

POLICE DEFUNDING AND REFORM: What Changes Are Needed?

Olivia Ghafoerkhan



**Being Black in
AMERICA**



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“Nothing I saw in the videos has changed my opinion that the shooting was unjustified and that Michael Ramos was not a threat—to officers, to himself or anyone else.”²⁸

—Scott Hendler, attorney retained by the family of police shooting victim Michael Ramos

individual, giving police the opportunity to take the suspect into custody. In this case, though, the bean bag round appeared to have no effect on Ramos. After he was struck in the thigh by the bean bag round, he turned, walked away from the police officers, reentered his car, and began backing out of the parking place.

Another officer, Christopher Taylor, responded by opening fire on the car. Ramos was struck by the gunfire and died at the scene. The whole incident was recorded on videos shot by body cameras worn by the police officers. Later, an in-

vestigation revealed that no gun was found in Ramos’s car. Says Scott Hendler, an attorney retained by Ramos’s family, “Nothing I saw in the videos has changed my opinion that the shooting was unjustified and that Michael Ramos was not a threat—to officers, to himself or anyone else.”²⁸ As for Taylor, by the end of 2020 he remained employed by the Austin police but was on administrative leave, meaning he was not permitted to report for work. The case remained under investigation by authorities seeking to determine whether Taylor’s shooting of Ramos was justified.

What Is Meant by “Defunding the Police”

The shooting of Ramos did not initially spark protests in the streets of Austin, but following George Floyd’s death a month later, protesters did pour into the streets of the Texas city and call attention to the Ramos case. In Austin as well as other cities, many protesters shouted demands to “defund the police.”

By demanding that city council members defund the Austin police, protesters were not calling for a total withdrawal of taxpayer dollars from the city police department—meaning that calls to defund the police would not leave the city without police protection. Rather, police reform advocates like those in Austin have

asked for portions of budgets earmarked for police departments to instead be set aside for social programs. In their view, programs that help improve the lives of low-income people or people who are experiencing problems related to mental illness or addiction will reduce interactions with police. In other words, instead of outfitting a new SWAT team with the latest assault gear and rapid-firing weapons, that money would, for example, be spent on hiring mental health counselors. Mental health counselors, rather than police, would respond to emergency situations involving troubled individuals. This would be in addition to programs aimed at reducing illegal drug use, alcoholism, and violent acts—situations that often lead to interactions with police.

Carleigh Sallon, a clinical social worker in Denver, Colorado, says angry and erratic individuals react far differently when they are approached by mental health counselors than by armed police officers in uniform. “The uniform alone can be a trigger for people depending on what their past experience has been, especially if



Protesters and police face off in May 2020 in Austin, Texas. Protesters called attention to the police killings of George Floyd in Minneapolis and Michael Ramos in Austin and demanded the defunding of police.

they have a history in the criminal justice system,” she says. “Even if the officer is being supportive, they can have an immediate fear that they’re in trouble or going to jail.”²⁹

Fewer Police Often Means High Crime

The idea of defunding police, even partially, has many detractors. Opponents of defunding the police argue that cutting police budgets—and therefore the number of officers who patrol city streets—often leads to higher crime rates. Due to a budget

shortfall, in 2011 the city of Newark, New Jersey, was forced to lay off 15 percent of its police officers. That year, Newark experienced a 65 percent increase in the city’s homicide rate. Other violent crimes, such as shootings and assaults, rose 21 percent.

Also in 2011, Sacramento, California, faced a financial shortfall as well. To make up the budget gap without raising taxes on residents, Sacramento officials ordered cuts in the police department.

Specifically, Sacramento made cuts in the city’s narcotics squad as well as the units that investigate street gang violence, automobile thefts, and prostitution. Police were told not to respond to minor traffic accidents. Almost immediately, Sacramento saw its crime rate increase. Shootings rose by 48 percent over the previous year. The number of rapes, robberies, assaults, burglaries, and vehicle thefts also increased.

West Virginia attorney general Patrick Morrissey believes this outcome will be repeated as government officials cut police department budgets. He warns:

Taking away funding for local, county, and state law enforcement will lead to an increase in crime, drug overdoses, violence, vigilantism, and inequality. It is definitely proper

“The uniform alone can be a trigger for people depending on what their past experience has been, especially if they have a history in the criminal justice system.”²⁹

—Carleigh Sailon, clinical social worker in Denver, Colorado

to examine the need for reforms with police interaction—particularly in communities of color. However, gutting police departments is not the answer to a much deeper problem. Police officers save lives. Having more cops on the streets has been shown to reduce crime.³⁰

Reimagining Public Safety in Austin

Nevertheless, in the wake of the Ramos shooting, Austin elected to move money out of its police department and into social services programs. For 2020 the Austin City Council appropriated

Al Sharpton Opposes Defunding the Police

Opponents of the movement to defund American police departments found an unexpected ally in the Reverend Al Sharpton, for decades one of the nation's most vocal Black civil rights leaders. During the summer of 2020, municipal leaders in many American cities slashed their police budgets and moved money into community-based programs to improve the quality of life in urban neighborhoods. But Sharpton called for cities to resist demands to defund and instead fully fund their police departments.

Sharpton says Black-on-Black crime remains a significant problem in cities, and police are needed to protect innocent Black citizens. “On the side of the city that I come from, which is Blacker and poorer, we’ve seen more in terms of gun usage,” Sharpton says. “I got a lot of attention when I did the eulogy for George Floyd’s funeral, but I also, a month later, preached a 1-year-old kid’s funeral in Brooklyn [New York] who was killed by a stray bullet.”

Sharpton says police departments need to be reformed so that officers are better able to respond to incidents without first drawing their guns. But police departments need to be adequately funded, he says. “People living on the ground need proper policing,” Sharpton says.

Quoted in Brian Flood, “Al Sharpton: Defunding Police Is Something ‘a Latte Liberal’ May Like, but ‘Proper Policing’ Is Necessary,” Fox News, September 8, 2020. www.foxnews.com.

\$434 million to the city's police department. But for the 2021 budget, the council stripped \$150 million out of the police budget. Instead, the council allocated money to a number of new services intended to provide alternative responses to situations that often lead to police drawing their guns. For example, council members put \$50 million into a new program it named the Reimagine Safety Fund. The focus of this fund is to provide alternative responses to erratic or unruly behavior by individuals.

Instead of using the police to provide those services, grants from the Reimagine Safety Fund will be made available to community-based organizations that propose new ways to respond to emergency situations. City officials hope organizations will offer new plans for mental health and substance abuse counseling as well as programs to find affordable housing for the homeless.

These changes do not mean that Austin will be without a police force. While the city council cut funding to the police department, it still approved nearly \$300 million to finance police operations. Some believe this is not enough for a functioning police department. Texas governor Greg Abbott was critical of the council's action, warning that officers and residents of Austin will find their safety compromised by these changes. Says Abbott, "Austin's decision puts the brave men and women of the Austin Police Department and their families at greater risk, and paves the way for lawlessness. Public safety is job one, and Austin has abandoned that duty."³¹

Crisis Response Teams

Austin was not the only American city to approve plans to defund its police department. For example, Los Angeles officials agreed to cut \$150 million out of the city's \$1.8 billion police budget and reallocate that amount toward social services programs (such as mental health counseling) in minority communities. Los Angeles officials also determined that a lot of the calls police officers respond to could probably be handled by city workers who do not show up with badges and guns. The Los Angeles City Council created a new unit that would dispatch crisis responders to nonviolent incidents in

How Americans View Police Defunding and Other Reform Proposals

A July 2020 poll by the Gallup organization reveals that many Americans (58 percent) believe that major changes in policing are needed, but not all reforms have equal support. And support varies even more when the results are broken down by race and ethnicity. In all categories, abolishing police departments has the least support. However, about half of all Americans (and significantly more Black Americans) favor ending officer involvement in nonviolent crimes and shifting money from police departments to social programs.

Americans' Support for Policing Reform Options, by Race/Ethnicity

	All Americans	Black Americans	Asian Americans	Hispanic Americans	White Americans
Changing management practices so officers with multiple incidents of abuse of power are not allowed to serve	98%	99%	98%	99%	97%
Requiring officers to have good relations with the community	97%	97%	98%	96%	97%
Changing management practices so officer abuses are punished	96%	98%	99%	96%	95%
Promoting community-based alternatives such as violence intervention	82%	94%	91%	83%	80%
Ending stop and frisk	74%	93%	89%	76%	70%
Eliminating police unions	56%	61%	68%	56%	55%
Eliminating officer enforcement of nonviolent crimes	50%	72%	72%	55%	44%
Reducing the budgets of police departments and shifting the money to social programs	47%	70%	80%	49%	41%
Abolishing police departments	15%	22%	27%	20%	12%

Source: Steve Crabtree, "Most Americans Say Policing Needs 'Major Changes,'" Gallup, July 22, 2020.

which mediation, not force, is used to quell tempers. “We need to reimagine public safety in the 21st century,” says Los Angeles City Council member Herb Wesson Jr. “One which reduces the need for armed police presence, especially when the situation does not necessarily require it.”³²

In New York City, the city council cut the \$6 billion police budget by \$484 million. Among the cuts in the police budget was the hiring of only twelve hundred new police officers for 2021. (The New York City Police Department employs thirty-six thousand police officers.) That money will instead be spent on programs intended to guide young people away from criminal activities. In addition, New York

The Sunnyvale Model of Policing

The city of Sunnyvale, California, provides public safety to its citizens in a manner considered unique in America. The city of 140,000 residents near San Francisco does not have a police department but rather a department of public safety. Employees of the department serve as police officers as well as firefighters and emergency medical technicians.

The city has combined all three tasks into one department since 1950 and has found that its officers are not regarded as armed authoritative figures—as they are in many big-city police departments—but rather as respected public servants who can respond to burglaries, extinguish fires, or provide emergency medical care to accident victims. “Because firefighters are often seen by community members as caretakers, people will help you out,” says Phan Ngo, chief of the Sunnyvale Department of Public Safety. “So, I do think to a certain extent, it does have a positive impact in what we do here in our city.”

Ngo suggests that instead of defunding the police, cities would do well to look at the way Sunnyvale provides public safety. “I wish that this model could be implemented everywhere,” he says. “I’m a firm advocate for this public safety model.”

Quoted in Kai Ryssdal and Bennett Purser, “How One City Provides Public Safety Without a Police Department,” Marketplace, June 10, 2020. www.marketplace.org.

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ORGANIZATIONS AND WEBSITES

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)

www.aclu.org

Founded in 1920, the ACLU focuses on pursuing legal actions on civil rights issues and most recently has been campaigning for police reform. By accessing the link for Racial Justice on the organization's website, visitors can learn about court cases the ACLU has filed against city police departments seeking justice for victims of police misconduct.

Campaign Zero

www.joincampaignzero.org

Campaign Zero works with public officials to focus on solutions and policies that lead to safer interactions between citizens and police. By accessing the link for Reports, visitors can find Campaign Zero's study of which American police departments routinely use force in making arrests.

Center for American Progress

www.americanprogress.org

This nonpartisan policy institute has taken on the issue of police reform. By accessing the link for Criminal Justice on the group's website, visitors can find the report *Assessing the State of Police Reform*, which looks at how communities are changing how their police do their jobs.

Check the Police

www.checkthepolice.org

This organization studies how labor contracts often protect police officers accused of misconduct. The group's website features a

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Books

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