

A Critical Analysis of Defunding the Police Movement: Ramifications and Recommendations
for Police Reform in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Law enforcement in the U.S. seems to be at a crossroad in some of our largest cities. As early as 5 years ago (circa 2016, for example), if someone claiming to be clairvoyant wrote a published article that proclaimed there would be a movement to defund the police in some of America's largest cities beginning in 2020, no one—not even the most diehard anti-police groups—would have believed it. But here we are in 2021 with this movement receiving traction in New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles and many other large urban cities. The paper will explore this movement and its possible consequences for the citizens living in these cities.

Introduction

The death of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin, propelled the *defund the police* movement. At first glance, this movement seems to be a justifiable response to the reprehensible death at the hands of Officer Derek Chauvin of George Floyd. It appeared to be one in an unacceptable succession of police killings of Black citizens. It certainly made most Americans, regardless of one's political and moral beliefs, realize that there possibly was systemic racism in American criminal justice policy.

The result was both peaceful and destructive protests in many cities in the U.S. A slogan that emerged in the U.S. from these demonstrations is “defund the police.” Banners carried by the protestors displayed the proclamation, but, like any proclamation, there was no definition of or explanation of what defund the police means or its possible consequences. The purpose of this paper is to examine the concept of “defund the police” from a research point of view to determine its ramifications and to look at other reforms that are not so radical as defund the police such as police reform initiatives.

What Exactly Does Defund the Police Actually Mean?

Boynton (2020) gives perhaps the best definition of what is meant by protesters decrying “Defund the Police:” ‘Reallocate some policing costs toward mental health, addiction treatment and social services while reframing the role of the police themselves — particularly in Black and Indigenous communities’ (para 2). Years of policing in the US have shown that police officers are not capable of identifying and adequately dealing successfully with individuals that are mentally ill. This increased response to mentally ill persons began in the 1980s when mental health facilities were being closed due to state budget cuts. Suddenly mentally ill persons who needed treatment were cut-off from their treatment. Prisons soon were given the responsibility of housing and treating the mentally ill. Police officers were now thrust into a new responsibility of identifying and adequately dealing with the mentally ill being released from prison. Enormous increases in mentally ill persons occurred in the 1980s and 1990s because of the “out-of-control” use of illicit drugs. In summary, police officers have never been qualified to deal with the mentally ill, so some shift to giving this responsibility to mental health professionals again is justified. But some mentally ill persons can become aggressive and dangerous. To put a mental health professional on his or her own without a police officer “back-up” is perilous to the mental health professional; the other alternative is to give responding mental health professionals weapons training and arm them with similar weaponry as a sworn police officer. Are these responding mental health professionals willing to make this step? They would need some degree of police training. In California, for example, this would be training under PC 832.

This paper is not specifically about mental health and policing, rather it is about “defunding the police” in general, so the author will return to the discussion of the efficacy of “defunding the police.”

Which Agencies “Jumped” onto the Defund the Police Bandwagon?

First, the author present a thorough summary of ten cities that politicians quickly “bought into” the defund the police position by declaring a dollar amount that could be reduced from the police agency’s next budget cycle. Table 1 below shows these agencies -and the amount of reduction as proposed and that has actually been implemented as of August 2021 and the resultant crime rate increases.

Table 1—Agency, Defund Amount, and Anecdotal Crime Increase/Decrease as of August 2021

Note: The transition from the FBI’s UCR to NIBRS in 2020 makes determining precise changes in crime rates virtually impossible because the participation rate of agencies was 53% versus 98% over the previous years. Thus, the reason for the anecdotal determinations from various reported sources.

Agency	Defund Amount	Crime Increase
Baltimore PD	\$22 million	Baltimore is on pace to experience more than 300 homicides for the seventh year in a row (MacFarquhar, 2021)
Chicago PD	Undetermined. Through attrition by not filling vacant positions.	According to the most 2020-2021 data from the FBI , the total crime rate in Chicago is 3,925.8 per 100,000 people. That's 58.51% higher than the national rate of 2,476.7 per 100,000 people and 74.22% higher than the Illinois total crime rate of 2,253.4 per 100,000 people. (Homesnacks, 2021).
Los Angeles PD	\$175 million	The numbers of murders and

		shootings reported in the City of Los Angeles continues to outpace violent crime rates recorded in 2019 and 2020. One-hundred forty-one in 2021 as of 10/1/2021 which is a 22% increase over 2020. (Cain, 2021)
Minneapolis PD	\$8 million	In the first three quarters of 2021, there have been five hundred three people injured by gunfire. This is an increase of 25% over 2021. Homicides up 16%; robberies up 5%; and Aggravated Assault up 2.6% (Williams, 2021)
New York PD	\$1 billion	For the month of August 2021, the number of murders and shootings declined compared with August 2020. (Malone, 2021)
Oakland California PD	14.6 million	The Oakland PD announced a 140% increase in violent crimes from January 2020 to January 2021. There were 159 shootings in 2021 versus 79 in 2020. Fifteen homicides and 64 shootings and murders occurred in January 2021, a 129% increase over January 2020 (Colorado, 2021)
Philadelphia PD	33 million	According to new data from the Philadelphia PD, homicides were up 30% in 2021. There have been 412 nonfatal shootings in 2021, whereas there were 258 in 2020. (Palmer, 2021)
Portland, Oregon PD	15 million	According to the most recent 2020 data from the FBI, the total crime rate in Portland is 5,748 per 1000,000 people. That is 132.08% higher than the national rate.

		(Thomas, 2021)
San Francisco PD	120 million	According to the most recent data from the FBI, the total crime rate in SF is 6,175.2 per 100,000. That is 149.33% higher than the national average of 2,476.7/100,000 and 122.74% higher than the total of 2,772.4/100,000 in 2020. (Homesnacks, 2020)
Seattle PD	69 million	According to the most recent data from the FBI, the total crime rate in Seattle is 5,081/100,000. This is 105.5% higher than the national rate of 2,476.7/100,000 and 70.75% higher than the Washington total crime rate. (Rantz, 2021).

Table 1 shows the crime increase in the ten selected cities which have defunded the police. The follow-on Table 2 shows the retirements and resignations of the same departments in Table 1. The research question here is, “Do the increased crime statistics in these “defund the police agencies” reflect corresponding police officer retirements and resignations that would not be the case without a “defund the police movement?”

Table 2—Retirements and Resignations Featured in Table 1 2020-2021

Agency	Retirements and Resignations
Baltimore PD	As of December 31, 2020, BPD staffing fell below 700 sworn officers. This was 500 officers short of normal staffing levels and resulted in responding to emergency calls only. (MacFarquhar, 2021)
Chicago PD	The department — which has roughly 13,000 sworn officers — had 560 retirements in all of 2020, 475 in 2019 and 339 in 2018. (Main & Spielman, 2021).

Los Angeles PD	In just the 2020-21 fiscal year that ended in June, LAPD saw 631 police from all ranks leave the department, many through retirement. That was nearly 100 more than left LAPD in the prior fiscal year. (Cain, 2021)
Minneapolis PD	In 2020, 105 officers retired or resigned. This is double the attrition rate in 2019. In addition, in 2021, 155 officers are on psychiatric leave and not available. (Williams, 2021)
New York PD	In 2020, 5,300 uniformed NYPD officers quit or submitted paperwork to retire. This is a 75% increase over 2019. (Malone, 2021)
Oakland California PD	OPD has 80 unfilled positions (Colorado, 2021)
Philadelphia PD	The Philadelphia PD is 368 officers short and the Deferred Retirement Option Program (declaring retirement in next 4 years) is 5 times higher than in 2020. (Palmer, 2021)
Portland, Oregon PD	Portland PD had 69 officers resign and 75 retire from April 2020-April 2021 versus 27 and 14 respectively in the previous year (Thomas, 2021)
San Francisco PD	SFPD had 23 officers resign in first 6 months of 2020 and another 31 retired. Comparatively, only 26 resigned in 2019 and only 12 in 2018 (Matier, 2020)
Seattle PD	Seattle PD saw resignations increase 123 in 2020 from 34 in 2019 and retirements increase to 96 in 2020 from 43 in 2019 (Rantz, 2021).

What are the Consequences of Defunding the Police?

Police Officer Retirements and Unfilled Positions

As Table 2 shows, for these ten US cities there is a correlation between the amount of defunding of the police budget and the concomitant resignations and retirements of sworn police officers. There also seems to be a correlation between the police resignations and retirements and a spike in at least violent crime in these ten cities. Syllogistically, can we conclude that the increased resignations and retirements and the resultant reduction in police manpower caused the increase in crime in these ten cities which some in the US media claimed is the case? Many

studies have shown that an increase in police staffing can result in a decline in the crime rate, particularly if the increase of officers is strategically deployed (gang task forces; illegal gun confiscation, etc.). Therefore, a reduction of police officers and a concomitant transfer of officers from these specialized units back to patrol assignments will most likely result in an increase in violent crime. So, logically it can be posited that these sudden increases in retirements and resignations did have some impact on violent crime. But is this the only explanation for the increase in crime rates in these ten cities. The short answer is that the *defund the police movement* probably was the primary reason for both the increase in retirements and resignations and the resultant violent crime increase. Not being able to control for other variables makes the defund movement (Independent Variable) the most likely cause of the increase in violent crime rates (Dependent Variable) and the spike in retirements and resignations (Dependent Variable). Are there any other variables that could have been Intervening Variables? The answer is “yes.” Historically, criminologists know that violent crime increases in the summer months, and most of the increases that occurred in these ten cities took place in the summer months of 2020 and 2021. Another Intervening Variable that looms large, but whose impact cannot be precisely measured is Covid-19. Did the requirement to wear masks and be vaccinated as a condition of continued employment impact an officer’s decision to either resign or retire? This paper will not explore what separate impact the two Intervening Variables, summers of 2020 and 2021 and Covid-19, had on the spike in violent crime but these are possible areas to explore in further research.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

An alarming trend is the number of officers in Minneapolis who have initiated the process of a disability retirement based on PTSD. To be eligible for a PTSD retirement, he/she

must first be diagnosed with a work-induced stress disability that makes it impossible to continue performing as a police officer (Zanotti, 2020)). If a large percentage of these PTSD retirements are granted, there are several untoward consequences: (1) a strain on already underfunded police retirement systems, (2) fewer officers to take calls for service which puts workload stress on the remaining officers (who might also qualify for a PTSD retirement at some point), and (3) puts citizens in more peril due to longer response to calls for service.

Cities Forced to Disband Their Police Departments

Defunding the police will inevitably result in cities having to disband their police departments, because there will be a confluence of factors: (1) salaries will decrease for potential recruits, so that only the unqualified will apply, and (2) police staffing levels will fall to the point that crime will overcome the overwhelmed officers, and it will result in a cost-benefit ratio that does not justify a police department (think of massive law suits that bankrupt US cities). The consequence of this outcome might possibly be a return to the medieval English policing system called the “Hue and Cry.” In the “Hue and Cry” system, criminals (or perceived criminals) were pursued with cries and sounds of alarm. It was the duty of any person wronged or discovering a felony to raise the hue and cry, and neighbors were bound to come and assist in the pursuit and apprehension of the criminal. All those joining in the pursuit and apprehension were justified under law, even if the apprehended person was shown to be innocent. Today we refer to this as vigilante justice. Without a police department, vigilante justice certainly seems a possibility. Do we really want to return to the Middle Ages practice of Hue and Cry?

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions:

The reasons behind the “defund the police movement” are myriad and complex. Social movements of this sort are often without specific inception. Nevertheless, social changes have occurred throughout history and the defund the police movement is one of many that could be included. Examples are the Pinkerton National Detective Agency’s harassment of labor unions from 1878-1930s, the “sit-ins” of the 1950s and 1960s, the riots in many of the major cities in the summer of 1968, Democratic National Convention of 1968 during which the Chicago Police were accused of brutalizing some of the 10,000 anti-Vietnam War protestors.

The culmination of much of the unrest of the 1960s was President Johnson’s, The President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice. This Commission was composed of some of the most prominent criminal justice practitioners and educators of this time, and their many recommendations were outlined in a publication titled, *The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society*. Unfortunately, many of their recommendations, particularly for policing, were never implemented. One of the most controversial but perhaps the most logical recommendation was to require police officers to have at least a bachelor’s degree. This recommendation never got traction, because two powerful organizations opposed it: The National Association of Police Chiefs and the National Sheriff’s Association. It is this author’s police officer recruits to have a bachelor’s degree is the panacea that will suddenly give policing the legitimacy they desire from particularly minority communities. Nevertheless, it is a step forward. This leads me now into the final section of this paper and this is the Recommendations Section.

Recommendations

Policing needs reform and not defunding. No other country in the world has experienced a *defund the police movement*. Why would the greatest democracy in the world want to defund the police which eventually might result in abolishing the police? It is a “zero sum game” that will result in crime chaos. So, the author will now offer a plethora of reasonable reforms to policing that will not result in a defund the police zero sum game.

What has not worked in police reform?

Arrests for misdemeanors versus citations

“An independent study showing that a decline in prosecutions for misdemeanors and other non-violent offenses does not imperil public safety is adding new impetus to reforms by so-called “progressive” district attorneys in Boston, Chicago and Baltimore.” (Anonymous, 2021, para 1). Many district attorneys/prosecutors in the US are de-emphasizing prosecution for misdemeanors. This seems to be a good idea. Perhaps most misdemeanors should be only citable offenses for even the first two offenses with restitution as the resolution.

Recruitment of military without college degrees

Too many police agencies rely on hiring military veterans. Being a veteran, the author certainly believes this policy is a good one, but giving preference to veterans with veteran bonus points in an interview is not good policy. The best police recruit is a male or female veteran with a college degree. This should be the standard for all police departments.

Not employing some degree of community policing

Community policing is a proven solution to the more prevalent pro-active policing tactics. This does not mean that police agencies that have employed more aggressive specialty units such as SWAT, gun removal task forces, gang task forces, etc. should be disbanded. These

directed police tactics should not be abandoned. The “respond-to-calls” patrol officers should be trained more specifically in community policing.

Not hiring minorities and women at a greater % than currently exists.

Diversity in police hiring is essential to greater police accountability. Police agencies should not be relying on local hiring as has been the case probably throughout the history of policing in the US. This has been the case more often in smaller departments. Police agencies at all levels of large to small should be seeking the best candidates from as far from their geometric center as possible. Of course, this includes hiring qualified officers who represent the ethnic and gender percentages as much as possible.

Rating Police Officer Performance that emphasizes arrests, citations, and other enforcement tactics

Ratings of police officers that emphasize arrest and other “measurable statistics” such as arrests and citations is insufficient. Emphasis should be placed on other enforcement factors such as crime reduction in the officer’s beat, citizen identification of officer efficiency, supervisor recognition of an officer’s engagement with his beat citizens, and peer evaluations.

Too many laws in state penal codes and city ordinances that become nothing more than ruses to stop and justify searches of the over-policed populations that include both Black and Hispanic. Examples are (1) license plate out, taillight out, failure to signal lane change, tinted windows, and many more not identified.

There needs to be a “cleaning” of penal and vehicle codes of ordinances that allow police and sheriffs to use these innocuous issues as a ruse to make stops for harmless existential situations that poor drivers are unable to fix.

No knock warrants.

No knock warrants have become one of the most controversial police tactics in 20th and 21st century. The question remains is “How effective are they, and are they a relic of the crack cocaine era? What purpose do they serve?

Police officers wearing blazers and tie instead of a recognizable uniform (Menlo Park, California 1968)

This experiment was a miserable failure, because citizens and offenders could not recognize police officers from the general public. The officers looked more like college students from nearby Menlo College or Stanford University. The badge was embroidered on the blazer pocket (Boynton, 2020). Even when officers identified themselves as Menlo Park PD, most citizens were skeptical

Police chief Charles Gains’ San Francisco Police Department experiment with changing the police car from Black-White to Baby Blue.

This was another attempt at “reform” which backfired. Oftentimes when police officers are on routine patrol, citizens who have just witnessed a crime or were the victim of a crime might look for a police car just in case there happened to be one driving by or parked nearby. San Francisco citizens complained that they could not recognize the baby blue police cars, and the SF POA brought a lawsuit that ended this experiment.

Use of Force Policies that Authorize Potential Deadly Force Such as the Minnesota “Neck Kneel”

This maneuver, used by Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chavin on George Floyd, was sanctioned when a Minneapolis police officer had received the training. As a former police

officer, this author sees the inherent danger of its use. With the carotid restraint, an officer can tell exactly when the arrestee has lost temporary consciousness and release the hold and ease the arrestee to the ground to be handcuffed. With the “neck knell,” the flow of oxygen to the lungs and brain is shut off, unlike in the carotid hold, and it takes only 5-10 minutes for the victim to be brain-dead. This maneuver should never again be sanctioned for police to use.

What has worked in police reform?

Community Policing

Volumes could be written about community policing (CP); this section will be a short summary of what CP is and whether it has worked in the jurisdictions in which it has been employed. CP stresses more direct officer involvement with local citizens, is organized around less rigid hierarchies and protocols, and attempts to address the root causes of neighborhood crime with the assistance of the larger community (Diamond & Weiss, 2009). Its basis is the SARA model [Scanning, Analysis, Response, Assessment]. The answer to the question, “Has CP worked?” was best answered by the Arlington, Texas PD chief of police, Will Johnson. He replied, “I am often asked if community policing really works, and the short answer to the question is yes. There is research to demonstrate that community policing is effective in reducing crime, and the Arlington PD can support these finding in our jurisdiction” (Johnson, 2018, para 1).

Hiring officers with college degrees (Best example is Arlington, Texas PD)

Law enforcement administrators have resisted this reform ever since it was identified as a necessary reform in the 1968 *President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice*. The time has come to make this a condition of employment.

Diversity in hiring and particularly hiring of female officers and even more so female officers of color.

Even though females now comprise approximately 12% of sworn law enforcement positions, they make up 50% of the US population. The argument that the vast majority females are not interested in law enforcement is no longer a valid argument. Moreover, a greater percentage of females are obtaining a bachelor's degrees. Among the population 25 to 29, 36% of women have bachelor's degrees versus 26% of men (US Census, 2020).

Decertification of Police Officers for Serious Misconduct

Up until September 2021, California was one of only four states that did not have a decertification law, but now it does. Senate Bill 2 gives the state's Commission of Peace Officer Standards and Training the power to decertify an officer for wrongdoing. For all intents and purposes, this law ends these officer's careers in law enforcement. It sets up a nine member Advisory Board of civilians who, based on an independent investigation, can recommend to California POST that the officer be decertified. This bill will end the possibility of an officer fired from one department only to reemerge in another (Lewis, 2021).

Leadership that values these "what has worked" principles

None of the above recommendations will come to fruition until the nation's law enforcement leaders take the bold step to implement these reforms as Chief Johnson did in Arlington, Texas. One chief making a change has shown that policing can be less militaristic;

however, it may take an entire state, like Texas, to make these changes before they get traction in the rest of the country.

In Summary

The author is not so presumptuous to suggest that the above recommendations are all-encompassing. In fact, the author seeks more in-put from the readers of this article. More articles in support of this article may be the answer.

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