

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

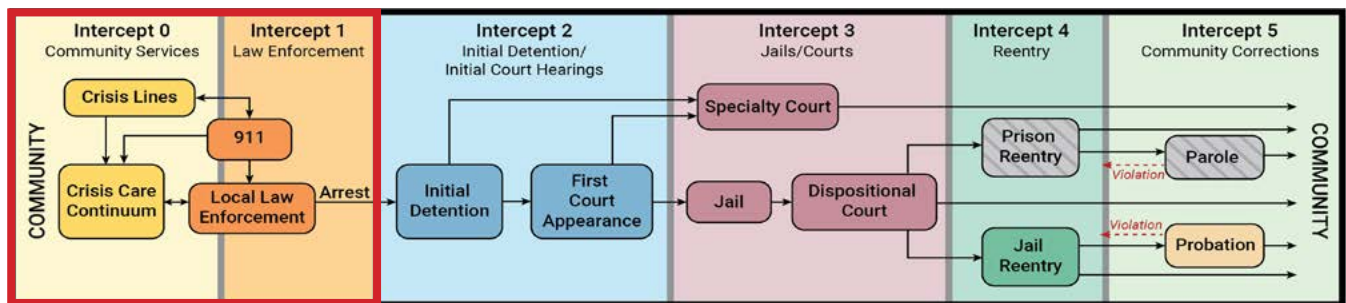
Individuals with mental illness and disabilities represent a disproportionate number of people arrested and jailed each year. According to the Treatment Advocacy Center, [people with untreated mental illness are 16 times more likely to be killed by law enforcement](#). In the same vein, [approximately 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



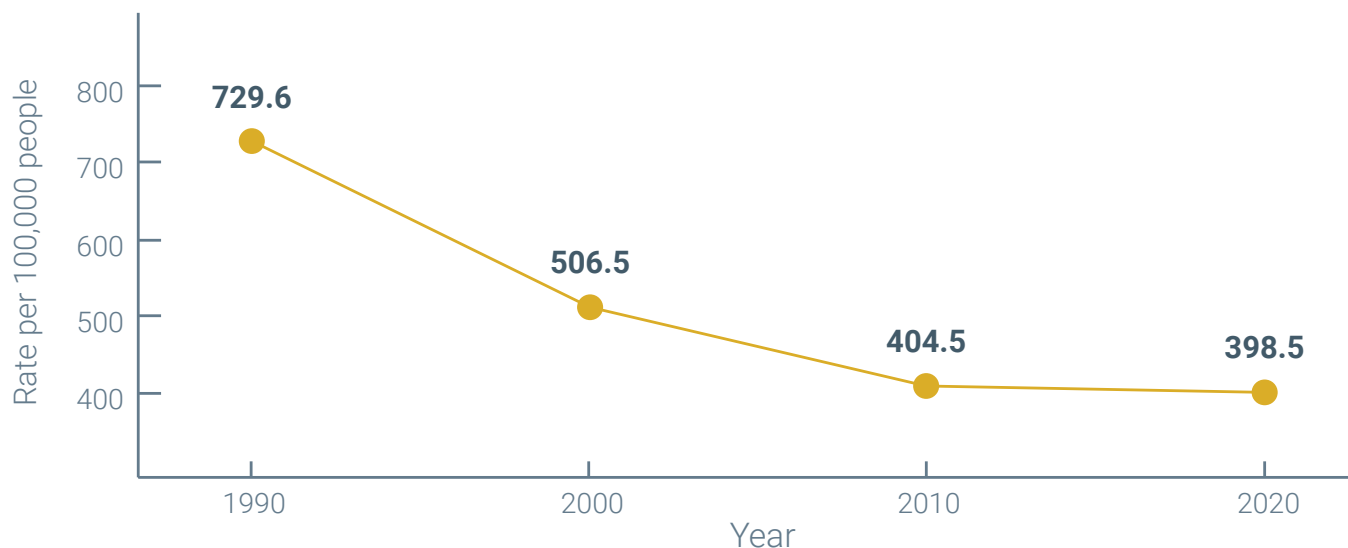
Abreu, D., Parker, T. W., Noether, C. D., Steadman, H. J., & Case, B. (2017). Revising the paradigm for jail diversion for people with mental and substance use disorders: Intercept 0. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 35(5-6), 380-395. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bsl.2300>
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Historical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

Figure 2. Rate of Violent Crime Offenses by Population ([FBI Crime Data Explorer](#))



In many cities across the country, the number of homicides increased in 2020 and 2021, likely for a variety of reasons that include disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, most other forms of violent crime did not mirror this increase; and many have dropped since 2020. It is also important to keep the larger historical perspective in mind, as homicide rates have shown a fair amount of fluctuation over the last 100+ years and do not necessarily indicate an overall increase in crime rates.

Regardless of national crime rates over time, [state and local law enforcement spending has remained at roughly 4 percent since 1977](#). While the total amount spent on police has increased significantly by many billions of dollars, the general *share* of state and local spending allocated to police has not changed, despite significant variation in crime rates over that period.

Migration of Law Enforcement Funding Since 2020

Note: Additional details tracking law enforcement funding in about 25 local jurisdictions since the summer of 2020 can be found in the PRA resource [“Examples of Law Enforcement Funding Reallocating/Unbundling Across the United States.”](#)

A [December 2021 *Newsweek* headline “America’s Biggest Cities to Invest \\$450M More in Police Following 2020 Defund Movement”](#) summarizes what has been the reported trend across many jurisdictions. A selection of examples illustrating the migration of police funding in a variety of cities since 2020 follows. Many local budgets also included new funding for alternatives to police response and pilot programs to reimagine public safety, but the examples below focus specifically on law enforcement funding changes.



In July 2020, the New York City Council in **New York State** [approved](#) shifting roughly \$1 billion away from the \$6 billion annual New York Police Department (NYPD) budget. This shift canceled the planned hiring of roughly 1,160 officers, and reallocated \$354 million to mental health, homelessness, and education services. The budget also shifted school safety and outreach to individuals experiencing homelessness services away from law enforcement's responsibility. One year later, the city's [approved budget](#) increased spending for the NYPD by \$200 million (for a total budget of \$5.4 billion), including a \$166 million increase for overtime pay and \$47 million for technology upgrades.



In June 2020, **Los Angeles, California**, [voted](#) to cut \$150 million from the \$1.8 billion Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) budget, halting a planned increase in funding. The city's goal was to redirect these funds toward community-building projects and health and education initiatives. As of the end of 2021, the mayor's [proposed 2022 budget](#) included an increase of \$213 million to the LAPD.



The **Minneapolis, Minnesota**, city council [voted](#) unanimously in June 2020 to approve a ballot measure that would change the city charter and dismantle Minneapolis' police force, calling instead for a department of community safety and violence prevention, with a provision for licensed law enforcement officers. In November 2021, 56 percent of voters [rejected](#) the proposal to replace the police department with a new Department of Public Safety. The 2022 city [budget](#) included just over \$191 million for the police department, restoring its funding to nearly the level it held before George Floyd was killed in 2020.



In **Chicago, Illinois**, the mayor's [fiscal year 2021 budget](#) contained an \$80 million cut to its police department (resulting in \$1.7 billion total funding for police), including a \$34 million cut from already-vacant positions, halting four consecutive years of police budget increases. However, in October 2021, the city council [approved](#) the fiscal year 2022 budget, which boosted police spending to \$1.9 billion, a \$189 million increase.



In June 2020, **Oakland, California**, councilmembers [voted](#) to immediately reduce or transfer \$12 million (about 3 percent of the total) from the Oakland Police Department budget. The council also signaled plans to reduce the police budget by up to \$150 million (a 50 percent reduction). While the fiscal years 2021–2023 budget [redirects \\$18 million](#) proposed for police spending to alternative violence prevention methods, it also [includes](#) a \$38 million increase from the actual 2019–2021 total police budget, for a total of \$674 million dedicated to the police department.



In June 2020, the **Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**, city council approved the fiscal year 2021 budget with a \$33 million reduction in police department funding. This reduction canceled the mayor's previously planned \$19 million increase and allocated \$45 million into affordable housing, arts funding, and social services to address poverty. In 2021, the city council voted to keep the general budget for the Philadelphia Police Department at approximately the same amount for 2022 as it was in 2021 (\$727 million). However, the council did vote to send the department an additional \$14 million to equip all officers with Tasers over the next 5 years.



In June 2020, the **Baltimore, Maryland**, city council approved a \$22.4 million cut to the Baltimore Police Department's \$550 million budget, including nearly \$7 million in overtime spending. However, in June 2021, the approved budget included a \$555 million allocation for the police department, including a \$28 million increase in spending to cover employee health insurance and higher pension obligations.



In **Norman, Oklahoma**, (a jurisdiction of about 122,000 residents) the city council voted to deduct \$865,000 from the local police department by eliminating 9 salary positions in June 2020. The city determined the funds would be allocated to general community outreach programs and to hire a city auditor. Following a lawsuit by the local Fraternal Order of Police and State Supreme Court ruling that the council's meeting was invalid, the council upheld its funding decision through an April 2021 vote. In June 2021, the city council considered taking half a million dollars from the Police Department to fund a mobile-crisis response pilot program, but voted instead to leave the police budget intact and move \$500,000 from the general fund to pay for the program.

As these examples highlight, many, though not all, of the cities that made public cuts to law enforcement funding since 2020 either funded police budgets at the same levels the following year or increased police spending. This about-face has led to frustration and division for law enforcement, system constituents, and community members alike.

What Happened to Defunding?

While cities certainly did not fully defund their police departments since 2020, many budget increases are much more layered than news headlines would lead us to believe. Consider the nuances of funding allocations in several jurisdictions from Illinois to Oregon.

Staffing Maintenance



Chicago, Illinois, increased its police spending from 2021, but the number of officer positions remained essentially the same (the fiscal year 2022 budget included a recommended expansion of only seven positions).



Ithaca, New York's 2022 budget was increased by restoring two previously eliminated positions to fill vacancies. However, the city also created and funded with \$700,000 a Re-Imagining Public Safety Task Force to explore the replacement of the department with a Department of Public Safety. The proposed new department would include armed public safety workers and unarmed community solution workers, all of whom would report to a civilian director of public safety instead of a police chief.

Enhanced Transparency and Equipment

Increased city budgets around the country also included funding for improved transparency efforts, such as technology upgrades, body cameras, and additional staff to support reform endeavors.



In June 2020, county executives in **Prince George's County, Maryland**, decided to forgo expanding a police training facility. Instead, police department funds were used to develop a \$20 million public health facility to treat mental health and addiction needs. The reallocation was approved, and officials broke ground on the facility in April 2021. In addition, the county's 2022 police budget (decreased by \$12.6 million from the 2021 spending plan) included \$291,600 dedicated to hiring a director of race and equity and two psychologists within the department. These positions were based on recommendations from the county's police reform workgroup.

Reactions to State Legislation



New legislation also influenced police funding in some areas. Following a 2020 vote, **Austin, Texas**, planned to reinvest about a third of Austin's \$434 million police budget into social services, including food access and violence prevention. However, the Governor of Texas signed a law that would penalize cities for decreasing police department funding. To avoid the penalties, cities had to allocate funding to police that was at least equal to their fiscal year 2020 budgets. As a result, Austin's 2021–2022 budget allocated \$443 million to the Austin Police Department, with about \$29 million of the budget dedicated to maintaining and advancing progress on reimagining public safety. In November 2021, Austin voters rejected (by about 69 percent to 31 percent) a ballot proposition that would have established minimum police staffing per 1,000 residents and resulted in the hiring of hundreds of additional officers, indicating that finding alternatives to law enforcement response is still a priority.

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



Outreach and Response Team is tasked with coordinating resources to people experiencing homelessness, with the provider community performing all direct outreach. Other jurisdictions have funded new mobile crisis response teams or community-based violence prevention programs and limited officer response to basic traffic stops and parking violations, such as in **Berkeley, California**.



Another example of allocating funds to community-based services is in **Los Angeles, California**. The city's 2022 proposed budget included an increase in LAPD spending, but in November 2020, 57 percent of voters also passed Measure J. Measure J requires the county to allocate 10 percent of its general funds toward social and community services (including alternatives to incarceration) to achieve racial and economic justice. Central to the measure is a requirement that the money cannot be used for policing or prisons.



Other communities have found separate pools of funding to support alternatives to police response. **Albuquerque, New Mexico**, raised its police department's funding by about 4.5 percent in 2021, but the budget also contained \$7.7 million for the city's new Community Safety Department. Launched in September 2021, it serves as a third response option to police or fire departments. The new department deploys unarmed social workers with mental health and substance use expertise, housing and homelessness specialists, and violence prevention coordinators directly from 911 dispatch, reducing reliance on law enforcement.



In **Minneapolis, Minnesota**, the 2021 ballot measure to dismantle the city police force and replace it with a new department of public safety did not pass, but the margin was fairly close: 44 percent for to 56 percent against. When asked, some who voted against the measure cited worries that the proposal had no concrete plan for moving forward and warned that it could impact some communities already affected by violence. Many opponents of the measure also stressed the urgency of transforming policing in the city even without its passage. While specific approaches are part of ongoing discussions across the country, the objective of identifying public safety strategies that do not rely on policing and give duties to community groups with more relevant and appropriate expertise certainly remains a focus.

Working Toward Systems Change

Over the past several decades, public institutions, including housing, health care, and education, have themselves been steadily defunded. Jurisdictions have also expanded the number of issues to which police officers are expected to respond, even if there should be alternative individuals and organizations with more relevant expertise involved. When discussing law enforcement funding, it is vital for policy makers to keep in mind the larger goals of ensuring taxpayer dollars serve the public in the most appropriate way, and that communities define what public health and public safety mean to them.

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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