doubled from 2015, reaching \$27 million two years later. Wait times for 911 calls rose. City officials then pressed a nonprofit to raise money in secret to pay for police bonuses without public input.

Other police reforms fell short. To bolster community trust in police, cities like Chicago turned to academics from top-tier universities to develop training using the latest buzzwords, such as “implicit bias” and “procedural justice.” But the programs did not always take hold—and one Chicago cop sued the city for inadequate training after he accidentally shot and killed a African-American grandmother despite the new classes.

Court-ordered consent decrees, under which the federal government essentially acted as watchdogs of a local police force, often cost millions of dollars for cities to implement. And in some cases, there were abuses: A 2015 Marshall Project investigation into the failures of federal oversight found that a Detroit monitor had billed the city as much as \$193,680.55 a month, and had an affair with the then mayor Kwame Kilpatrick. Detroit is considered one of the most violent cities in the nation, according to FBI figures.

Yet the push for change continues. For one, policing and racism have long been entangled. Roots of U.S. law enforcement, especially in the south, are easily traced back to slavery. Federal oversight of local officers emerged during Reconstruction when Congress enacted a law criminalizing police abuse in the wake of widespread lynchings of African-Americans.

There are fiscal incentives for defunding, too. Police departments are often one of the largest slices of the city budgets. Nearly 7 percent of the city budget in New York, for example, goes to police; in Los Angeles, it's 16 percent. In Minneapolis the police account for roughly 15 percent of the city's \$1.3 billion budget.

But the current debate over defunding the police is different than the challenges following the Great Recession, said Alexander Weiss, an expert on police staffing. That financial crisis forced police departments to scale back out of necessity. The current defunding debate asks how officials can redirect money from law enforcement and move into social services.

“If you have neighborhoods where there is little hope for future success, that’s a real problem, and police officers face that every day,” said Weiss, who has instructed police leaders in Chicago, Albuquerque and New Orleans on how to best deploy their cops. “What people are saying is that it doesn't make sense to invest all this money in policing when there are significant deficits in these neighborhoods.”

Some efforts to reimagine how police departments operate have worked. In 2011, the Camden Police Department in New Jersey became the first law enforcement agency in recent memory to implode as the state struggled to pay for officers. Police officials blamed the four police unions then operating in the city for having too much power, driving up overtime costs and dictating how patrol cops were used.

A county police department emerged tied to only one police union, which local leaders say is why Camden now has a national reputation as a place where residents and cops get along. “We get a lot of information from residents now to help us fight crime and help us solve crimes,” said Louis Cappelli, Jr., the county executive.

Some cities are cutting budgets without, it seems, plans to reimagine the police force. In Los Angeles, Mayor Eric Garcetti pledged to trim \$150 million from the LAPD’s budget in the coming fiscal year. New York City’s mayor said Sunday that he would consider cuts to the police department’s nearly \$6 billion annual budget after the city’s top fiscal advocate outlined how to trim 5 percent in police spending per year.

“It wasn’t just enough to say ‘defund,’” said the city’s comptroller, Scott M. Stringer. “The real question was ‘How? And by how much?’”

Still, some worry the push to defund the police is rash. James McCabe, a former commander in the New York Police Department who now is a consultant for scores of departments, says changing the culture of a police force takes time. Training in many departments has only just begun, and it’s too soon to tell if it is working, McCabe said.

“I am a proponent of good government and efficiency and not overspending on something that you shouldn’t,” McCabe said. “But it might be a little bit of a knee-jerk reaction right now to just

unilaterally defund the police because you don't like something that happened.”

“The more pressure put on police from without,” he said, “the more they will resist that change from within.”

Minneapolis is already making change— it has removed police from its public school system. The next step, advocates say, is to stop police from responding to calls for emergency medical services.

Supporters of defunding the police, such as Glasgow, say residents and businesses need to embrace a philosophical shift when it comes to the role of cops in their lives. Property can be replaced, she says, but human lives cannot. And too often, the police have killed city residents while responding to minor crimes.

“I encourage people, even at this point, to retrain themselves on reflexively calling or suggesting calling the police,” she said. “It's been ingrained in us and what we've been trained to do, but we need to look for alternatives — even as they are being developed.” ■■