

# (De)funding the Police

In the summer of 2020, protests erupted across the United States in response to the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor by police officers, and to continued trends of police violence against Black Americans more generally. More recently, many activists have begun calling for state and local governments to “defund the police.” However, as Matthew Yglesias of Vox renders it: “A three-word slogan is not a detailed policy agenda, and not everyone using the slogan agrees on the details.”<sup>1</sup>

The most radical proposal associated with the slogan conceives proposes “defunding” as a literal goal, and advocates for abolition of policing, at least as the institution currently exists. As one activist argues, American policing wasn’t always around. Its early days are associated with enforcing slavery and rebuffing labor activism.<sup>2</sup> This checkered history, coupled with ever-increasing militarization in equipment and tactics, which studies have shown disproportionately affect Black Americans<sup>3</sup>, motivates some activists to offer that Americans once lived without this kind of policing and can do so again.<sup>4</sup>

Others advocate divesting funds from police departments and reallocating them to other community and public initiatives, such as education, employment resources, social work, and mental health services. Police, after all, are often called to respond to issues ranging from cats in trees to mental health crises and domestic violence. Studies have shown that up to 9 in 10 calls for emergency service involve non-violent offenses.<sup>5</sup> This doesn’t, of course, mean that the resolution of such calls will remain non-violent, and many activists insist that police officers themselves often worsen outcomes by arriving, often armed, and leaning into escalatory engagement tactics.<sup>6</sup> Advocates of such an approach point to studies showing no correlation between increases in police funding and decreases in crime, and consistent social science research which points to educational<sup>7</sup> and employment<sup>8</sup> equity, not increased policing, as more effectively reducing crime.

Many Americans, however, remain skeptical of proposals to defund, divest from, or otherwise alter the basic structure of American policing, citing concerns about their safety and that of their communities, as well as the lack of clear alternatives for responding to crimes when they are committed.<sup>9</sup> Many from vulnerable demographic groups want police presence in their neighborhoods to stay the same, rather than decreasing or refocusing.<sup>10 11</sup>

While a FiveThirtyEight poll indicates that a majority of Americans oppose “defunding the police” (58% to 31% on average), many municipalities are making changes consistent with the movement—from banning particular engagement tactics, to adjusting hiring priorities, to restructuring entire departments.<sup>12</sup> While a strategy pursuing “reallocation” may be more palatable to many, advocacy for “defunding” surely seems to have captured some attention, and is already having an impact on policing across the United States.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Does the racially oppressive history of American policing mean the institution is, as some activists suggest, not able to be reformed?
2. Are activists obligated to make their demands (more) palatable to the public in order to achieve their goals?

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<sup>1</sup> Vox, “What does ‘defund the police’ mean?”

<sup>2</sup> TIME, “The History of Police in America and the First Force”

<sup>3</sup> PBS NewsHour, “Police militarization fails to protect officers and targets black communities, study finds”

<sup>4</sup> The New York Times, “Opinion: Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police”

<sup>5</sup> The Brookings Institution, “What does ‘defund the police’ mean and does it have merit?”

<sup>6</sup> ProPublica, “We Reviewed Police Tactics Seen in Nearly 400 Protest Videos. Here’s What We Found.”

<sup>7</sup> Lance Lochner and Enrico Moretti, “The Effect of Education on Crime: Evidence from Prison Inmates, Arrests, and Self-Reports”

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Uggen and Sarah Shannon, “Productive Addicts and Harm Reduction: How Work Reduces Crime – But Not Drug Use”

<sup>9</sup> The Boston Globe, “Amid cries to defund the police, what are the alternatives?”

<sup>10</sup> Gallup, “Black Americans Want Police to Retain Local Presence”

<sup>11</sup> The CATO Institute, “Policing in America: Understanding Public Attitudes Toward the Police. Results from a National Survey”

<sup>12</sup> USA Today, “2020 protests impact: City and state changes to policing”

