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Police Presence and Perceived Safety of Marginalized Groups

Introduction

Around 1000 civilians are killed extra-judicially by police officers every year, and Black Men are 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police than white men. This data has even been shown to be underreported, as a 2019 paper showed widespread bias in police administrative records. (Peeples) These systemic issues have resulted in the popularity of Police Abolition, or the eradication of Police departments to be replaced with a completely new system

"Police Abolition" has been a radical idea for a long time, but as the police's well documented abuse of Black Americans has continued despite reforms, it has entered the mainstream (McDowell and Fernandez. 2018). While most discussion of abolition seems to be centered on whether it will reduce or increase crime, it fails to address the reason why abolition is being called for in the first place. Does reduced Police presence result in greater perceived safety in groups that have been historically attacked by the police? In this paper, I seek to understand how a reduction in police funding will increase perceived safety levels of marginalized groups. I argue that as Police Presence per capita decreases, members of victimized groups will feel safer from police attack and safer overall. This question is important because analyzing abolition through the lens of perceived well-being of people of color will help determine if abolition will result in a more racially equitable society as advocates have believed (McDowell and Fernandez. 2018).

First, I review previous studies on the impact of fluctuations in police presence and funding on communities. Second, I introduce my theory which focuses on how reductions and increases in police funding influence people's trust in the police as an institution. Third, I test my hypotheses by using an analysis of Gallup data about people's reported trust in police as an institution(Gallup) from 2001 to 2017 and compare it with Bureau of Justice Statistics data on Police expenditures (Bureau of Justice Statistics). Fourth, I will describe the findings and conclude with the implications of this study.

Literature Review

So, what is Police abolition as it stands now? According to Meghan G. McDowell and Luis A. Fernandez, "The call for police abolition gained national traction soon after the 2014 Ferguson rebellion and is encapsulated by the slogan: "disband, disempower, and disarm the police!" This is more than a slogan however. The overarching strategy is to eliminate the institution of policing, while disarmament and disempowerment are two inter-related tactics used to achieve this goal."(McDowell) In other words, while the end goal of the police abolition movement is getting rid of policing altogether, there are many intermediary steps that are being called for right now. Beth E. Richie, Valli Kalei Kanuha, and Kayla Marie Martensen argue for a specifically feminist analysis of police abolition, that women as a whole have not been effectively protected by the police and have been more harmed by them. (Richie et al)

Previous studies explore the effects of Police presence on communities. For example, Wortley et al. (1997) examine how people perceive and react to instances of criminal injustice, illustrated by the Just Desserts Shooting of 1994, and find that Black respondents feel that there is discrimiination in the Criminal Justice system far more than White Respondents.. More recent studies analyze the differences between how people view and trust police based on Race. Michael Pass found that Immigrants overall distrusted Police more the longer they lived in the country they immigrated to, with variance based on socioeconomic status.(Pass et al. 2020) Roscigno and Preito-Hodge found that based on survey results, Police on average hold far more racist views than the general populace. (Roscigno and Preito-Hodge 2021).

There have been several police slowdowns, which is a form of police protest where cops drastically reduce their presence. These slowdowns showcase the effects of reduced policing on communities. Sullivan and O'Keeffe (2017) show how crime reduces during reductions in proactive policing by analyzing a police slowdown from late 2014 to early 2015. Similarly, a study of NYPD's operation impact, a surge in proactive policing in New York, shows that the bulk of the investigative stops did little to reduce crime (MacDonald et al. 2016). By contrast, other studies found that police slowdowns did not impact significantly crime levels and that they in fact stayed the same (Chandrasekher 2016).

Theory

When police funding goes up, not only will rates of police violence likely go up, so will instances of conflict between citizens and police and negative interactions with police. These increased interactions will result in people having a negative perception of the police. These interactions will ripple across communities, as people will tell others in their community about incidents they were either a part of or saw, thus causing an overall decline in trust in police.

As discussed in the literature review, marginalized communities have overall higher distrust of police and higher negative interactions with police, so it stands to reason that demographics other than white men will have their trust in police be more influenced by these changes in Police funding. My Hypothesis is that as Police Funding per capita goes up, trust in the police as an institution goes down

Data and Method

There are many different ways to measure police presence, but police funding is a useful indicator of police presence for our study. I will use data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics to explore how police funding has changed over time. I will take the data of local and state funding per year and do a derivation of it to get the change in police funding per year and analyze the peaks and valleys of that to find notable years in terms of fluctuations in police funding. I also want to measure how positive peoples views on the police are per year. I will use the self-reported trust in police from Gallup Poll's Social series across time from 2001 to 2017. I will analyze both how the chart changed overtime and how it changed in the year after the notable years determined by the derivation of the Bureau of Justice Statistics Data.

Results/ Evidence

Real police-protection expenditures (thousands of 2012 dollars; using GDP price deflator) vs. Year
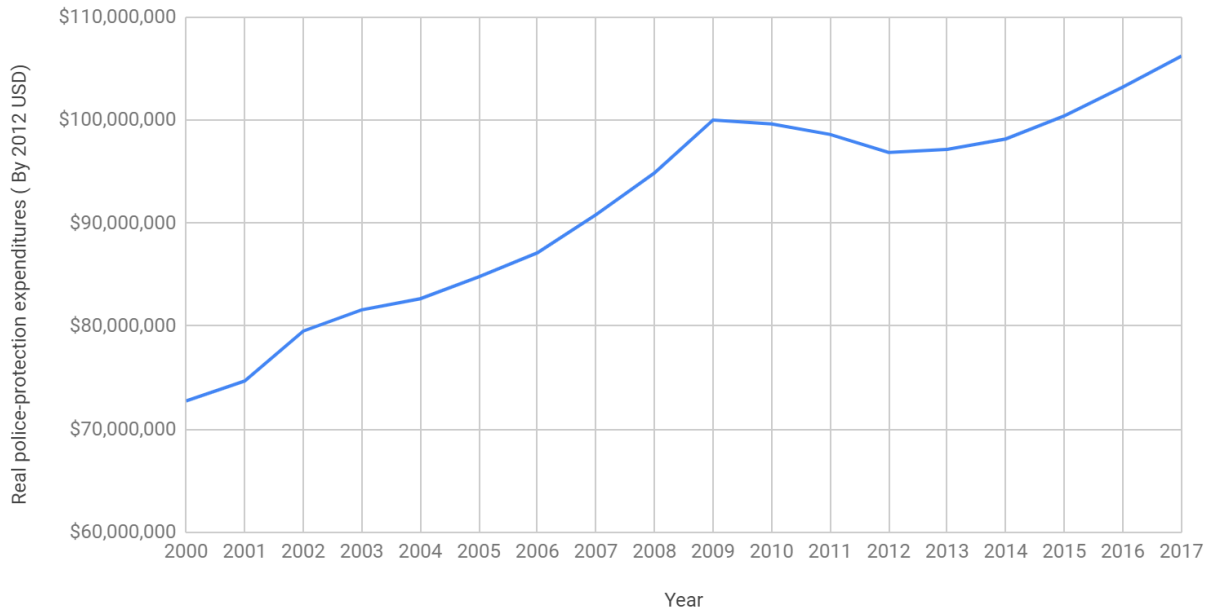
This chart showcases the Police protection expenditures over the years from 2000 to 2012, When we take the derivative of this, we get the following chart which shows the change in local and state Police funding across time.

Change in Police Funding per Year
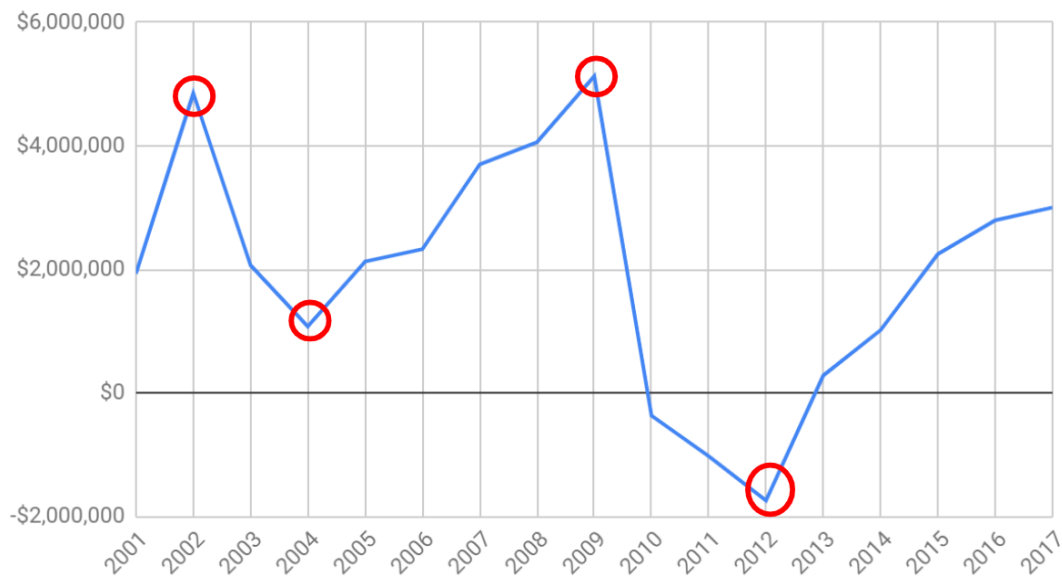
Looking at this chart, there are two notable peaks of increased Police Funding. In 2002, Police funding increased by $4,850,916 to $79,527,211. In 2009, Police Funding increased by $5,128,027 to $100,013,772. There is also a notable peak in reductions of police funding in

2012, where funding decreased by $1,742,797 to get to $96,879,449. These years will thus be the most relevant to examine to see if there are shifts in how the Police are viewed because of changes in Police funding.

The Gallup Long Standing Methods poll asked the Question "(Now I am going to read you a list of institutions in American society. Please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in each one--a great deal, quite a lot, some, or very little?)... The police" Every year from 2001 to 2017. Combining the respondents that said little or no confidence, we get 10% in 2001, 10% Little or no confidence in a 2002 Gallup survey. 9% very little confidence in 2003 (CNN 2003); 10% very little in 2004(Gallup 2004) 8% very little or none in 2005 (Gallup 2005) 12% very little or none in 2006 (Gallup 2006) 13% in 2007, 11% in 2008, 11% in 2009, 13% in 2010, 14% in 2011, 16% in 2012, 13% in 2013, 16% in 2014, 18% in 2015.

Little to No Confidence in Police Over Time (%)
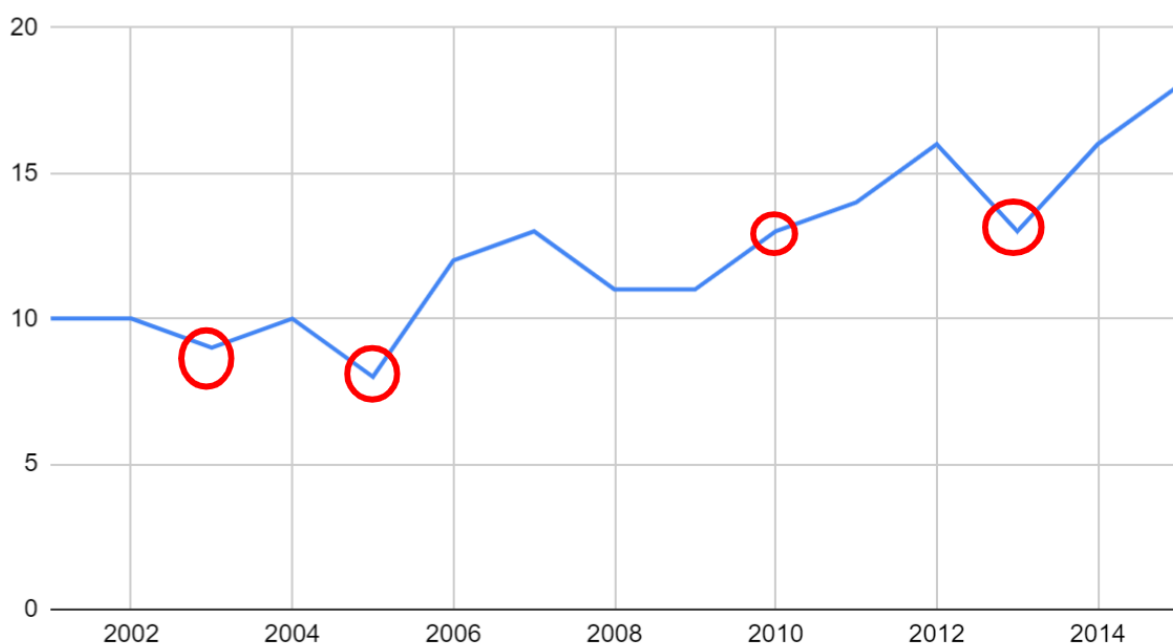
If we analyze each year after the aforementioned years that Police funding changes changed the most, there are some interesting results. 2004 and 2012 were years that had notable reductions in the rate of police funding increases, and the years after, 2005 and 2013, have noticeable dips in the lack of confidence in police. However, the two peaks in Police funding increases, 2002 and 2009, do not seem to have notably affected the chart in 2003 or 2010. This may be because as Chart 1 shows, funding increases are the norm, with very slight funding decreases occurring only in 2010, 2011, and 2012. Since increasing is the norm and slowing down is abnormal, it stands to reason that the effects of slowing down or reducing funding may be more noticeable.

Discussion and Conclusion

Looking at the data, the years after the biggest reductions in police funding did end up with small reductions in the percentage of people that had little to no confidence in the police. For the biggest increases in funding, there was no real noticeable effect on the percentage of people that had little to no confidence in the police. This may be because police funding increases are the norm and police funding decreases or slowing down of increases are rare and can thus be noticed by more people. Overall both Distrust of Police and Police funding have gone up steadily from 2000-2016. We can thus conclude that significant reductions in the rate of police funding increases are noticed by the general public and can result in police as an institution.

There were some limitations with this analysis. The data set was unfortunately only at the national level. To be more accurate in our conclusions, being able to examine individual regions and communities would be extremely helpful. Another flaw was that the data was unable to be stratified by race effectively. The differences in trust in police based on race would be very relevant information that future studies should strive to analyze.

The biggest limitation that is the most difficult to overcome is that there was never a truly significant decrease in police funding. In order to truly test if police defunding has an effect on people's trust of the police, a significant amount of police defunding should be analyzed, which unfortunately has not happened yet. Though it would be difficult, experimenting with Police defunding and extensively analyzing the results would be the best way to get a solid answer as to what the effects of abolition are.

All in all, it does seem like reductions in the rate of police funding increases are felt on the national level in terms of trust in the police as an institution. This bodes well for future studies, and as these systemic issues with policing become more and more well known it is past time for these deeper studies into the benefits of abolition to be conducted.

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