

What Happened to Defunding?

The Migration of Law Enforcement Funding and Building the Right Response

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Prompted by heightened cries for police reform across the United States since 2020, many jurisdictions quickly pledged to and made significant changes to local law enforcement budgets, including allocating or reallocating funds to community-based services. In particular, some jurisdictions utilized these funds to explore and expand community-based alternative response options for individuals experiencing behavioral health needs. However, many cities that made reductions in local law enforcement spending in 2020 either funded department budgets at the same levels the following year or increased police spending. This apparent reversal in budget priorities, combined with potentially misleading narratives around public safety and a rise in homicides across many major U.S. cities since 2020, has led to confusion and disillusionment.

This resource provides an overview and analysis of the migration of law enforcement funding across a sample of U.S. jurisdictions from 2020 through December 2021. It also discusses the modern dual role of law enforcement and the importance of building community capacity while decreasing the footprint of the criminal justice system to work toward true systemic change.

The Need for Reform

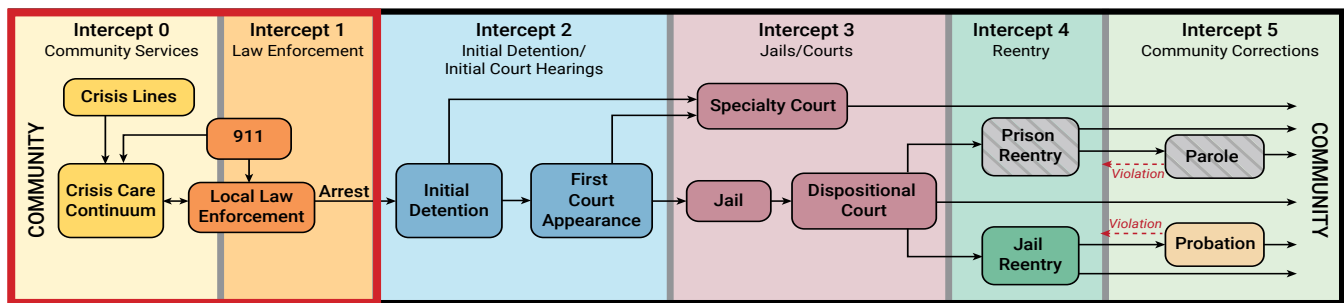
Individuals with mental illness and disabilities represent a disproportionate number of people arrested and jailed each year. According to the Treatment Advocacy Center, [people with untreated mental illness are 16 times more likely to be killed by law enforcement](#). In the same vein, [approximately 25 percent of people killed by police have a serious mental illness](#). In most cases, law enforcement officers do not have the specific, in-depth training or capacity to assess or meet the needs of individuals with behavioral health needs, cognitive impairments, or developmental disabilities. Additionally, many jurisdictions do not have sufficient options for community-based responses or deflection from the criminal justice system into more relevant alternatives, leaving law enforcement as the default first responder.

Racial disparities in police use of deadly force against both armed and unarmed individuals have also been a significant area of focus in recent years, particularly since the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. [Rates of fatal police shootings of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color \(BIPOC\) are significantly higher than white people](#). A 2021 study of data from four states (California, Colorado, Florida, and Texas) also found that [racial disparities in nonfatal injurious police shootings were even more pronounced than in fatal police shootings](#). While police reform is not a new conversation, the national dialogue around racial disparities, police funding, and public safety has only amplified over the last 18 months.

The Dual Role of Law Enforcement

For law enforcement officers, merging the roles of civil response (as guardian or legal protector) and public safety (as warrior or enforcer) poses additional challenges. The commonly used Sequential Intercept Model (see Figure 1), or SIM, recognizes that law enforcement plays a dual role across Intercepts 0 and 1 (Community Services and Law Enforcement, respectively) and is often the first to respond to individuals in distress. When officers respond to calls for service involving individuals experiencing a behavioral health crisis, the calls are often related to unmet treatment needs, instead of major crimes or violence. Indeed, a recent multi-city analysis of 911 calls by the Vera Institute of Justice revealed that most 911 calls are related to non-criminal issues. However, in most communities, a law enforcement response to a 911 call is typically the first and sometimes the only option available.

Figure 1. The Sequential Intercept Model



Abreu, D., Parker, T. W., Noether, C. D., Steadman, H. J., & Case, B. (2017). Revising the paradigm for jail diversion for people with mental and substance use disorders: Intercept 0. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 35(5-6), 380-395. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bsl.2300>
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Historical Context of Law Enforcement Funding

Funding for policing is primarily derived from local governments, with supplemental funding from state governments and federal programs. We may assume that increased spending on police has correlated with reduced crime rates over time. However, as the National League of Cities reports, "overall, spending on policing is a function of historical factors and cost of living, not related to variation in actual changes in crime and safety."

It can be difficult to determine how much crime occurs in the United States since much of it is unreported. The two primary sources of government crime data in the United States are the Uniform Crime Reports from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National Crime Victimization Survey from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). Both the FBI and BJS data show dramatic declines in violent and property crime rates since the early 1990s when crime spiked across much of the nation (see Figure 2). It is worth noting that the surveyed perception of many Americans is there is *more* crime nationally than there was the year before, despite a general downward trend in violent and property crime over the past three decades.

High-Quality Staff Retention Through Bonuses, Pay Increases, and Overtime



Since 2020, there has also been an increase in voluntary law enforcement officer departures in many jurisdictions, whether through resignations or retirements. This resulted in some departments advocating to spend more to recruit new officers for work that may now be considered less desirable. In mid-2021, the mayor of **Salt Lake City, Utah**, agreed to give entry-level officers pay raises of nearly 30 percent and senior-level officers 12 percent raises to attract and retain quality staff. **Portland, Oregon**, increased its 2022 police budget by \$5.2 million after cutting \$15 million the prior year, using the added spending for signing bonuses for new officers, funding a retire-rehire program, and bolstering recruitment due to workforce gaps.



Sickness from COVID-19 also exacerbated short-term staffing issues, leading to the need for increased officer overtime pay. In addition, many police departments implemented new and expanded training due to calls for reform, such as de-escalation and crisis response. This training temporarily pulled officers from the field, requiring additional staff time to cover the work. All these situations contributed to requests for increased police budgets across the country.

A False Narrative on Reform

The defunding/unbundling debate has often been framed as a false choice between supporting law enforcement and reforming police, leading to intense political polarization. We know that crime rates fluctuate for various reasons, and a rise in homicides during the pandemic was seen across the country, including in cities that increased police spending. However, the false narrative that there is a rise in violent crime due to criminal justice reform has been difficult to contain. According to an October 2021 [Pew Research Center poll](#), the share of adults who say spending on policing in their area should be *increased* stands at 47 percent, up from 31 percent in June 2020. However, opinions differ widely by race, ethnicity, and age.

Building the Right Response

In most areas, law enforcement is still relied upon as the first responder to most 911 calls for service. However, the months following May 2020 were a powerful window of time, where campaigns across the country shifted the narrative toward imagining alternative possibilities. Today, community members and advocates continue to work together to reduce the footprint of the criminal justice system, whether or not police department budgets have been impacted.



In **Seattle, Washington** (the only major U.S. city to reduce their police department budget for the second consecutive year since 2020), the city council unanimously voted to remove officers from the city's Navigation Team, the duties of which include removing encampments of people who are unhoused. In October 2020, the council passed a bill to establish a new Unsheltered Outreach and Response Team composed of civilian staff to replace the Navigation Team. The Unsheltered

To work toward true systems change, attention is needed around both decreasing the footprint of the criminal justice system and building effective community capacity and infrastructure that includes a continuum of options, from preventative to post-crisis or post-emergency. Services must be timely, accessible, person-oriented, and tailored to individual needs, while also considering social determinants of health.

Communities should lay the groundwork for both first response and potentially second response, examine local gaps and resources to determine what services are available, or can be, and determine whether people know how to access those services without a call to police. It is also essential that data-driven evaluation efforts are funded and lead to publicizing what is working across various communities and diverse populations, to improve public safety and public health for all.



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