

WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE ?

Because Education and Research are Essential for Solving Crime and Justice Problems

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Police agencies across America are in the hot seat. Frontline officers' every move is scrutinized, and anything that resembles excessive force is recorded and shared on social media. Extreme acts of police violence, including wrongful shootings, garner even more attention. They make for viral videos and shocking news headlines. They spur community groups and politicians into action. In response to real and perceived police abuses, a movement is now afoot to "defund" the police. It sounds serious, implying that money should be stripped from policing budgets as punishment for law enforcement misdeeds. Proposals to defund the police, however, are much more complex and nuanced than these discussions typically let on. Many people misunderstand what defunding entails, and relatively little research exists on which supporters can base their proposals—and in some cases, the research is ignored altogether. This is where criminal justice and criminological researchers and educators come in.

What does it mean to "defund" the police? It is *not* punishment. Rather, it is the reallocation or redirection of funding away from police departments to other government agencies—and possibly beyond. Defunding is not about abolishing policing, nor is it about starting over. Its concern, instead, is with the efficient allocation of public resources. It asks several questions in this regard. Should police respond to all types of 911 calls? Could they be more effective in apprehending lawbreakers if they weren't tied up with trivial, noncriminal incidents? If money is taken from policing, where can and should it go? Other government agencies? Social service providers? [Years of research](#) shows no strong connection between police funding and crime, so perhaps it is time to rethink how the money is spent. That is the essence of the defunding movement. We might go so far as to say the term "defunding" undermines the potential of an otherwise interesting set of ideas. Defunding will struggle to get off the ground if people fail to understand what it is. Education is essential.

Understanding the concept of defunding is only one piece of the puzzle. Could defunding actually happen? What exactly do the police do with their time? What do the data show? There is a surprising lack of research that answers these questions. In [one of the first studies of its kind](#), Cynthia Lum and

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her colleagues analyzed millions of 911 calls to gain insight into the kinds of activities officers actually engage in on a daily basis. Such knowledge is critical if defunding is to have a chance. Interestingly, the study found that the vast majority of calls to which police respond are *not* transferrable to other public agencies, as

currently constituted. There is a perception, for example, that mental health disturbances consume much of officers' time, but the data did not bear that out. Just 1.3 percent of calls were for mental distress issues. The authors also found that traffic-related calls made up the largest proportion of calls for service, raising the question of who should respond to such disturbances if not the police?

Learning what the police do with their time is critical, but it is just a starting point. Much more research is necessary. Shockingly little is known about how or whether diverting police resources to other governmental agencies (or outside of government) could be accomplished. Are these

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other entities more capable of picking up where police leave off? How would certain types of calls be diverted to or shared with other agencies? There are some examples, such as the [CAHOOTS program in Eugene, Oregon](#), which handles approximately 20 percent of 911 calls, but much more research is necessary. At the least, policies, training, and technologies will need to change. Collaborations will need to be forged. Decisions will need to be made about *whom* to collaborate with. Should community groups be included? If so, can they pick up where police leave off, especially in fractured and disorganized high-crime areas? Police, with their authority to arrest and use force, have a unique ability (at least in theory) to diffuse situations and command compliance. If not them, then who?

More research, combined with education, is critical if we are going to carry on an informed debate about the merits and drawbacks of defunding the police. Criminal justice and criminology scholars and educators are uniquely positioned to assist in this regard.



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