

Police Funding: Public Opinion and Policies

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A series of controversial use of force incidents, notably the death of George Floyd in 2020 (Forliti & Sullivan, 2020), has stirred a contentious debate among the American public: should the budgets of police agencies be reduced? Public concern has escalated regarding the amount of funding that goes into police budgets. The concept of reallocating police budgets is not a new one (see Davis, 2005; Gimbel & Muhammad, 2019). Yet, use of the phrase 'defund the police' at protests across the nation has put this concept at the forefront of the public debate (Novacic, 2021).



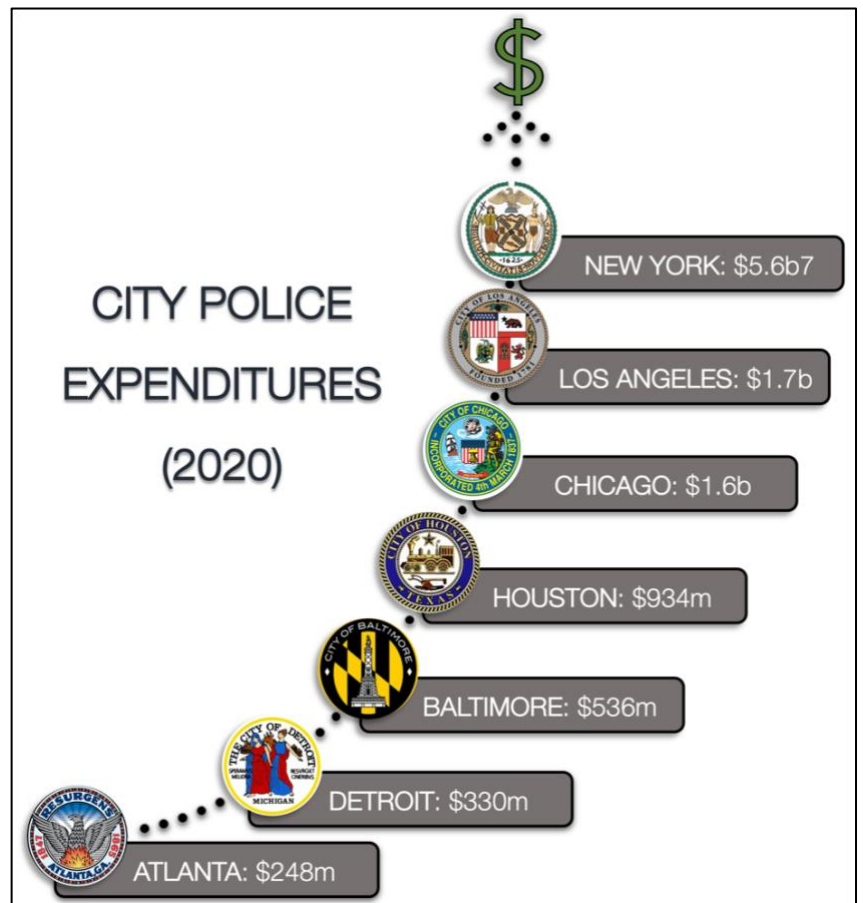
What exactly is meant by reallocating and defunding police budgets varies widely (Kiger, 2020). Some advocate for modest readjustments to police budgets with diversion of funds to other services (e.g., educational & vocational training, healthcare, housing) to help address the underlying causes of

crime. Here police would primarily be called upon to handle situations too volatile for social service workers. Others favor more extreme measures, such as the abolition of local police agencies, arguing that financial adjustments alone are inadequate. Instead, residents would maintain order themselves through non-violent means. Opponents of budget reallocation have also provided numerous counterpoints. For instance, defunding may result in inefficient reactive policing, while police agency abolition may encourage citizen vigilantism (Sousa, 2020a).

This policy brief seeks to examine this debate by first providing an overview of police agencies and their budgets in the United States. Results of national surveys that examine public opinion on various police reforms, including the reduction of department budgets, are then presented. Finally, implications for police funding and public policy are discussed.

Police Expenditures and Public Opinion

About \$300 billion is spent on the criminal justice system annually in the U.S., with half allocated to funding roughly 18,000 local, state, and federal police agencies (Banks et al., 2016; Hayes, 2020). Many agencies are small (e.g., employ ≤ 10 officers), while others are much bigger (e.g., 5,000+ officers). Figure 1 depicts how much money various, larger cities devoted to policing in 2020 (Statista, 2020). Most departmental funds were used for salaries (of both sworn and non-sworn personnel), pensions, and employment benefits like health insurance. While exact budgetary

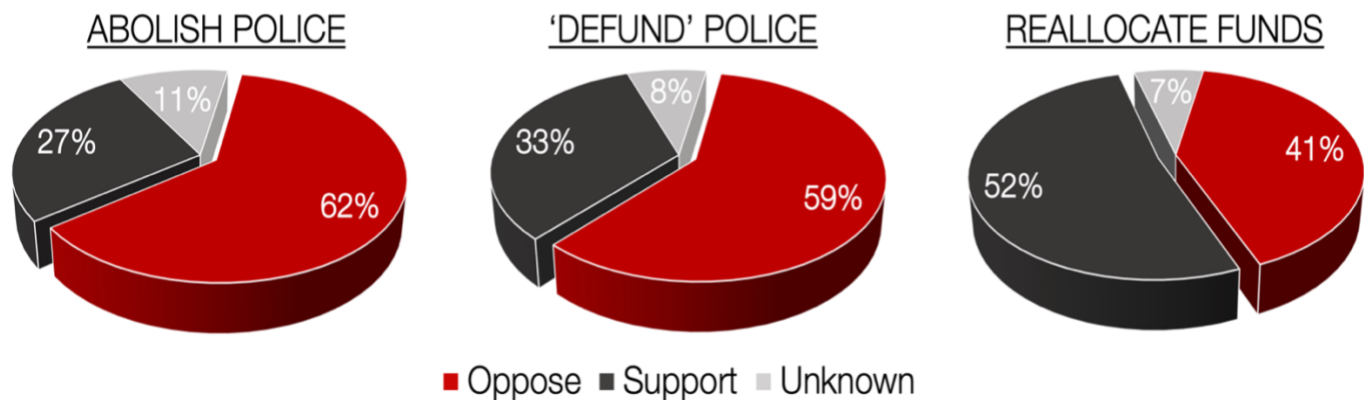


expenditures vary by department, a consequence of reducing police budgets would be employing fewer officers (Hayes, 2020). Given the substantial expenditures involved with policing, it is crucial to better establish public opinion towards police reform efforts.

Polls and surveys examining public opinion regarding altering police budgets have revealed a variety of findings. Figure 2 depicts the average level of public support and opposition to various police reforms drawn from multiple national surveys (e.g., ABCNews, 2020; CCJP, 2021; Gallup, 2020; Huffpost, 2020; Pew, 2021; Reuters, 2020; USAToday, 2021). Responses indicate that most Americans are opposed to abolishing and defunding police departments. When asked specifically about reallocating funds from police budgets to other social services, just over half of respondents showed support. Support has also shifted with time. For example, Pew Research Center (2021) reported that opposition to defunding police increased from 55% in 2020 to 75% in

2021. It is also important to note that there is substantial variation in public opinion across different social groups, with Black and Democrat respondents being far more supportive than other groups for the reallocation of police resources (CCJP, 2021).

LEVEL OF SUPPORT/OPPOSITION TO VARIOUS POLICE REFORMS



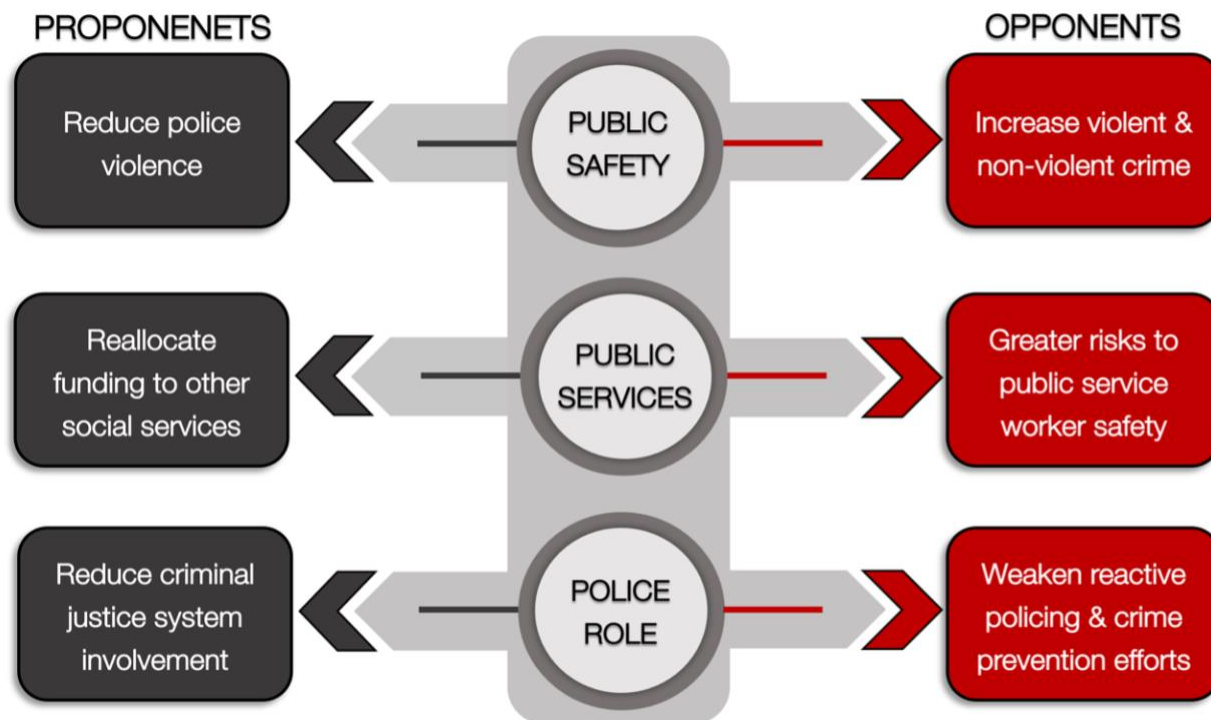
POLICY DEBATE

Ongoing debates about police budget reallocation center around public safety, public services, and the role of police in society. For each of these areas, proponents argue that reducing funding will improve the current situation, while opponents contend that cutting police budgets will have serious consequences. Figure 3 summarizes these sources of disagreement.

One major source of contention surrounding police funding is public safety. Proponents of reducing police budgets contend that doing so will reduce police violence, especially against minorities (Fernandez, 2020; NYCLU, 2018). Conversely, opponents of budget reallocation argue that public safety will decrease, as evidence suggests that violent crime increases when police budgets are cut (Chalfin et al., 2020; Dearden, 2020). Employing a greater number of police has also been connected to less crime (Mello, 2019). Disagreement also exists surrounding the redistribution of police funding to other public services. Proponents argue that reducing police budgets allows resources to be diverted to other social services like healthcare, education, and housing, which help address the root causes of crime (Lehman, 2021). However, public services previously performed by police would then need to be fulfilled by others, which may expose public service workers to greater risks of victimization (Wilson, 2021). There is disagreement surrounding the role of police in society as well. According to proponents of budget

reallocation, police are often involved in critical situations (e.g., mental health crises) yet lack proper skills or training which strains police-citizen relations (Friedman, 2021). Further, decreasing or eliminating funding to police agencies may also reduce criminal justice system involvement overall (e.g., fewer arrests, incarcerations) (Lum et al., 2020). Opponents, however, note that reducing the role of police may also weaken efforts to address and prevent crime (Sousa, 2020b).

SOURCES OF DISAGREEMENT



Discourse surrounding police budgets is nuanced, as highlighted by the existing state of public opinion. Opposing perspectives highlight key issues that should be considered when developing and implementing policies regarding police budgets and reforms. Yet efforts have been made with considerations for both sides of the debate. Recently, Crisis Intervention Teams (CIT) and Co-responder models have been used to support police responses to situations such as mental health crises (Beck et al., 2020). Such programs involve collaborations among police, advocates, and health and social service providers to improve responses to critical situations as well as promote diversion away from the criminal justice system. Regardless, more research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of these programs as an avenue for police reform.

CONCLUSION

The results of recent survey research demonstrate the importance of examining the debate surrounding police budgets. Despite public concern, the majority of American's generally oppose reducing police budgets as well as abolition. Greater support for reallocating police resources exists when such resources are directed at efforts to reduce the social conditions associated with crime. These public opinions are crucial considerations for shaping the future of police budgets and policies in the United States.

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End Notes

¹ ATF, 2020.

² ATF, 2021.

³ Gallup, 2021.

⁴ Pew Research Center, 2021.

⁵ Pew Research Center, 2017; Saad, 2020; Gallup, 2021.

⁶ Pew Research Center, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2021; Gallup, 2021.

⁷ Pew Research Center, 2017.

⁸ Brennan, 2021.

⁹ Sen & Panjamapirom, 2012; Kalesan, et al., 2016; Kivisto, Ray, & Phalen, 2017.

¹⁰ Kleck & Gertz, 1995; Lott, 1998.

Center for Crime and Justice Policy

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