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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Guest post: Defunding or disbanding the police is a dangerous idea if done hastily

Proactive policing and evidence-based policing are shown to work to reduce crime.

By **Tom Jackman**

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It's the term of the moment: "Defund the police." But is there a better way than simply abolishing the police? Criminologists Justin Nix of the University of Nebraska-Omaha and Scott Wolfe of Michigan State University say there are effective ways to conduct policing which both reduce crime and build community trust.

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By Justin Nix and Scott Wolfe

U.S. policing is once again at a crossroad. Widespread protests have swept the globe in response to George Floyd's death in Minneapolis police custody. There is now significant public pressure to "defund" or "disband" the police as a means of reducing racial disparities, especially concerning the use of excessive force by officers. The problem is that it is unclear what this will actually involve.

Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti (D), for example, has proposed cutting nearly $150 million from the LAPD's budget. It is unclear where the money saved will be allocated. The Minneapolis City Council is going more extreme by disbanding the entire Minneapolis Police Department. It is unclear what their exact plan is for a replacement. Moving forward, we really need to (1) hold police departments accountable for their spending and (2) reconsider forcing the police to respond to so many of society's ills.

Our concern is that politicians and legislators feel pressured to do something — anything — about complex problems in policing, which could lead to hasty, ill-conceived and poorly planned decisions. We have enough research evidence to be concerned about the immediate impact of drastic budget cuts or wholesale disbanding of police agencies: *crime and victimization will*

increase. More people will be robbed, more people will be shot, and more people will die. More homes will be broken into and more cars will be stolen. People who have the means will pack up and move. Businesses will suffer. These collateral consequences will disproportionately harm minority communities that need help, not further marginalization.

Cities that have more police officers per capita tend to have lower crime rates. This does not necessarily mean we need to hire more police. Rather, having more officers per capita provides greater ability to dedicate resources to community- and problem-oriented policing approaches that have been shown to reduce crime and improve community satisfaction. Sufficient staffing allows departments to respond to 911 calls while simultaneously taking part in such proactive policing.

Many, such as Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-Minn.), are pointing to the 2012 reform of the Camden (N.J.) Police Department as evidence that "disbanding" an agency works. What really happened in Camden was that the city's police services expanded to the county and the agency adopted a new name. Most Camden officers who were laid off were immediately rehired by the newly formed Camden County Police Department. This resulted in *more* police officers on Camden's streets. This would appear to be in conflict with what some advocates of defunding and disbanding police departments are pushing for.

The expansion also coincided with significant violent crime reductions. More officers on the street allowed the Camden County Police Department to engage in more community- and problem-oriented policing. Therefore, the Camden experience illustrates that proactive policing strategies work, not necessarily that disbanding is an effective reform strategy. It also shows us that the agency's other efforts, such as use of force policy revision and improved officer training, are key to

reform. Slashing police department budgets without a definitive plan for reform will leave much less time for officers to engage in strategies shown to reduce crime and victimization.

Defunding or disbanding the police will probably lead to more citizens arming themselves out of fear that police will not be around to offer help. This will put more guns on the street and increase the chances that another Ahmaud Arbery tragedy occurs. More guns in circulation could mean more suicides, more accidental shootings and more guns that can be stolen and used to commit acts of violence.

Make no mistake, police reform is needed. We could be witnessing a watershed moment — an opportunity to reimagine the function of police in our society. But this opportunity will be wasted if our local governments make hasty decisions in the face of public pressure. Rather than defunding or disbanding, a more promising approach to police reform will involve two things.

First, before taking money away from the police, local governments need to hold agencies more accountable for their spending. We need to determine whether resources are being used to fund evidence-based policing practices, training programs and proper use of technology. Only then could we have an informed discussion about budget cutting or reallocation. In some jurisdictions, this process will result in trimming agency budgets and reducing the number of officers. In other areas, however, this could shed light on a need to increase police budgets.

Second, we need to reconsider making the police responsible for so many societal ills. The police response to drug epidemics and the mental health crisis has failed. We need better state and local

infrastructures to handle those problems. And, such plans need to be in place *before* reallocating money that once went to the police.

With such plans in place, many police officers would welcome relinquishing such responsibilities. This would put us in a better position to reduce racial disparities and the use of excessive force. And it would give officers more time to focus on problem solving with their community members and attending more training programs — both of which would improve community outcomes. We hope reason and care prevail in our search for effective police reform.

Tom Jackman
Tom Jackman has been covering criminal justice for The Washington Post since 1998 and anchors the True Crime blog. He previously covered crime and courts for the Kansas City Star. Follow 🐦

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