

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/policy-changes-in-us-policing>

Campaign and Advocacy

Almost two months have passed since Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin killed George Floyd. Protests have swept the nation, and [defund the police](#) has [become the rallying cry](#) of the Black Lives Matter movement and others who are seeking systemic changes to policing in the United States.

Advocates and communities are calling for a range of actions to rethink public safety, including:

We are at an unprecedented moment in our nation's history, when a majority of people believe American policing has [a systemic problem](#). But have the protests galvanized transformative change?

Most cities have not significantly altered their approaches to police spending and oversight or taken steps to reduce their footprint. But a handful of jurisdictions have, suggesting a shift in the political winds and the potential for mobilizing reform. This brief captures some of the most notable budget and policy changes since the protests began in late May.

As important as these successes are, they are only the beginning of the seismic overhaul of policing needed to address a legacy of racism and over-enforcement, especially in Black communities. American policing, with approximately 18,000 unique departments, costs [\\$115 billion annually](#). The size and power of police forces are formidable—240 million calls to 911 a year and more than 10 million arrests—and yet only [about 5 percent of those encounters](#) with the police involve a serious violent crime.

As police operations in public schools are widely criticized, at least 12 school boards or city councils have acted to discontinue the practice. The [presence of police in public schools](#) has exploded [since the mid-1990s](#) and removing law enforcement from schools has been a core goal of advocates.

Some cities are exploring how 911 and other dispatching systems can provide public safety alternatives and help shrink the scope of policing.

Some cities have decided to decrease funding for police in municipal budgets and invest in communities and social services. Other jurisdictions have committed to reducing their police budget, but given the squeeze of shortfalls because of COVID-19, it is unclear whether they will reinvest resources.

Several states and localities have improved oversight and accountability by changing their practices regarding the collection and dissemination of policing data.

The actions taken so far are first steps in a few communities. More is urgently needed. Where efforts to divest from policing and invest in communities have not gained traction or are unambitious, grassroots campaigns that change the terms of the conversation will continue to offer a path forward. For example, the [#DefundNYPD](#) campaign called for divesting at least \$1 billion from the New York City Police Department's \$6 billion budget. Several prominent city council members, including the speaker, announced their support for this demand. On July 1, the **New York City Council** [passed a budget](#) that moved \$1 billion from the police department's budget and discontinued plans to hire 1,000 new officers through a small hiring freeze, although advocates and some council members argued that the cuts were mostly cosmetic.

Although this result fell far short of the #DefundNYPD campaign's goals, it is remarkable that the largest police department budget in the country was temporarily in limbo because of a political struggle over the fundamental scope of law enforcement. A community outcry for meaningful police reform held up negotiations, an important action that could be a sign of changes to come.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

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