



Policing, Justice, and Black Communities

A Brief Guide for Understanding Police Defunding, Reform, Disbanding, and Abolition

Tracie Lowe, PhD

Introduction

Amid current protests happening across the nation, conversations have arisen over the role of police in Black communities. Phrases such as “defund the police” or “disband police departments” are commonly used during these discussions. However, the terms and the exact intent behind them vary. In some cases, there is little clarity surrounding these topics. The purpose of this brief is to provide useful information on the meaning of some frequently used concepts. Given the expansive nature of the issue, the definitions provided may not be all-encompassing. Instead, they serve as a useful introductory tool.

What Does it Mean to Defund or Divest in Police Departments?

Defunding or divesting in the police occurs when governments cut significant funding from law enforcement departments and direct them to other municipal services or community groups.¹ The increased demands among African Americans for defunding the police are partly

rooted in the disproportionate number of Black people killed by law enforcement each year.² According to the CATO Institute, a majority of Black people (73 percent) believe the police are too quick to use lethal force, while 56 percent believe police tactics are generally too harsh.³ The historic distrust between Black communities and police is also another contributing factor to calls for divestment. Only 40 percent of African Americans have a favorable view of police officers.⁴ High satisfaction with police performance is also low among Black people. Only 4 in 10 gave high ratings to the police for enforcing the law, protecting them from crime, and responding quickly to a call.⁵ Black activists and community members question whether many of the duties of police officers, such as answering mental health or sexual assault issues, are appropriate. Black community stakeholders advocate for restructuring police departments so that specific responsibilities and funding shifts to more suitable community service agencies, which are often underfunded.⁶

Opponents of defunding police departments argue taking funds from police efforts could instead lead to increased crime rates or impeded

¹ Scottie Andrew, “There’s a Growing Call to Defund the Police. Here’s what it Means,” *CNN*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/06/us/what-is-defund-police-trnd/index.html>.

² Deidre McPhillips, “Deaths From Police Harm Disproportionately Affect People of Color,” *U.S. News*, June 3, 2020, <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2020-06-03/data-show-deaths-from-police-violence-disproportionately-affect-people-of-color>.

³ Emily Ekins, “Policing in America: Understanding Public Attitudes Toward the Police. Results from a National Survey,” *Cato Institute*, 2016, <https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/survey-reports/pdf/policing-in-america-august-1-2017.pdf>.

⁴ Ekins, *Policing in America*.

⁵ Ekins, *Policing in America*.

⁶ Natalie Moore, “Defund the Police’ Requires Rethinking Black Communities’ Relationships with the CPD,” *NPR*, June 12, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/local/309/2020/06/15/877387591/defund-the-police-requires-rethinking-black-communities-relationship-with-the-c-p-d>.

efforts to control officer misconduct.⁷ According to researchers, underfunding police departments might result in fewer officers on the street who could disrupt potential criminal activity.⁸ They assert that inadequate funding could mean an uptick in crime within cities due to a lack of staffing and a lack of effective strategies to prevent crime. Following a reduction in police activity, Minneapolis saw an increase in car-jackings, homicides, arson, and burglaries compared to same period the year before.⁹ Violent crime increased by 16 percent and property crime by 20 percent.¹⁰ In New York City, shootings, burglaries, and car-jackings also increased before the pandemic, and recent riots emerged.¹¹ Opponents of defunding also contend lessening police funds may lead to an increase in police misconduct. A decrease in police allocations could negatively affect support for police conduct investigations and the enforcement of disciplinary measures.¹² Additionally, a lack of proper funds could affect the implementation of training that could prevent misconduct.¹³

Conversely, some researchers argue that adding law enforcement in fear of rising crime is not the solution. Research studies show that civilian reports of significant crime (e.g., burglaries, felony assault, and grand larceny) decreased by three to six percent after sharp short-term reductions in proactive policing measures by the New York Police Department.¹⁴ Findings from the study suggested the link between proactive policing and deterrence of crime warrants further reflection.¹⁵

Where are funds reinvested?

Adequate funding to social services such as healthcare, education, food and nutrition, career training, and

housing are all recommendations for the redistribution of funds in Black communities. These services would yield positive social benefits especially for vulnerable populations. Black communities have higher unemployment rates, especially among Black women. In Texas, the rate for Black women is 4.5 percent, equal to the rate for Hispanic/Latino women, yet higher than the 3.4 percent rate for White women.¹⁶ Nearly 21 percent of the total population of Black women in Texas lived in poverty in 2018.¹⁷ Limited access or inadequate healthcare is also an issue among Black people. In Texas, black populations have comparable health outcomes to those living in the least healthy quartile of counties.¹⁸ Police department funds typically comprise a more substantial portion of city budgets than other community or municipal areas. Reallocations open an opportunity to correct the impact of institutional racism, increase economic mobility, and add value to Black communities.¹⁹

Major metropolitan areas in Texas have committed to practical measures and initiatives that address community needs. **In 2018 the Dallas Police and Fire-Rescue Departments launched a pilot reform program—the Rapid Integrated Group Healthcare Team (RIGHT Care).**²⁰ **The program partners paramedics, police officers, and mental health professionals together in South Central Dallas to respond to behavioral health calls in Dallas. The program has responded to 6,600 behavioral health issues calls since 2018.** Proponents would like the program to be implemented on a citywide level.²¹ The City of Austin will also hire mental health clinicians to support call centers with video calls from paramedics or crisis interventions.²² In 2019–2020, Austin City Council increased funding for the Expanded Mobile Crises Outreach Team (EMCOT), seeking to improve access to care for adults and children.

⁷ Rushin, Stephen, and Michalski, Roger. *Police Funding* (July 1, 2019). Florida Law Review, Forthcoming. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3542418>.

⁸ Rushin and Roger, *Police Funding*.

⁹ Wall Street Journal, "Defund Police, Watch Crime Return," June 8, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/defund-police-watch-crime-return-11591658454>.

¹⁰ Wall Street Journal, *Defund the Police*.

¹¹ Wall Street Journal, *Defund the Police*.

¹² Stephen & Roger, *Police Funding*.

¹³ Stephen & Roger, *Police Funding*.

¹⁴ Christopher M. Sullivan, and Zachary P. O'Keeffe, "Evidence that Curtailing Proactive Policing Can Reduce Major Crime," *Nature Human Behavior*, no. 1 (2017): 733. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-017-0211-5>.

¹⁵ Sullivan and O'Keeffe, *Proactive Policing*.

¹⁶ United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employment Status*.

¹⁷ IPUMS NHGIS, University of Minnesota, www.nhgis.org.

¹⁸ Marjory Givens, Amanda Jovaag, and Anne Roubal, "2019 County Health Rankings Report," *University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute*, 2019.

¹⁹ Andre M. Perry, David Harshbarger, Carl Romer, and Kristian Thymianos, "To Add Value to Black Communities, We Must Defund the Police and Prison Systems," *Brookings*, June 11, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2020/06/11/to-add-value-to-black-communities-we-must-defund-the-police-and-prison-systems/>.

²⁰ City of Dallas, "Dallas Public Safety Agencies Launch Innovative Mental Health Program," <http://www.dallascitynews.net/dallas-public-safety-agencies-launch-innovative-mental-health-program#:~:text=The%20Rapid%20Integrated%20Group%20Healthcare,of%20its%20kind%20in%20Texas>.

²¹ Alex Boyer, "Dallas Pilot Program Seeing Great Success by Pairing Officers with Social Workers for 911 Calls," *Fox 4*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.fox4news.com/news/dallas-pilot-program-seeing-great-success-by-pairing-officers-with-social-workers-for-911-calls>.

²² Andrea Fox, "Austin Budget Adds Millions for Mental Health Response in 911 Services," *EfficientGov*, September 13, 2019, <https://www.efficientgov.com/public-safety/articles/austin-budget-adds-millions-for-mental-health-response-in-911-services-DqqgMkTaZMxXi538/>.

Defunding discussions are also taking place across the nation in cities such as Los Angeles. The mayor, Eric Garcetti, announced he would cut funding from a proposed budget increase to the police department.²³ The Budget and Finance Committee of the L.A. City Council discussed cuts between \$100 million to \$150 million from the LAPD budget. A public survey revealed city respondents' tremendous support for redirected funds to be dedicated to more mental health services, housing, and general care programs. In Albuquerque, New Mexico, Mayor Tim Keller announced the formation of an alternative department, the Albuquerque Community Safety Department, to respond to non-violent incidents.²⁴ The police department will reallocate funds to support the new initiative that sends unarmed personnel specialists to calls related to mental health, behavioral, or housing issues.

What is Police Reform? And How is it Implemented?

Police reform consists of changes in policing policies and practices. Police reform can include several measures, such as the implementation of police training, the use of body cameras, the decriminalization of drugs, and investigations of misconduct by outside agencies. A majority of Black people support police reforms and often at higher rates than other racial groups. **The CATO Institute reported that eighty-two percent of African Americans believe the police could benefit from further training on handling confrontations with citizens compared to 62 percent of Americans.** Seventy-six percent of Black people also oppose racial profiling during traffic and pedestrian stops. Reform measures are meant to improve the services provided by police officers and increase

accountability among law enforcement agencies.

Austin City Council members approved measures to improve policing practices and policies to limit the use of force within the Austin police department.²⁵ Council members voted unanimously to ban chokeholds, tear gas and reduce the amount of military equipment among police. Resolutions also limit the use of less-lethal force unless the person poses an imminent threat of death or serious bodily harm.²⁶ Frederick Frazier, chairman of the Dallas Police Association, expressed full support for reforms to improve conditions between communities and law enforcement. **Frazier suggested the need to increase community outreach, define police officers' roles, hire social workers, and maintain high standards for new officers.**²⁷

Cities have also implemented statutory policy reforms beyond local change initiatives. The Colorado Senate Bill 217 is a recent example of far-reaching policy reform adopted at a statewide level. The bill sets limits on police force use and bans the use of chokeholds and carotid holds.²⁸ Police officers will be issued body-worn cameras and required to activate body cameras during any interactions with the public when enforcing the law or investigating possible violations. The division of criminal justice will also provide an annual report with information from local agencies on the use of force by officers that resulted in death or serious bodily injury. The bill will also require police to intervene when another officer is using unlawful physical force.

At the national level, the House introduced the Justice in Policing Act of 2020, a police reform bill that addresses accountability, transparency, and law enforcement training.²⁹ The bill includes measures that lower the standard of intent for police officers and limit qualified immunity as a defense to liability

²³ Marc Cota Robles, "L.A. City Council to Meet to Discuss LAPD Budget Cuts Amid Calls to 'Defund the Police,'" *ABC7*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.koat.com/article/mayor-keller-announces-civilian-response-department-to-help-with-abq-public-safety/32869947>.

²⁴ Marissa Armas, "Amid Movement to 'Defund Police,' ABQ Mayor Creates New Public Safety Department to Address Social Issues," *KOAT Action News 7*, June 15, 2020.

²⁵ Meena Venkataramanan, "Austin City Council Unanimously Limits Police Officers' Use of Force and Asks for Cut to Department Budget," *The Texas Tribune*, June 11, 2020, <https://www.texastribune.org/2020/06/11/austin-police-reform-budget-cut-george-floyd-protests/>.

²⁶ Bryce Newberry, "Council Approves Astin Police Reforms Amid Ongoing Police Brutality Protests," *KVUE*, June 11, 2020, <https://www.kvue.com/article/news/local/austin-city-council-approves-policing-reforms/269-3a062cd4-664a-4ac8-aa4-8b838a2b1b3f>.

²⁷ Frederick Frazier, "Dallas Police Association: We Support Calls for Reform," *Dallas Morning News*, June 14, 2020.

²⁸ Colorado General Assembly, Senate, *Concerning Measures to Enhance Law Enforcement Integrity, and, in Connection there with Making an Appropriation*, SB20-217, 72nd General Assembly, 2nd regular sess., introduced in Senate on June 3, 2020, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/7120>.

²⁹ U.S. Congress, House, *Justice in Policing Act of 2020*, H. R. 7120, 116th Congress, 2D Session, introduced in the House on June 8, 2020, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/7120/text>.

in a private civil action. It will also establish a misconduct registry and reporting requirements and prohibit racial profiling.³⁰ Law enforcement agencies would be required to report data on use-of-force incidents, misconduct, complaints, discipline records, and termination records. The use of body cameras and dashboard cameras for all marked federal police vehicles would also be mandatory.

What Does it Mean to Disband a Police Department?

Disbanding a police department entails the elimination of police services from a city and the start of a law enforcement group with new structures in place. Police departments disband when a host government no longer funds them. Researchers examined the cause of local disbanded police forces in the state of Ohio during the 1990s.³¹ Findings revealed police organizations were disbanded when they violated the expectations of external constituents such as the media or the public, politicians, or sovereign entities.³² Problems emerged in the form of misconduct issues or disagreements between local government and the police department, where the institution was considered unruly or out of control. Police departments can be disbanded at the local level yet still policed by an agency at a higher government level.³³ When police forces disband, local oversight shifts to county agencies, decreasing the local community's ability to hold police accountable. Police departments in smaller cities are more likely to be dissolved due to the high expense combined with inadequate funding.

Minneapolis announced plans to dismantle their police department with City Council President Lisa Bender stating the existing police department could not be reformed.³⁴ Details for how a new law enforcement agency will look are still unclear, however. Camden, New Jersey, is one example of a city that made efforts to disband its police department in 2012 to address deep-rooted corruption.³⁵ Violent crimes dropped

by 42 percent during the next seven years. Some residents feel the restructuring had a positive effect in terms of the trust built between the community and the police department. Other residents expressed more work needs to be done in terms of changing the demographics of the police department to reflect those of the city.

What Does it Mean to Abolish the Police?

Calls to abolish the police by activists grew in 2014 during the Ferguson social movements to oppose police brutality after the death of Mike Brown. Abolishing the police means to eliminate police departments and replace them with community alternatives to policing. Scholar discussions of police abolition assert law enforcement agencies must be directly targeted along with all forms of police control for the transformation of society.³⁶ Police abolitionist efforts focus on disbanding, disempowering, and disarming law enforcement institutions.³⁷ The historical origins of the police in the United States as slave patrols are the foundation of their arguments that police organizations were not created to protect and serve. Police abolitionists argue law enforcement institutions founded in the history of White supremacy cannot be reformed and must be disbanded. The excessive use of force by police and the increased militarization of police forces provides evidence for abolitionist demands to disarm the police.³⁸ Though considered an effective tactic for harm reduction, the movement to disarm has not gained significant support. Methods cited by police abolitionist to disempower the police include: "(1) attacking laws and policies that give police power; (2) direct action; (3) divestment campaigns; and (4) building alternatives that directly challenge the legitimacy of police."³⁹ Disempowerment measures work together to erode the power that police institutions possess while also building the community's ability to solve social problems.

³⁰ Covington Alert, "Analysis of the Justice in Policing Act of 2020," *Covington*, June 12, 2020, <https://www.cov.com/en/news-and-insights/insights/2020/06/analysis-of-the-justice-in-policing-act-of-2020>.

³¹ William King, "Organizational Failure and the Disbanding of Local Police Agencies," *Crime and Delinquency*, no. 60 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128709344675>.

³² King, *Organizational Failure*.

³³ King, *Organizational Failure*.

³⁴ Oliver Milman, "Minneapolis Pledges to Dismantle its Police Department – How Will it Work?" *The Guardian*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/08/minneapolis-city-council-police-department-dismantle>.

³⁵ Andrew, *This City Disbanded its Police Department*.

³⁶ Meghan G. McDowell, and Luis A. Fernandez, "Disband, Disempower, and Disarm": Amplifying the Theory and Practice of Police Abolition," *Critical Criminology*, no. 26 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-018-9400-4>.

³⁷ McDowell & Fernandez, *Disband, Disempower, and Disarm*, 381.

³⁸ McDowell & Fernandez, *Disband, Disempower, and Disarm*, 381.

³⁹ McDowell & Fernandez, *Disband, Disempower, and Disarm*, 382.

Conclusion

There are several definitions of what it means to defund, reform, disband, or abolish police departments. To recap, defunding the police means cities would divert budgeted police allocations to other service areas that benefit the well-being of communities. Police reforms include changes in policies or practices. These include the use of force bans, drug decriminalization, and more police training. The disbandment of police occurs when police departments are dismantled and rebuilt with new structures in place. The abolishment of police occurs when police departments are eliminated and replaced with alternatives to policing. The next part of our series will provide an in-depth discussion of police reform in the United States.