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Would Law Enforcement Leaders Support Defunding the Police? Probably—*If* Communities Ask Police to Solve Fewer Problems

Defunding the police—that is, budgeting less money for police and reinvesting it in other public safety strategies—has become a prominent idea in the national conversation around police reform. In many cases, this idea is discussed in the context of a community that has developed an "us-versus-them" mentality between law enforcement and residents, and it is portrayed as a punitive action against the police agency for perceived misconduct. In light of that perspective, let's play a game. Guess which of the following statements originated from law enforcement and which originated from a proponent of defunding the police:

> "People like to go after bias in policing, but this is too myopic. The problems really call for a system-wide overhaul."

"Community members should be empowered to resolve problems on their own, in partnership with law enforcement, and use police as responders of last resort. . . . Communities need to set their own norms and treat police as a supporting role."

"Police often end up doing the things they can do, not necessarily the things they should be doing. . . . We need to not just look at what they are doing, but the things they should not be doing."

"Too many social problems with many causes and needed responses, like mental health, substance abuse, and other social service needs, are often hefted onto the police: Police aren't educated or trained as social workers, but they are being tasked with those objectives."

"Police do certain things competently, but we don't have them fight fires or sanitize wastewater—we've tasked others with doing that. . . . Police have been pulled a lot of directions that have clear resource implications, and we need to do the resource and job analysis on what police should be doing."

"Law enforcement should not be addressing problems like homelessness by themselves. . . . Other key stakeholders—government agencies, service providers, communities—need to be at the table and come to a consensus locally."

"We wouldn't have these challenges if we were able to get individuals with mental illness or addiction access to services."

"We can't arrest our way out of these problems."

"We need a national evaluation of the criminal justice system, from end to end, that will evaluate all activities of the system, their effectiveness, fairness, legitimacy, and consistency."

"The job [of policing] has to change."

In fact, every one of these quotations originated from law enforcement officers and chiefs. We have heard these and other similar perspectives repeatedly in focus groups of practitioners across the justice system, brought together over the past seven years for a project designed to improve the functioning and fairness of the justice system by prioritizing practitioner-identified needs on timely issues (RAND Corporation, undated).

As protests against police use of force and perceptions of systemic racism have swept the nation and the world following the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, there has been a renewal of the national conversation about systemic problems in the U.S. criminal justice system. Much of this conversation has been focused on the idea of defunding or, in some cases, abolishing the police. Although the idea of eliminating police entirely is very controversial, opinion polls and surveys suggest that revisiting and fundamentally redefining the role of police in society is much less so. When specific policies that have been put forward recently are examined closely, many of the components of these policies are likely to garner much broader support than the more vague idea of "defunding the police," even among law enforcement practitioners themselves. And in a highly polarized era in U.S. history, that common ground could be the basis on which to build reforms that are likely to succeed.

Police: The One-Stop-Shop for Trying to Address Society's Problems

The United States has many societal problems that have very different (often complex and overlapping) causes and for which effective solutions require responses from practitioners with very specialized training, expertise, and resilience. Almost without exception, however, a single entity has been made the "front line" in addressing all of these problems: the police. Indeed, data on calls for service in agencies around the country show similar trends of police being called upon to address a multitude of community issues outside what would normally be considered the core responsibilities and training of law enforcement (Police Data Initiative, undated). Recent analysis of 911 calls to the Los Angeles Police Department showed that, in the past decade, only 8 percent of the nearly 18 million calls for service were related to violent crime (Rubin and Poston, 2020). Police are frequently called to respond for minor disturbances, dispute mediation, traffic collisions, responses to alarms or low-level property crimes, and other events which undoubtedly need to be addressed but rarely need the attention of a sworn officer. Law enforcement often is also called upon to respond to other more serious problems, such as people experiencing mental health crises—complicated situations for which police might have limited training and tools. The decision to task police with these responsibilities has been gradually made by default as communities have opted to reduce funding for mental health treatment infrastructure, treatment for substance use disorders, violence prevention, and other community-led resources (Glover, Miller, and Sadowski,

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2012). This is both dangerous and wildly ineffective and serves no one well, including the police officers on the ground and other practitioners in the criminal justice system who now face unrealistic expectations (McCosh, 2020; Mental Health America, 2017; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).

The status quo is not fair to police agencies and officers either, and it forces them to operate in a near-constant state of feeling under-equipped to address all of the additional mandates they have been given. Asking officers to act as social workers without training them as such, as de facto medical responders in the drug epidemic, or as emergency mental health professionals with limited resources—on top of what was a stressful and dangerous job to begin with—increases the risk of officers being emotionally and mentally overwhelmed. Officers also can end up suffering from the vicarious trauma of repeatedly responding to the tragic consequences of homelessness, substance abuse, mental health crises, and situations in which members of the public are being victimized. Officers have noted

that this is especially traumatizing when they witness individuals who are dealing with these issues continually cycle through criminal justice system interactions without getting better, and they have not been provided with enough of the "tools" they need to address those situations (Goodison et al., 2019).

If Americans expect the criminal justice system to deal with all of these issues effectively, police, court staff, and corrections officers have indicated that it is very important to develop new and specialized training to prepare them for each of the tasks they are expected to perform. Practitioner workshops have found, however, that training needed for law enforcement is already extensive, costly, and disjointed, with separate courses needed on, for example, use of force, de-escalation, mental health crisis intervention, trauma-informed and victim-centered interviewing, physical grappling, and use of less-lethal and lethal weapons, among many more (Hollywood et al., 2017). Police need an integrated curriculum that combines all of these elements, but some areas of training may be designed for fundamentally different roles and situations that might be difficult to reconcile; Americans nevertheless expect officers to be able to seamlessly shift between them.

When an officer arrives at a scene with a person experiencing a potentially dangerous mental health crisis, for example, it is helpful for the officer to have training in crisis intervention (Rogers, McNiel, and Binder, 2019). However, the ability to manage the crisis might nevertheless be diminished because the individual in crisis observes an armed individual approaching them and because the officer is also trained extensively in use of force and might deal daily with threats to their own safety (Myers, 2020). Even where officers receive appropriate training, different emphases in training may inevitably lead to unfavorable outcomes in fast-paced situations: A 2015 survey by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), for example, found that agencies train recruits for a median of 58 hours on firearms and another 49 hours on defensive tactics, but only eight hours each on such topics as de-escalation or crisis intervention (PERF, 2015). There is also debate on whether data show that de-escalation techniques and training improve officer safety or decrease police use of force (Engel, McManus, and Herold, 2020; Landers, 2017; PERF, 2016). Communities can and must train officers to handle all of the many responsibilities assigned to them, but a new and more extensive slate of mental health training,

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substance use intervention education, de-escalation training, or other classes would have to be fit into already crowded training schedules. Such training also would have significant financial costs—in an era in which state and local resources were stretched even before the disruption caused by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. In some cases, communities might want to consider whether removing incompatible responsibilities from police could be more effective than trying to better train officers for those roles.

As a result, over and over again, we have heard practitioners saying that the most effective tools for many of the problems encountered by police were collaborations with organizations that prioritize nonenforcement solutions (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2019). These collaborations include such examples as the following:

- Crisis Intervention Teams that specially train officers for interactions with those experiencing mental illness (Rogers, McNiel, and Binder, 2019) and Crisis Response Teams (or co-response programs) in which mental health professionals, social workers, and police officers respond to incidents together (Helfgott, Hickman, and Labossiere, 2016; Shapiro et al., 2015)
- Angel programs for those experiencing substance use disorders (Michigan State Police, undated; Police Assisted Addiction and Recovery Initiative, undated)
- Homeless Outreach Teams for those experiencing homelessness (Anaheim Police Department, undated; PERF, 2018; Perry, 2018).

Often, police seek nonenforcement solutions or use arrests as an opportunity to funnel or redirect offenders

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toward the treatment or program that would target the factors that led to the offending behavior rather than moving directly to more arrests, citations, and the more formal elements of the criminal justice system.

Such collaborations are often seen as contributing to another top priority for law enforcement leaders in our workshops: better engagement and trust in their communities. Better engagement and trust are not just about making everyone feel better; when communities trust the police agency protecting them, it helps the police do their job better and enables such strategies as community policing. Concerns about eroding community trust of police predate this cycle of protests, and there are no easy solutions. It is the public's choice whether to trust law enforcement, and finding a way to get to a mutual working relationship between police departments and the communities they

serve takes considerable work and conversation (Jackson, 2015). Others have written and spoken persuasively for years about an organizational culture that sees police as "warriors" rather than "guardians" in their communities and the impact that an "us-versus-them" perception can have on both community trust and officer morale (Anderson and Harrison, 2020; President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015; Rahr and Rice, 2015; Skinner, 2020). In many cases, we have heard that practitioners have a sense of having "their backs against the wall" in communities where they are expected to solve complex problems, such as homelessness, especially when they might not have the training, the resources, or even the constitutional authority to respond in the way the community might expect (Goodison et al., forthcoming). Law enforcement will continue to receive calls for service regarding criminal behavior—such as property crime—that is adjacent to more-complex social problems, such as drugs and homelessness, and they need to know how best to respond and be able to communicate a justification for that strategy, both

to the public and to the officers involved. They describe being in need of partners in their communities that they can lean on to help address these challenging problems. As one police chief stated, "We are part of the fabric, but we are not *the* fabric." Explicitly placing police as a supporting role to partners in the community who are the primary entities called on to handle more-complex issues can be one way of better positioning officers as trusted guardians in their communities.

With these realizations as the starting point, the idea of "defunding the police" can look quite different, where the policy focus is not punishing police departments by cutting their resources, but productively taking law enforcement and the criminal justice system more broadly off the front line for responding to these concerns. Many of these roles and expectations are those that police leaders have already noted for years are difficult and costly to train for and perform effectively alongside their primary responsibilities, and these roles often have profound, negative effects on officer stress, mental health, and overall wellness

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(International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2017). If some of the goals of those advocating for defunding the police are met, it should mean that some calls for service will be redirected from police to partners in their communities who are better positioned to handle certain problems. If police are more explicitly given permission to say "no" to some of the current responsibilities that they find most problematic, it should make the job of a police officer easier, more effective, more respected, and more satisfying.

Defunding: Not Just Whether, but How

Although there does not appear to be a consensus regarding the positions and intended outcomes that are being sought by advocates for defunding the police, proponents are generally in favor of reallocating resources toward programs seeking to address societal problems outside the criminal justice system (Hamaji et al., 2017; Stahly-Butts and Atkinson, undated; Vitale, 2020). Essentially, proponents suggest that the community use its limited resources to fund things that will effectively *treat* the problems facing society rather than expecting police to manage the societal *symptoms* that those problems produce. So, proponents argue, instead of spending resources for police to respond to people experiencing homelessness, mental health crises, or substance use disorders, the community should redirect those funds to programs that effectively address both the symptoms *and* the root causes. Such programs would include those that are proven to be effective in alleviating homelessness, addressing mental health needs, and treating and preventing substance use disorders.

Although mental health crises, substance use disorders, and homelessness are some of the most commonly cited examples of complex problems that should not be assigned primarily to police, many other current police functions have been considered. Other possibilities include finding strategies for lesser police roles in school safety, traffic enforcement, community violence, and resolution of disputes or conflicts. Many strategies for addressing these issues with a diminished role for police or a focus on nonenforcement solutions have been implemented, evaluated, and shown to be promising or effective. Table 1 shows several examples of alternative strategies across a variety of policing issues and activities.

While many municipalities are currently considering or implementing strategies labeled as "defunding the police," examples of communities that have explicitly implemented defunding strategies long enough to see the results are less common. The Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets (CAHOOTS) program, however, begun in 1989 in Eugene, Oregon, is one notable example of a long-standing strategy with demonstrated positive effects that communities are considering for reallocation of police budgets. CAHOOTS teams are composed of a medic and a behavioral health crisis worker who are dispatched by local police departments in response to a variety of calls regarding nonviolent situations with a behavioral health component, such as welfare checks, behavioral health crises, and transportation to social services. Although CAHOOTS teams can request to be accompanied by a police officer when there are safety concerns, in 2019 this happened in only approximately 0.6 percent of the calls for assistance, and 20 percent of the 911 calls for assistance in that year were handled by CAHOOTS teams instead of

TABLE 1

Example Policing Functions for Reallocation

Policing Issue	Strategy with Lesser Enforcement Role	Example(s)	Source(s)
Homelessness	Homeless Outreach Teams	Chula Vista Homeless Outreach Teams; Seattle Navigation Teams; Community Outreach Resource Program, Indio, California	Gonzalez, 2019; Jones, 2019; Martinez and Telep, 2017
	Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD)	Seattle LEAD Program	Collins, Lonczak, and Clifasefi, 2019
	Housing interventions	Permanent Supportive Housing programs	NASEM, 2018
Behavioral health	Community-based behavioral health crisis response	Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets (CAHOOTS)	White Bird Clinic, 2020
	Police-assisted substance use treatment	Police Assisted Addiction and Recovery Initiative Angel initiatives	Schiff et al., 2017
	Police–mental health collaboratives	Crisis Intervention Teams; Co-Responder Programs	Zauhar, 2019
Community violence	Violence prevention initiatives	Cure Violence	Delgado et al., 2017; Slutkin and Ransford, 2020
	Community development	Local nonprofit organizations	Sharkey, Torrats-Espinosa, and Takyar, 2017
	Advance counseling and mentoring for at-risk youth	Becoming a Man	Heller et al., 2017
School safety	Early intervention and prevention	Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports	Horner, Sugai, and Anderson, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2017
		Threat assessment and prevention	U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center, 2019
Dispute resolution	Coordinated community response models	Domestic Violence Enhanced Response Team (DVERT), Colorado Springs, Colorado	Reuland et al., 2006; Uchida et al., 2001
Traffic enforcement	Shift responsibility to civilian departments of transportation	Transportation Alternatives, New York; Berkeley Department of Transportation	Transportation Alternatives, 2020; Simpson, 2020

police (White Bird Clinic, 2020). Other cities, including Denver, Colorado (Dawson, 2019), and Portland, Oregon (Templeton, 2019), have recently considered implementing similar programs.

Unfortunately, financial pressures on communities at least as far back as the Great Recession in 2008 have also led to many instances of cuts to police funding that went poorly. The oft-cited positive example of the dismantling and reform of the police department in Camden, New Jersey, actually began with spikes in crime in 2011 and 2012 attributed to budget cuts (Danley, 2020). The city of Vallejo, California, filed for bankruptcy in 2008 and drastically cut funding for the police force without reinvesting in other social programs, leading to increases in officer use of deadly force and decreased responsiveness to crimes (Jamison, 2020). Many other cities, including Chicago, Illinois, and Memphis, Tennessee, have similarly struggled with the aftermath of police funding cuts, due to financial pressures, that were not accompanied by reinvestments elsewhere (Weichselbaum and Lewis, 2020).

For better or for worse, many communities—including Los Angeles, California (Zahniser, Smith, and Reyes, 2020); Albuquerque, New Mexico (Ramsey and Kornfield, 2020); Seattle, Washington (Beekman, 2020); Baltimore, Maryland (Richman and Wenger, 2020); and Minneapolis, Minnesota (Romo, 2020), to name just a few examples—are now responding to public pressure with commitments and plans to defund police agencies in various ways. Every community has different needs for law enforcement, and there are few, if any, areas where a national one-size-fits-all solution is likely to work well. Furthermore, although the evaluation literature suggests a variety of different options for tasks that could be shifted to other agencies or service providers (Table 1), how effective individual options will be in other communities will likely vary with the local community environment, the presence and capacity of partner organizations, and other locally specific factors. Although the existing evidence base provides a map for thinking about what defunding or reimagining policing could involve for a specific policing function, every community will need to find local adaptations. Rushing to implement defunding and reinvestment strategies without careful planning is likely to leave vulnerable members of the community in worse circumstances, not better. Applying criminal justice interventions without an evidence-based approach to implementation has often led to ineffective or even harmful outcomes and unintended consequences (McCord, 2003; Roman, 2020).

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Therefore, it will be important to understand not just *whether* such strategies could or should go forward but *how* to do so responsibly, in an evidence-based way, and with the input and consent of all necessary stakeholders in the community, including police. Budget decisions will need to be made on which programs, services, and staff positions will be eliminated and which will be funded. Communities will need frameworks that can provide examples, set expectations, identify important factors to consider and strategies for tracking metrics of success, and point out pitfalls to avoid as they consider how to transition responsibly to a new state of affairs (see the box below).

Example Transition Considerations

- What data exist to prioritize transfer of police functions? Has the community clearly identified the most-pressing needs?
- Do viable alternatives for taking over some current police responsibilities currently exist in the community, or will organizations need to do long-term capacity-building once a new funding strategy is in place?
- Even where significant capacity exists, what is the change management plan for organizations during the transition?
- What new frameworks for collaboration and data sharing between law enforcement and community organizations are needed, especially in agencies that are experiencing low community trust?
- What are the plans for long-term evaluation and oversight? Are evidence-based metrics of success established, and how will they be collected and tracked?

Evidence-based policy and planning will need to account for many factors, including needs identification, capacity building, change management, data sharing, and long-term evaluation, as just a few examples. Capacity-building, in particular, might be a commonly overlooked consideration. As the chief of the Durham, North Carolina, police department recently said, "I can't imagine who the surrogates would be to take over the work that we do every day, and I don't think this country really realizes how much work police officers do and have taken on even in the social services realm" (Lukpat, 2020). As another example of a capacity building issue, social workers are already in short supply in many communities (Lin, Lin, and Zhang, 2016), and developing a workforce that is adequate to handle the responsibilities being transferred away from the police might need to be managed over a years-long transition process. Communities might need to make plans to promote organizational collaboration and change during a long transition, especially in communities that have historically struggled with community trust; practitioners in our workshops have often cited needs for better change management guidance and information-sharing strategies in police agencies (Hollywood et al., 2017; Hollywood et al., 2019). Finally, planners will need to make decisions on how success will be measured to evaluate a strategy over time and assess what improvements might be needed. Law enforcement practitioners have frequently stated the adage, "What gets measured, gets done," and data on some problems, such as issues related to homelessness, can be notoriously difficult to consistently collect, track, and share (Goodison et al., forthcoming). More communities should consider such proposals as that in Minneapolis for a dedicated community task force that will bring together

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stakeholders, including police leaders, to carefully examine the needs of a community and methodically chart an evidence-based path forward (Associated Press, 2020), and some resources already exist to assist communities in the necessary planning (Hamaji et al., 2017; Californians for Safety and Justice, 2020). Proponents of defunding and reinvestment strategies might want to consider creating other template frameworks that communities and policymakers could tailor to their own needs to aid in making informed decisions on effective local strategies.

Broad Support for Reform

Any strategy to reallocate responsibilities and budget from police to other partners will clearly involve many unique challenges that each community will have to solve primarily at the local level. However, although many of the ideas for defunding the police might seem radical or unrealistic—particularly when the message is condensed to fit on protest signs or in social media posts—these

ideas actually closely mirror many of the perspectives and effective strategies that we have heard from criminal justice practitioners in our expert panels and workshops. All of our workshops were designed to take the practitioners' roles and the expectations placed on them as a given and help identify what practitioners would need to actually play those roles and meet those expectations effectively. Despite that status quo bias, practitioner discussions and identified needs were consistently shaped by the perception that—even if technologies, training, or policy changes were found that could make police responses to these kinds of societal concerns more effective—those solutions could end up just being bandages as long as practitioners are being asked to solve problems that they are not in a position to solve. The ideas they put forward thus often focused on more-fundamental reforms, including asking society to revisit the range of things that it expects law enforcement and criminal justice to address (Hollywood et al., 2019; Jackson et al., 2020).

We therefore submit that, counter to the us-versus-them narrative that has dominated the

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current policy debate, many law enforcement practitioners would agree that they are being asked to play too many—sometimes clashing—roles in society, and this often makes the job of a police officer difficult, if not impossible. One exasperated police chief in our workshops said that "all we need to do is be perfect at all times in a constantly changing world." Former Dallas Police Chief David Brown recently stated, "every societal failure, we put it on the cops to solve. . . . That's too much to ask. Policing was never meant to solve all those problems" (Horwitz, 2016). Former Baltimore Police Commissioner Darryl De Sousa has said, "You have to take a look at the responsibilities and role of police and how they morph over the years. They've been called to everything under the sun" (Fenton, 2020). Leaders also often see that other partners in their communities are better equipped to handle certain problems. Some, such as Scott Thomson, former chief of the Camden County Police Department, have shown a willingness to relinquish budget and staff positions in exchange for handing the response to certain problems off to others:

> "Look, I would have traded 10 cops for another Boys & Girls Club, but the system needs to change as far

as having police respond to incidents such as mental illness. Police are not equipped. They're not trained. They're not specialized in that. But yet it continues to get delegated to them.

So I think if we changed the expectation of police and did not have them intersecting with [the] community as frequently . . . in areas where they don't have expertise, I think that the tension on some of these issues could certainly lower if you put the money towards having specialists handle these situations. I think cops would actually appreciate that." (Doubek, 2020)

Albuquerque Police Chief Mike Geier also noted that his officers felt relieved by news that a new community safety department would be taking responsibility for many calls related to behavioral health issues (Ramsey and Kornfield, 2020).

Finally, there is evidence that the public is also generally on board, depending on how the issue is described; recent polling on police reforms shows interesting results. A YouGov poll conducted on June 8–10, 2020, showed that only a small fraction of respondents (27 percent) support

"defunding the police" as a reform, while 57 percent oppose it. But these results changed to 44 percent support and 41 percent opposition when respondents were asked whether they would support "budgeting less money for your local police department and more for social services (for instance, funding social workers and mental health professionals)." Fifteen percent responded that they were "Not Sure," which could suggest that it would depend on how such a reform would be implemented (Frankovic, 2020). Similarly, in a Reuters/Ipsos poll conducted on June 9–10, 2020, only 39 percent of respondents supported "the 'defund the police' movement," but 76 percent supported "proposals to move some money currently going to police budgets into better officer training, local programs for homelessness, mental health assistance, and domestic violence" (Kahn, 2020).

Nearly half of the country thinks policing in America needs significant improvement, and nearly everyone thinks it needs some improvement (Frankovic, 2020). Our work with police chiefs and officers over the past seven years essentially started from that same assumption—that policing in America, and criminal justice more broadly, can do better in many ways, and there are effective ways to transform and improve policing (Hollywood, 2020). We have found that law enforcement leaders themselves usually point to many ways in which new approaches, changed policies, or other innovations could enable them to better serve their jurisdictions—but they also argue persuasively that police are overwhelmed by what the public has been asking of them in recent years.

Conclusion

Defunding the police does not make sense if communities ask police to do the same job with fewer resources. Practitioners consistently cite budget constraints that make it hard to fulfill all of the expectations that society has placed on them. Without fundamental changes to what the police are expected to do, defunding the police is unlikely to achieve the goal of making a more just society for all. However, if communities defund aspects of policing and refund the savings to support proven and promising programs that are designed to address both the root causes and the symptoms of the ills of society, they could both more effectively address those problems *and* make the job of a police officer easier, less stressful, and—potentially—more trusted and respected. Americans should expect that our societies, communities, and justice system could work better for everyone, including police, as a result.

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Note

[1] Although local strategies to reallocate budgets from criminal justice agencies to other community organizations have no doubt been happening for many years with little fanfare, the relative novelty of the concept of defunding the police as a means of reform might make it difficult to identify instances labeled as such.

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