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COMMENTARY OPINION

Commentary: How to 'defund' the police — real strategies to reduce costs safely



By ALEXANDER WEISS
CHICAGO TRIBUNE | JUN 26, 2020



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Protesters at Daley Plaza rally against police in schools, June 24, 2020. (Abel Uribe / Chicago Tribune)

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The idea of “defunding” the police has [sparked a great deal of discussion](#) in recent weeks. Proponents of this approach have laid out two justifications.

One group suggests that the police lack legitimacy, and thus they should be dissolved so that a new public safety model can emerge. It may take some time to determine what that model looks like in practice. The other approach suggests that funds currently allocated to policing would be better served if they were devoted to public health, mental health, education and housing. Some communities, including Boston, Los Angeles and New York, already have taken steps to accomplish this transfer of funds, although policymakers do not as yet have a complete understanding of the costs of providing these types of services on a 24/7 basis.

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While both of these strategies can help to instruct our conversation about the future of policing, I would like to focus on the second model. That is, I want to discuss how reduced funding for the police might affect performance.

For several years I have studied police staffing and deployment in many communities. Included in this group are several agencies operating under a “consent decree,” including New Orleans, Baltimore, Chicago, Albuquerque, N.M., and the Puerto Rico Police Bureau.

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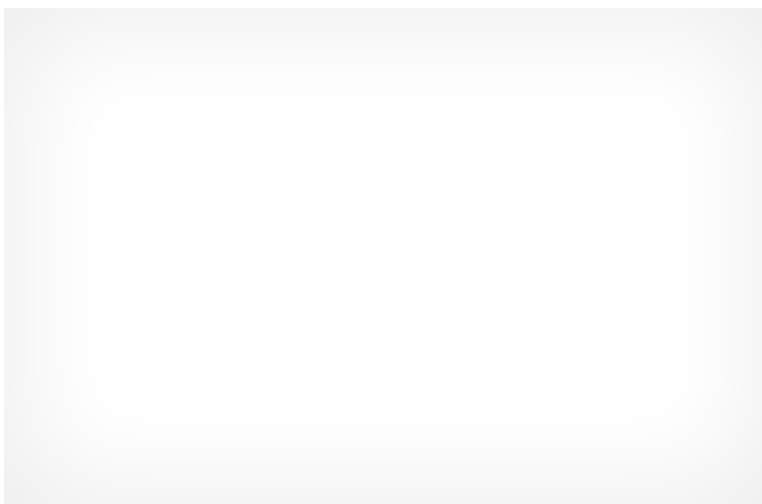
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While police organizations vary considerably in size and structure, they share some common characteristics. First, almost everyone in these organizations believes that they needed more police officers. Second, most officers believe that during their shift they “go from call to call,” and have no time for community engagement. However, when we examine data on calls for service, we often find that there are enough officers to meet performance objectives, particularly if more effectively deployed, and that many officers, instead of spending all shift handling calls for service, actually have significant amounts of uncommitted time.

Our work suggests there are a number of things that law enforcement agencies can do to be more efficient, and even reduce the number of sworn officers — the largest cost of the police budget. Here are five that have great potential.

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1. Communities should take a hard look at minimum staffing levels. Most police departments maintain some type of minimum staffing level. That is, they identify the minimum number of officers who must be on duty on a shift or at a given post. Occasionally, this staffing level is based on an analysis of the agency workload, but more often it is tied to the number of posts, or what the agency and its officers feel is appropriate. Sometimes the minimum staffing level is specified in a union contract.

[Eric Zorn: Activists' call to 'defund the police' is a confusing message that could backfire »](#)

There are two problems associated with minimum levels. First, we often find that the staffing level does not match the workload. For example, we often see the same number of officers working at 4 p.m. is the same that is working at 4 a.m., even though the workload in the afternoon could be four or five times greater. Second, when the number of officers on duty falls below the minimum, the agency will often hire off-duty officers to fill the spots on overtime. This leads to significant costs, officers who may be patrolling in unfamiliar areas and officers who may be working too many hours. In 2019, for example, Boston spent nearly \$70 million on police overtime.

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2. Agencies should critically examine officer work schedules. A number of years ago, police agencies began to implement so-called 4/10 plan work schedules. In these schedules, officers work four 10-hour days and have three days off. Although these schedules are popular, in most applications they require the agency to employ 20% more officers than if the officers worked eight- or 12-hour shifts.

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other departments use non-sworn staff for these tasks. Non-sworn staff are often better equipped for this type of work (many have degrees in forensic science), and the cost for these members is typically less than that of a sworn officer.

4. Police agencies should focus on reducing demand for services. Police departments respond to many types of calls that could be handled in other ways. For example, police departments devote significant resources to answering burglar alarms, the vast majority of which are false. Some agencies have an approach to alarms called “verified response,” in which the initial response is done by the alarm company and not the police. Communities adopting verified response have seen significant reductions in demand.

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5. Departments should greatly reduce the use of two-officer patrol cars. Some agencies continue to make extensive use of two-officer patrol cars. While the safety effects of that approach are subject to debate, the extra cost is not. While a fraction of police calls for service require that two officers respond, that percentage rarely exceeds 50%. More often it is the case that this approach results in two officers being assigned to a call that only requires one.

It is important to point out that even before the events in Minneapolis, most communities were facing significant fiscal challenges as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. There likely would have been large cuts in funding for public safety, and thus this may be an important time to think critically about how we want to keep our communities safe and what it will cost.

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In the days ahead, many units of government will ask how many police officers are required to ensure public safety. Put another way, what number of officers would help an agency most cost-effectively meet the demands placed on it? This is a

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Alexander Weiss is the former director of the Center for Public Safety at Northwestern University. He is the author (with Jeremy Wilson) of "Performance-Based Approach to Police Staffing and Allocation," published by the Office of Community Oriented Police Services, United States Department of Justice.

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