

# Problems and Limitations of Defunding the Police

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The term "defund the police" refers to proposals aimed at reducing law enforcement agency budgets and reallocating public resources to social programs, mental health care, housing support, and violence prevention initiatives. These initiatives are often integrated into broader community-based programs. The visibility of this term increased significantly in media discourse following a series of incidents involving police violence and protests against social inequality, wherein numerous activists argued that policing had not effectively improved social conditions related to crime and disorder. While these proposals emerged from dissatisfaction with police conduct and disparities in criminal justice outcomes, they have also provoked considerable debate regarding whether budget and staff reductions could compromise the effectiveness of emergency response and crime deterrence. The contemporary discussion on this topic has largely shifted from the moral dimensions of the movement to practical considerations concerning the feasibility of implementation, administrative challenges, and potential unintended consequences. This essay examines key issues and challenges associated with defunding the police initiatives, including their impact on public safety, effects on community relations, crime consequences, and relevant case studies.

## Overview of the Defunding Movement

The movement to defund the police largely stems from persistent dissatisfaction with police violence, racially disparate enforcement, and the expanding scope of responsibilities assigned to law enforcement agencies. Following the protests triggered by the death of George Floyd in 2020, this issue gained prominence in public discourse, engaging activists, municipal legislatures, and political debates. The core premise was to reallocate portions of police budgets to fund housing, mental health treatment, education, and violence prevention, based on the understanding that many conditions contributing to crime do not primarily originate from criminal law violations. This agenda was further driven by the belief that police officers have increasingly been tasked with intervening in behavioral health crises and other non-crime-related issues. Additionally, concerns have been raised that officers often lack the necessary training for many of these situations, leading to strain on departments and suboptimal outcomes for communities (Serrato, 2022). As will be discussed further, these reassignments could create significant challenges for cities if alternative systems are not sufficiently developed to assume these responsibilities, potentially highlighting the indispensable role of police in public safety (Serrato, 2022).

Advocates of police budgetary defunding have also articulated mechanisms for reallocating these funds to social services designed to address the underlying

conditions contributing to emergencies and calls for police intervention. These reallocated funds were frequently directed towards mental health crisis teams, housing initiatives, youth programs, addiction services, violence interruption efforts, and civilian non-violent response teams. Proponents anticipated that such investments would reduce the incidence of social problems requiring police action and arrests.

Theoretically, this approach aimed to narrow the scope of police involvement to primarily violent crime, for which police response is arguably essential, while health and welfare agencies assumed the majority of direct service roles, areas where officers are arguably not the primary appropriate frontline responders. Additionally, advocates hoped this process would mitigate harmful or negative interactions between residents and police, particularly in neighborhoods with frequent police presence, ultimately fostering less coercive and dependency-based public safety efforts (Rushin, 2023). However, implementing such reallocations, particularly at the municipal level, has faced challenges related to redirecting established public funds from existing agencies to departments with entirely distinct objectives and outcomes, raising operational feasibility concerns from the outset (Rushin, 2023).

### **Main Arguments Against Defunding the Police**

A primary critique of defunding police departments centers on the concern that budget reductions will decrease available personnel, equipment, and dispatch capabilities required for emergency calls and high-risk policing activities. While advocates often propose reassigning a broad spectrum of situations not requiring criminal intervention to civilian agencies, police departments remain the primary responders for rare but dangerous incidents such as assault, domestic violence, armed disputes, and other high-liability scenarios. A nine-agency study of calls for service revealed a diverse range of activities within each call but also affirmed that eliminating police from certain calls would necessitate accounting for urgent requests involving violent activities for which no immediate substitutes exist. Reducing the number of officers after such calls could delay immediate responses or hinder backfilling during extreme emergencies, creating personnel gaps during critical incidents. Critics contend that this operational reality implies budget cuts could prevent adequate coverage at crucial moments, despite the laudable motivations for reform.

Moreover, a significant and persistent concern in debates surrounding defunding is the likelihood that reductions in police staffing levels will lead to increased response times and decreased patrol, investigatory, and real-time engagement. For at-risk communities disproportionately affected by violent crime, domestic violence, and behavioral health situations, a decline in police numbers before supporting services are adequately established and organized presents a risk that essential services may not arrive when most needed. Vulnerable communities are particularly susceptible to the consequences

of such service breakdowns, as they often lack sufficient access to private health and safety provisions like private security, non-emergency transportation, or healthcare. Serrato's discussion on the limitations of police roles suggests that while non-policing, civilian support structures could be beneficial, such organizations must be robustly in place prior to any dismantling of existing police mechanisms, to prevent systemic gaps that could worsen conditions for these communities (Serrato, 2022). Therefore, without these foundational elements in place within a community before re-evaluating police provision, surface-level coverage would diminish, offering reduced protection for those with fewer alternatives.

Furthermore, opponents argue that emergency situations requiring police involvement cannot be simply transitioned to social services networks, as many hybrid emergencies involve well-being issues but also entail immediate jeopardy, uncertainty, and potential for violence. While mental health crisis teams, shelters, and addiction programs may address the root causes of disorder, their frontline staff typically lack the adequate training, legal authority, or protective measures to respond effectively when an individual is armed, physically assaulting, or actively threatening others. According to Rushin, public safety networks comprise interdependent systems; reallocating funds without establishing a synchronized emergency framework would weaken overall public safety rather than creating sustainable alternatives (Rushin, 2023). This argument is particularly relevant for volatile domestic disputes, unpredictable crisis activities, and street confrontations where circumstances can rapidly escalate, requiring a response unit capable of detaining, isolating, or restraining a suspect. Consequently, those who oppose defunding police forces and services contend that social investment is necessary, but it must be supplemented by mandatory services equipped to handle immediate, high-risk situations.

Additionally, some critics suggest that defunding undermines the potential for police reform by removing financial resources vital for implementing changes in departmental processes, oversight, and community-oriented public safety approaches. Measures such as de-escalation and crisis intervention training, enforcement of constitutional standards, and initiatives to reduce bias require consistent funding. Similarly, data systems, internal accountability units, body camera programs, and early warning systems designed to identify problems proactively also depend on stable financial support. If budget cuts are too comprehensive, departments compelled to reduce costs may be forced to prioritize core emergency response functions, thereby scaling back activities that do not yield immediate short-term savings but are critical for systemic change. Evidence from a nine-agency review of police workload indicates that genuine reforms are not merely about cutting departments; they necessitate careful differentiation between essential functions and those that could be reassigned without

diminishing service capacity (Lum et al., 2021). In this context, defunding risks becoming a mechanism that undermines the very administrative resources required to achieve the objectives of reform advocates.

### **Negative Impacts on Public Safety**

Empirical evidence from urban areas suggests that reducing police presence can pose immediate risks to public safety, particularly when such reductions proceed more rapidly than the establishment of alternative services. In Minneapolis, following public calls for the disbandment or radical reform of the police department, a decline in police personnel, reduced investigative capacity, and increased concerns about delayed responses to violent crime calls were observed, predating the articulation of an effective city-wide alternative. Similar concerns arose in other jurisdictions where patrol cuts or retirements resulted in insufficient personnel to respond to shootings, burglaries, and domestic violence calls. According to Rushin, public safety agencies operate within constrained fiscal and legal environments, and funding cuts, whether immediate or gradual, can leave already vulnerable communities with diminished protection until social intervention programs are capable of assuming the expected responsibilities (Rushin, 2023). While these situations do not conclusively prove that all crime increases are solely attributable to defunding, they demonstrate the heightened vulnerability to immediate threats when police response capabilities are reduced due to insufficient funding.

However, fluctuations in crime rates cannot be mechanistically attributed solely to police budget reductions; violence and disorder are influenced by an intricate interplay of social, economic, and institutional conditions that are themselves dynamic. Cities that implemented or merely debated police budget reductions also contended with the disruptive effects of the pandemic, courtroom backlogs, school closures, spikes in gun purchases, labor disruptions, and changes in reporting practices. It is not feasible to definitively attribute changes in crime rates solely to police funding decisions during such periods. A multi-jurisdictional agency study indicates that police activity encompasses a wide range of response calls. Therefore, staffing reductions or reassignments of police to other duties would not mathematically produce a clear service outcome for public safety, which is a collective endeavor involving all services (Lum et al., 2021). Furthermore, crime differentials vary across neighborhoods and by crime type, meaning that changes in overall city outcomes may not reflect improvements or deteriorations in specific categories such as homicide, car theft, domestic abuse, or minor offenses. Nevertheless, this inherent uncertainty does not alleviate apprehension regarding crime, fatalities, or disorder, as policymakers must operate in an environment where causation is contested and public risk is a paramount concern.

Moreover, if police budgets are reduced, specialized units are likely to experience attrition before patrol divisions. However, underserved populations, including victims of domestic violence, gang members, schoolchildren, and families involved with repeat offenders, often rely more heavily on these specialized teams than on traditional policing functions such as general patrol, victim follow-up, threat assessments, witness coordination, intelligence gathering, and sustained engagement with affected families or neighborhoods. If these specialized assignments are transferred to uniformed officers already managing violent emergencies across broad areas, victims of intimate partner violence may become less identifiable, early intervention in retaliatory violence could be neglected, and both services would be disrupted. Serrato acknowledges that narrowing police services and options can create a more organized patrol division if alternative services are available to fill the void. However, this logic implies that reducing police department resources when no such alternatives exist suggests inadequate support for specialized public safety efforts, rather than a mere redistribution of police responsibilities (Serrato, 2022). Consequently, carefully established neighborhoods that benefit from specialized police units addressing gang violence or domestic violence would experience the most severe service reductions.

### **Effects on Community Trust and Police-Community Relations**

The debate surrounding defunding the police has had a bidirectional impact on community trust: while it may have increased trust for some residents, for others it may have exacerbated fear and distrust. For certain communities that have perceived policing as overly punitive or racially discriminatory, the willingness to defund police budgets might signal a commitment to addressing long-standing grievances and reallocating public funds towards housing, treatment, and other non-police sources of safety, which many residents consider more legitimate. Conversely, for other residents, this same proposal may have conveyed a withdrawal of state protection, particularly in neighborhoods experiencing high rates of violence and limited access to private security options. This tension, as Rushin argues, arises from the broader inequities in access to public safety, which elicit such divergent responses to the same proposal (Rushin, 2023). Such divergence, however, may negatively impact police-community relations, as police may interpret increased public and political criticism as a form of hostility, while residents may perceive negative police responses as a reassertion of institutional distance. Therefore, trust appears more contingent on a jurisdiction's ability to implement tangible changes rather than on the message conveyed by the phrase "defund the police" itself.

Further reductions in departmental budgets could lead to the loss of outreach programs that foster non-enforcement interactions between police and the community. Most

outreach programs involve police outreach staff, school liaison officers, neighborhood meetings, youth and victim support programs, and follow-up services, all of which encourage positive engagement and build trust. If police-community interactions primarily revolve around enforcement, existing distrust may become further entrenched, even if police reform advocates aim for a more lenient approach. This loss is significant because non-enforcement activities provide crucial opportunities for community members to lodge complaints, seek clarifications, or assess officers' ability to address their needs. These contacts also enable officers to identify persistent conflicts and determine optimal community-based solutions. The diverse service demands placed on police indicate that such engagement inherently builds relationships, rather than being separate activities that can be easily sacrificed during budgetary cuts (Lum et al., 2021). With the minimization of these programs and contacts, the community may increasingly perceive the police as external agents who deliver judgments primarily through arrests, citations, or interventions in emergencies. This ultimately hinders sustainable relationship-building within the community.

### **Case Studies and Real-World Outcomes**

Empirical observations from various localities offer insights into the impact of police defunding. Where institutional capacity to appropriately reassign functions was insufficient, outcomes were mixed. Following the push for reforms in 2020, Minneapolis became a prominent case study, with officer departures, political disruptions, and uncertainty regarding the assumption of policing functions leading to concerns about slower response times and diminished investigative follow-up, even though policing was not fully "decertified" as some slogans suggested. In contrast, the widely acclaimed CAHOOTS program in Eugene, Oregon, demonstrated a more viable option for defunding by deploying mental health practitioners and emergency medical staff to handle nonviolent calls, thereby reassigning some functions without completely sidelining police officers in violent incidents (Serrato, 2022). The comparisons thus suggest that the effectiveness of police reform is less about the sloganization of "decertification" and more about the existence of viable alternative functions capable of assuming policing responsibilities before police operations are downsized. Where demands for action lead to implementation prior to adequate administrative organization, the outcome is often confusion regarding role assignments and public concern that policing activities are ceasing without corresponding backup support for their essential functions.

Ultimately, the primary lesson from these comparisons is that policy goals are less critical than implementation logistics and the chain of effects. On one hand, the Minneapolis example illustrates that, without comprehensive political support and a fully staffed alternative system, cities may experience disoriented officers, destabilized

systems, and citizen anxieties regarding inadequate response. The Eugene example demonstrates that diversion is possible, but this success is attributed to a legacy of established, well-defined tasks for alternative units. This suggests that calls to reduce police department duties necessitate careful consideration of which tasks can be safely redelegated, how quickly replacement teams can be scaled up, and which roles require ongoing protection for high-danger situations (Rushin, 2023). Additionally, Rushin notes that a department's budget and response satisfaction are also influenced by operating budget size, demand for services, and inequities in public safety delivery across neighborhoods, making defunding a more challenging consideration for citizens highly dependent on public emergency services (Rushin, 2023). In these contexts, the case studies highlight the need for phased restructuring rather than immediate downstream defunding, framing future legislative considerations around which elements of reform and legislation are of greater immediate concern when balancing risk against social change.

### **Conclusion**

While calls to "defund the police" have gained traction at local and national levels as a strategy to address police violence and the over-reliance of government agencies on law enforcement, the evidence presented suggests why many opponents believe this cannot be effectively achieved without substantial risks. Primary concerns include diminished emergency response capabilities, inadequate visible patrol, weakened specialized investigative units, and the potential for placing civilians in situations they are not equipped to handle due to the incomplete transfer of law enforcement powers and expectations. The examination of public safety and community engagement also indicates that budget cuts could engender fear among individuals residing in high-crime areas, create a divide in non-law enforcement interactions between police personnel and residents, and leave vulnerable communities with fewer immediate sources of dependable protection in stressful situations. Simultaneous comparisons of indicative police duties further suggest that outcomes are more significantly influenced by planning, personnel, legal authority, and the sequence in which responsibilities are removed, rather than by slogans. Based on this evidence, police safety reform appears more feasible when jurisdictions engage in progressive restructuring, targeted reassignments, and sustained efforts towards long-term investments in accountability reforms and alternative service provisions.

### References

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