

Issue: VA Criminal Justice

The Emerging Movement for Police Reform

Getting Started: Reimagining the Role of Police

The brutal murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Daunte Wright and the persistence of police violence across the country have led to efforts in more than 20 major cities to reform the role of police by redistributing some funding to other agencies and institutions.¹

Advocates for systemic police reform propose a new model of policing, variously called “reimagine the police,” “abolish the police,” and “defund the police.” However, not all proponents of police reform are in favor of abolishing the police. Rather, as Harvard Kennedy School professor Khalil Gibran points out in a *Washington Post Interview*, defund the police is, “in the broadest sense, a way of having a conversation about what starting over would look like.”²

Gibran urges people to think of defunding in terms of a “process” and an “outcome.” “The process is empowering local communities to come to the table with city council members to create a process for redefining what the police do, which leads to an outcome, which is they do less of what they’ve been doing.”³

The people who respond to crises should be those best-equipped to deal with them, according to MPD150, a community advocacy organization in Minneapolis that focuses on abolishing local police. Rather than “strangers armed with guns,” the organization, as quoted in a February 2021 CNN piece, maintains that “first responders should be mental health providers, social workers, victim advocates and other community members in less visible roles.” It also argues that law and order are best maintained through “education, jobs, and mental health services that low-income communities are often denied.”⁴

MPD150 and many of the organizations working for police reform focus on the root causes of crime: poverty and racism, which the police and prisons are not addressing. These organizations view the police and prisons as “sow[ing] the seeds of more poverty and alienation, while absorbing billions of dollars that might otherwise be spent on public welfare.”⁵

An April 2021 *New York Times* article mentioned data that appears in the *Washington Post* showing that over the past few years nearly 1,000 people have been shot and killed by the police annually and that Black and Hispanic individuals have been killed at a much higher rate by population than whites.⁶

Advocates of reallocating police funding to alternative services differ from police reformers, who argue that police departments need more funding for anti-bias training and other programs.⁷ This paper will discuss both approaches to re-imagining policing in America.

Does Police Reform Work?

A Case Study

Given the small number of examples in the U.S., it is not yet possible to assess the effectiveness of reduced policing on a large scale. However, there is evidence that fewer police interventions lead to fewer violent crimes. During several months in 2014 and 2015, the New York Police Department

engaged in a work ‘slowdown’ and stopped proactive policing. A 2017 study, based on crime rates during that period, defined proactive policing as the “systematic and aggressive enforcement of low-level violations and heightened police presence in areas where crime is anticipated.”⁸

Study findings revealed that proactive policing, which disproportionately targets low-income communities of color, does not reduce violent crime and, in fact, leads to more crime and more police intervention. The study’s authors point out that “the vicious feedback between proactive policing and major crime can exacerbate political and economic inequality across communities.” They conclude that “in the absence of reliable evidence of the effectiveness of proactive policing, it is time to consider how proactive policing reform might reduce crime and increase well-being in the most heavily policed communities.”⁹

Examples of Model Programs

Reallocation of Funds

Following are examples of reallocating initiatives highlighting their successes and ongoing challenges.

San Francisco, CA

- 2016: The “Collaborative Reform Initiative” (CRI) was established in response to the U.S. Department of Justice’s (DOJ) 400-page comprehensive assessment containing 94 findings and 272 recommendations for police reform.¹⁰
- 2020: Building on the CRI program Mayor London Breed proposed a four-part “Roadmap for New Police Reforms”¹¹ that aims to:
 1. Reduce public reliance on police responses to non-criminal street crises
 2. Eliminate biased policing and strengthen accountability
 3. Demilitarize departmental operation
 4. Promote economic justice through budget reallocations to marginalized communities.”¹²
- 2021: A “Street Crisis Response Team” pilot program was implemented, based on the Eugene, Oregon CAHOOTS program that deploys teams of professionals from the fire and health departments to respond to the majority of calls for substance abuse, behavioral, or mental illness crises.¹³

Positive Outcomes: By May 2019 the city police reported a 30 percent drop in the use of force over three years with no police shootings in nearly a year.¹⁴

Challenges: However, as of May 2019 only about a quarter of the 272 DOJ recommendations were fully implemented.¹⁵

The SFPD has a large task implementing the improvements laid out in the December 2020 SFPD’s 96-page “Racial Equity Action and Inclusion Plan” for enhancing racial diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging¹⁶

Austin, TX

- 2020: The city council cut the \$434 million police department budget by \$150 million with a plan to redistribute civilian functions like forensic sciences, support services, and victims' services to other parts of city government.¹⁷

Positive Outcomes: Funds were reallocated to emergency medical services for Covid-19, mental health, abortion, victim services, substance abuse programs, food access, workforce development, and the purchase of two hotels to provide housing for the homeless.¹⁸

Burglaries were down by 9% as of April 2021.¹⁹

Challenges: Republican state legislators oppose reallocation of funds and passed a bill that allows for various punishments for any city larger than 250,000 that funds its police department at a level lower than in the preceding two fiscal years

Unfortunately, just as the violent crime rate across the country has been increasing,²⁰ violent crime has also increased in Austin. Murders, violent assaults, and car thefts are all up significantly as of April 2021.²¹

Police Reform

Some cities are investing in police reform in an attempt to improve community relations without reducing the police force or the responsibilities of police officers.

Camden, NJ

- 2013: Pushed by Governor Chris Christie and state Democratic lawmakers, Camden disbanded the 200-person city police force and cancelled the police union contract and rehired more police under county jurisdiction, resulting in mixed community reaction.²²
- 2016: The county teamed up with the NYU Policing Project to update department policies—including use of force—and implement trainings, including anti-bias training.

Positive Outcomes: Crime rate at a 50-year low by 2020
Excessive force complaints significantly down
New county police chief viewed as a “transparent” leader²³

Challenges: Ongoing poverty and drugs
Few police live in the community
“Broken windows” policy where police show force by responding to small scale crimes^{24,25}

Memphis, TN

- 1988: Memphis developed a crisis intervention team (CIT) program widely adopted across the country.

- The program has three main components:
 - To train police to deal with crisis situations involving people with mental illness (PMI)
 - To train dispatch operators to recognize reports that have a high probability of involving PMI and to send CIT-trained officers whenever possible
 - To establish a centralized drop-off mental health facility that will automatically accept people and minimize police officer transfer time²⁶

Positive Outcomes: CIT is the “Gold Standard” for addressing PMI crisis situations.
Over 2,700 CIT programs across the U.S
Programs closely following the Memphis model show positive results.
CIT-trained officers report increased satisfaction and self-perception in their use of force.
Considered the best at reducing repeat offenses and improving mental health outcomes.

Challenges: Variability in program implementation makes assessment difficult.
Difficulty in drawing conclusions about arrest, use of force, and injury-related outcomes.
Cost reductions to criminal justice system shifted to community health systems.^{27,28}

A Mixed Model

Newark, NJ

A mixed approach included some efforts at reform as well as some reallocation of funding.

- 2014: Police reform activist Mayor Ras Baraka implemented reforms specified by a consent decree between the city and the DOJ under the Obama administration.

Positive Outcomes: Newark Street Team well established by 2020
An independent citizen review board established.
Five percent of the \$235 million police budget used for antiviolenace initiatives.

Challenges: A quarter of the population lives below poverty line.
Police brutality rampant.
Police viewed as “paramilitary” and political force.
Police force doesn’t reflect community.²⁹

Limitations of Police Reform Training

After the shooting death of Michael Brown in 2014, some of the nation’s police departments instituted de-escalation, implicit bias, and duty to intervene training programs in order to decrease the use of force. The number of such programs has increased significantly in the year since George Floyd’s murder. But according to experts, cited in a May 2021 *Axios* article, “no one should expect them to have enough impact in one year to prevent more tragic deaths of people of color. It could take years to see results.”³⁰

And the quality of such programs can vary significantly. As Frank Straub, an expert on police training at the National Police Foundation, points out, “there are no national standards to show what the training should look like—how many hours should be offered or how often it should be refreshed.”³¹

Policy Challenges

Political Opposition

For more than 20 years, local elected officials have ignored the positive impact of alternatives to proactive policing. When crime rates are increasing, they say the police need more resources, and when they’re decreasing, they claim the police are doing a great job. But, according to Gibran, when violence reduction “work is happening behind the scenes, nobody measures it in terms of local law enforcement,” mainly because there’s often a political incentive not to.³²

Republicans, as they have for the last 50 years, continue to view “systemic police reform” that in any way limits the power of the police “as an attack on police that should require a law-and-order response.”³³

Police Unions

Police unions are a major obstacle to change and play a significant role in preventing the transformation of police departments across the country.³⁴

A 2017 Duke University article that examines 178 union contracts from some of the country’s largest police departments demonstrates that a significant number of the contracts “limit officer interrogations after alleged misconduct, mandate the destruction of disciplinary records, ban civilian oversight, prevent anonymous civilian complaints, indemnify officers in the event of civil suits, and limit the length of internal investigations.”³⁵

Based on these findings, the article proposes that states change their labor laws to increase transparency and community participation in the negotiation of police union contracts.”³⁶

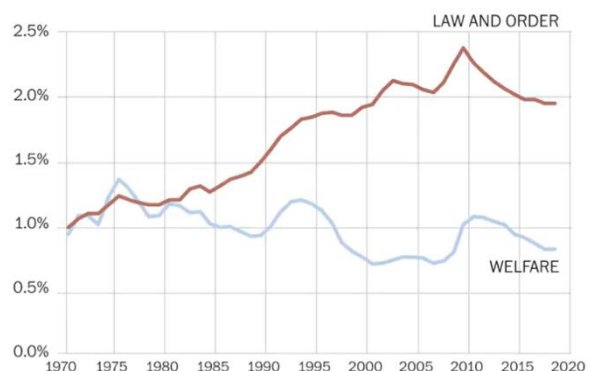
Police Overfunding

In a June 2020 article on police spending, the *Washington Post* published data showing that the U.S. spends twice as much on law and order as it does on social welfare.³⁷

This has not always been the case. Prior to 1980, the U.S. spent about the same amount on law and order and welfare—about one percent of national income for each. Since then, however, welfare spending has declined to .8 percent of national income, while law and order spending stands at two percent. These figures show an enormous shift in national priorities. As the article points out, “we funneled money away from poverty prevention to beef up our response to one of poverty’s biggest

Law and order versus social welfare

Public spending on law and order (police, prison and courts) versus welfare (TANF, food stamps, supplemental social security) as share of national income



Source: The Triumph of Injustice by Saez and Zucman THE WASHINGTON POST
Note: Includes federal, state and local government spending

consequences: crime. We now treat the symptoms rather than the underlying disease.”³⁸

Today, many major cities spend as much as 40 percent of their municipal budgets on law and order. This leaves fewer resources for everything else. The coronavirus pandemic has resulted in steep revenue declines for many cities that are cutting services in an effort to remain solvent, and many mayors are reluctant to cut spending for law and order.³⁹

Public Fatigue

Public fatigue is another obstacle to police reform. Pulitzer Prize winning columnist Michael Paul Williams, in a column for *The Richmond Times Dispatch*, writes that since the summer of 2020, as the nation has grown tired of working toward racial justice, demands to defund or abolish the police have declined while support for law and order have significantly increased.⁴⁰

A *USA Today* March 2021 poll published the following results:⁴¹

- 50% of survey respondents emphasized the importance of law and order.
- Less than one-third thought the right to protest is important.
- 69% trusted the police to promote justice and treat people of all races equally.
- 50% support Black Lives Matter.
- A minority supported the idea of defunding the police.

Department Size

The small size of most of the country’s police departments contributes to the difficulties of changing policing. According to a 2016 federal survey, nationwide there are more than 12,200 local police departments and 3,000 sheriff’s offices. Nearly half have fewer than ten officers, three in four have a maximum of two dozen officers, and nine in ten have fewer than 50 officers. While smaller police departments can adapt well to their communities, they can also avoid accountability. With limited resources and no national structure for law enforcement guidelines, levels of training, practices, and use of force vary greatly from one department to another. Chuck Wexler, executive director of the Police Executive Research Forum, has said, “You want to change American policing, figure out how to get to ... the departments of 50 officers or less....How do you reach them? How do you get to them? ... That’s what the American people keep wondering.”⁴²

Moving Forward

Alternatives to policing are not yet widespread across the country, and Republicans, by and large, vigorously oppose their adoption. Nevertheless, preliminary evidence suggests that reallocating funding and responsibilities from the police to other programs and services is effective in reducing violent crime, in addition to limiting police brutality. While politicians and activists debate the respective merits of defunding police departments and providing additional resources for reform trainings and programs, there is a growing consensus among Democrats that the status quo of American policing cannot hold.

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- ³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/06/12/black-lives-matter-defund-police-is-country-ready/>
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- ⁵ <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-emerging-movement-for-police-and-prison-abolition>
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