



Defunding the police: Reflecting on the US experience and lessons learned for Canada

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ABSTRACT

“Defund the police” became a rallying cry for change in the aftermath of the May 2020 death of George Floyd—at the hands of the police—in Minneapolis. What is meant by “defunding,” how has it evolved in the United States and in Canada, and what are the implications for Canadian municipalities going forward? Canadian community and civic leaders, police and other human service providers, and policymakers will benefit from an informed understanding of these issues as the discourse on the future of policing—and community safety and well-being more broadly—deepens.

Key Words Budgets; police financing; alternative service delivery models.

INTRODUCTION

In May 2020, the death of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis Police Department officer sparked a new wave of protests and anti-police demonstrations around the world. In parallel with the Black Lives Matter movement, “Defund the Police” became a widespread theme among protesters focused on exposing police brutality and fighting racism of minority communities.

In the most extreme sense, defunding was seen as a way of punishing intractable police agencies and perhaps exposing what is often perceived as a broken criminal justice system. Others looked at defunding as an expression of a broader social movement towards both greater accountability and legitimacy in policing. Still others viewed it as an opportunity to create alternatives for delivering community safety services, shifting funds away from the police towards more appropriate municipal or community-based service providers.

Over the course of our work in the past few years, it has become apparent that there are some deeply entrenched ideologically driven perspectives among some politicians and policymakers on matters of police funding—and the appropriate roles of the police—that may be grounded in a lack of understanding. The intent of this paper is to discuss what is meant by “defunding”; to examine how nine US cities—Austin, Baltimore, Berkeley, Charlotte, Cincinnati, Denver, Minneapolis, New York, and Seattle—responded to calls to defund police budgets; and to consider the responses to calls for defunding and their implications for longer-term change and reform to policing in Canada.

We undertook a thorough examination of publicly available municipal budget data for these nine US cities. This included a detailed analysis of certified financial records and estimates of all nine cities for the period 2018–2022. Furthermore, we reviewed the relevant literature to better understand public perceptions of the defund movement—both how the concept was interpreted and how attitudes have shifted over time—as well as outcomes and innovations from the experiences of the sample cities and here in Canada.¹

Background of the Defunding Movement

While the death of George Floyd served as the tipping point for anti-racism protests in the United States, it was only one of many incidents where African Americans and members of other minority groups died at the hands of the police. Michael Brown (Missouri), Tamir Rice (Cleveland), Eric Garner (New York City), Freddie Gray (Baltimore), Jamar Clark (Minneapolis), Tony Timpa (Dallas), Elijah McClain (Aurora, Colorado), and Breonna Taylor (Louisville, Kentucky) were among many who were killed by police in the years prior to Floyd’s death

¹This study was not intended to assess the merits or shortcomings of police defunding, nor to evaluate any one city’s or police department’s ability to provide for community safety and well-being. As complex and evolving notions that are subject to historic shifts, changes in operating parameters (Murphy & Corley, 2022; Kempa, 2014), and the unique challenges of communities, these concepts do not lend themselves to easy definition or assessment. Nevertheless, they are under greater scrutiny and re-evaluation than ever, both in Canada (City of Edmonton, 2021) and in the United States (Shared Safety, n.d.).

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and whose deaths contributed to growing mistrust, frustration, and tension between the police and the communities they served.

The defunding movement was further fuelled by the fact that every reliable indicator shows that the criminal justice system has a significantly disproportionate effect on members of minority communities, and African Americans in particular (Hernandez, 2020; Weichselbaum & Lewis, 2020). Data shows that by almost any measure—including arrest rates, conviction rates, incarceration rates, and particularly in the number killed by police—African Americans and other minorities are disproportionately represented when compared with the population as a whole (Police Scorecard, n.d.).

For example, in Seattle, as depicted in Table I (Police Scorecard, n.d.), African Americans make up less than 7% of the population but account for 34% of those arrested and 25% of those killed by police. In Minneapolis, African Americans are just under 19% of the population, but account for over 60% of arrests and a staggering 70% of people killed by police.

Each of the cities selected for this study shows a marked disparity between the percentage of African Americans who live there and the proportion who are drawn into or affected by the criminal justice system. Reflecting on these results, it is easy to see why so many protests, both before and after George Floyd's death, focused on messages of anti-racism and the over-policing of minority communities. It also becomes much clearer why so much of the defunding movement has pushed for the removal of police officers from minority communities, even if only in certain roles. In this light, some view police defunding not just as a *potential* solution, but as a *necessary* one to address what is widely perceived as a biased and oppressive justice system, with police officers being its most visible and immediate aspects.

What Does “Defund” Actually Mean?

“Defund the police” was one of the more straightforward catchphrases to emerge from the George Floyd protests, with the slogan having the virtue of being both a symbolic call to affirm the value of African American lives and a policy proposal as to how that might be achieved (Eaglin, 2021, p. 136; Lopez et al., 2020).

TABLE I Percentage of African American Arrests and Deaths by Police in USA

CITY	Local Population % (African American)	Arrest % (African American)	Killed by Police % (African American)
Austin	7.7	32	23
Baltimore	61.6	84	87
Berkeley	7.5	50	0
Charlotte	35.2	73	61
Cincinnati	40.3	76	67
Denver	9.0	28	14
Minneapolis	18.4	61	70
New York	23.4	49	62
Seattle	6.8	34	25

However, the practical application of “defunding” means very different things to different people. Some support the radical notion of complete dismantlement of police structures while for others it amounts to nothing more than a budgetary exercise in fiscal probity. A recent paper by Eaglin (2021) classified the spectrum of views into four distinct categories:

- 1) **Police abolitionists**, who believe that police “reform” is doomed and that the police are an institution designed to surveil and control minorities, adhere to a long-term goal to replace police with alternative means of ensuring public safety.
- 2) **Police recalibration** involves the reprioritization of existing public resources to create healthier communities. In this view, public safety can be transformed by altering police responsibilities, which in turn can only occur through a reduction of police funding.
- 3) **Police oversight** refers to a more “managerialist” approach, reallocating scarce public resources towards developing better oversight and accountability mechanisms—and thus greater police legitimacy—to shape the behaviour of police agencies and individual officers.
- 4) Finally, **fiscal constraint** perspectives look not to transform the police institution but to reduce costs. In this interpretation, defunding the police is exactly that: reducing spending in the administration of the criminal justice system without necessarily committing to any changes in police practice or policy.

In the context of this study, as well as the overall portrayal of defunding in the media and emerging academic literature, “police recalibration” is the most practical definition, particularly when considering the longer-term impacts of police defunding and change.

Public Opinion

Even at the height of the George Floyd protests in 2020, public opinion on police defunding was mixed. While clear support for better policing was evident, responses regarding defunding the police were more nuanced. Polling data at the time shows a clear divergence of opinion regarding the merits of defunding, which in many respects continues to this day.

For example, an ABC News/Ipsos survey conducted in June 2020 showed that only 34% of US adults supported movements to defund the police, while 64% opposed it. Support was higher among African Americans (57%), but considerably lower among white respondents (26%) (Merrefield, 2021). More radical reforms also found little broad-based support. A Reuters/Ipsos poll conducted in June 2020 found that while 76% of respondents supported moving some money from police budgets into other local programs, only 39% supported completely dismantling police departments and giving more money to other programs. In addition, rather than Floyd's death having completely alienated African American communities from the police, a Gallup poll conducted in July 2020 found that 81% of African American respondents wanted police to spend more—or at least the same amount of time—in their neighborhoods (Kahn, 2020).

By early 2021, however, attitudes around the perceived benefits and disadvantages of defunding appeared to have

shifted. A survey by USA Today/Ipsos in March 2021 showed that while 28% of African American respondents still supported defunding, 37% were now against it (Elbeshbishi & Quarshie, 2021). A poll conducted by Morning Consult/Politico in February 2022 showed that 49% of respondents now blamed defunding police for rising violent crime rates in the United States, while 69% believed that increasing police budgets would reduce crime “a lot” or “some” (Morning Consult/Politico, 2020). A survey of Baltimore residents in May 2022 showed that 41% of African American respondents wanted police funding to increase and 33% wanted it kept the same; only 16% wanted the budget to be decreased (Williams, 2022). Thus, even in Baltimore, a city familiar with high rates of crime and allegations of police corruption, respondents seemed to shy away from defunding and did not perceive it as a solution to their community safety concerns.

Although these polling results represent just a small sample of the surveys that took place at the time, they nonetheless provide a snapshot of public views on defunding over that 2-year period. Taken together, the survey results illustrate the complexity and diversity of views on the topic, as well as how these views evolved over time. At the very least, they indicate shifting public views on the efficacy of defunding and of the ongoing tensions between notions of police reform and evolving perspectives on public safety.

THE RESPONSE TO DEFUNDING THE POLICE

As the protest movement following George Floyd’s killing grew, so did calls to defund police. Proposals to defund the police were initially met with scepticism, with most politicians and commentators from both sides of the political aisle and at all levels of government dismissing the idea as impractical. Others, however, looked at defunding as an expression of a broader social trend (Eaglin, 2021, p. 123). Irrespective of which interpretation was adopted, the very act of defunding was perceived as somehow a central tenet to meaningful policing reform, as well as crucial to any reimagining of local community safety.

Police Budgets

In response to calls for defunding, many city authorities across the United States debated and agreed to reduce their local policing budgets. Although no city police agencies were abolished, budget reductions in some cities were quite dramatic and might have wiped years of cumulative gains from police department budgets. In other cases, the reductions were small, short-lived, or reflected existing budget trends in municipalities, with changes to police funding having as much to do with overall budget shifts as anything else. Many other cities committed to considering alternative means of providing public safety services, with an emphasis on homelessness, substance abuse, and mental health crises. West Hollywood, California, for example, chose to reduce its policing budget and reallocate funding from the sheriff’s department to the city’s Block by Block program. This program would provide up to 30 unarmed Security Ambassadors to take over patrol duties from the sheriff’s department. According to the acting mayor at the time: “Reimagining policing means reallocating funding. You can’t just say it without doing it. Period.” (Murillo, 2022).

The cities considered in this study also had varying responses to calls to defund the police. Of the nine cities, only two, New York and Seattle, had an overall reduction in policing budgets between 2018 and 2022. In Seattle’s case the 2021 budget reduction seen after George Floyd’s death was not maintained into 2022, and its proposed 2023 policing budget will see another increase. In the case of New York City, the overall downward trend following 2020 continues with an approximate 3.6% reduction into 2023.

In other cities—namely Austin, Baltimore, Berkeley, Denver, and Minneapolis—respective policing budgets were reduced in 2020, in some instances, dramatically. For example, Austin’s budget was reduced by over 28% from 2020 to 2021, while Denver’s and Minneapolis’s budgets were reduced by 2.5% and just over 7%, respectively. However, the change was short-lived and the majority of these cities raised their policing budgets again the following year, in some instances, equally dramatically. Austin’s budget rebounded by over 43% from 2021 to 2022, while Denver’s budget rose by over 10% and Minneapolis’ by 13% over the same period. In Charlotte, the policing budget was barely reduced following Floyd’s death, and in Cincinnati not at all; both communities saw significant increases in subsequent years.

These results align to the broader trend: in an analysis of over 400 municipal budgets in the United States, data showed that police agencies received the same amount of money in 2021 as they did for the previous 3 years (Henderson & Yisrael, 2021; Kummerer, 2022). In one sense, the defunding movement might be seen as a reflection of the failure of previous attempts to reform policing in the United States (Quan, 2020). However, existing research would seem to indicate that defunding may not represent the hoped-for solution either.

Alternative Service Delivery and Policing Reform

Another revealing aspect of the data is how many cities are piloting new or alternative means of addressing some of their public safety pressures. For example, Denver and Minneapolis have adopted new ways of addressing mental health crises, in both cases with the express purpose of reducing the need for police officers to respond (Hampton, 2022; Erdahl, 2022). The City of Berkeley is experimenting with the removal of low-level traffic violation stops from police responsibilities as part of a wider package of policing reforms passed in 2021 (Robinson & Gerhardstein, 2021).

Initiatives such as these reflect efforts to change how policing and community safety more broadly are being delivered and are consistent with much of what has been encouraged by the defunding movement. However, they are not the only means of reforming police agencies in the United States: four of the nine cities studied have been, are currently, or may soon be under some type of federal Consent Decree, a process of mandated reform that is reserved for more problematic agencies (Ibrahim, 2022; Carter, 2022; US Department of Justice, 2022).

Alternative Responses to Mental Health Crises

The defund movement also accelerated the uptake of alternative modes of response to persons experiencing mental health crises. Often referred to as Police and Crisis Teams (PACT) or Mobile Crisis Teams, police officers are paired with mental health professionals and jointly respond to these calls for service.

The police are there primarily to ensure everyone's safety while the mental health professionals are able to assess and stabilize situations and determine ongoing support requirements.

Might such multi-disciplinary responses have saved the lives of Sammy Yatim in Toronto in 2013 and Abdirahman Abdi in Ottawa in 2016? In both cases, these men were suffering mental health crises when police responded. A recent systemic review of such incidents in Ontario found that police-only responses can serve to aggravate—rather than de-escalate—incidents such as these, often contributing to the deaths of individuals (Office of the Independent Police Review Director, 2017).

OUTCOMES OF THE US EXPERIENCE

While this study was intended to be informative and illustrative only, even a cursory review of the US experience shows that “defunding” as a means of driving policing reform was both short-lived and ineffective.

Rising Crime Rates

In the wake of defunding initiatives, some critics argue that communities become less safe and experience spikes in violent crime. This was indeed the case in some cities, including Chicago and New York, where subsequent rises in homicides and gun crime led city councils to ultimately maintain or incrementally raise levels of police funding in following years. Los Angeles also saw a surge in violent crime in 2020 and 2021, prompting the city, which had initially agreed to remove \$150 million (approximately 8%) from the LAPD budget, to essentially restore the budget to pre-protest levels within a year (Arango, 2021). Houston, San Diego, Durham, Nashville, and others also reversed defunding decisions (McEvoy, 2020). In addition to rising crime rates, critics also cite rising numbers of police resignations and the increasing difficulty in hiring new officers (Merreffield, 2021) as disincentives to defunding.

Re-Funding the Police

Eight of the nine jurisdictions examined have experienced steady growth in their police budgets since 2020. Even in Minneapolis, the site of George Floyd's murder by one of their own police officers, the decision to severely defund the police was soon reversed. This is consistent with academic literature on police budgeting in the United States, which shows a prevailing tendency for budgets to grow incrementally. This is the case even during the most challenging financial times; while other municipal departments experience budget cuts, police budgets are seldom reduced. There are several reasons for this, including the nature of police collective agreements (Zhao et al., 2010). Moreover, even public support for the more progressive aspects of police reform proposed following Floyd's killing soon waned (Sepic, 2021).

Greater spending by a city on policing does not always translate into greater community safety. For example, among the cities sampled in this study, Baltimore spends the most on policing (US\$911 per capita) yet is consistently ranked among the more violent and crime-prone cities in the United States (Hamaji & Rao, 2017). By comparison, New York City spends the second most on policing (US\$722 per capita) and is consistently ranked among the safest cities in the country. Nor does the number of police officers appear to account for

the discrepancy; using the same cities as examples, New York has the highest police-to-population ratio of the nine cities at 420 officers for every 100,000 residents, while Baltimore has the second highest number of police officers (410 per 100,000 residents) yet remains among the least safe cities in that country. By contrast, as depicted in Table II, Canadian cities have much lower police-to-population ratios and lower cost structures (Statistics Canada, 2022).

Driving Innovations in Community Safety

But the defunding movement did have a positive impact on how policing and community safety is organized and delivered in the United States and elsewhere. The movement contributed to broad-based calls for social change that have intensified expectations that the police give greater attention to issues of social inclusion and social justice while improving transparency, responsiveness, and accountability.

There is also a growing recognition that more traditional approaches have shown themselves to be either ineffective or actively driving a wedge between the police and communities. This is as true in Canada as it is in the United States. Innovative, multi-disciplinary approaches to reducing recidivism, applying restorative justice, reducing homelessness, and responding more effectively to mental health crises are among the many new ways in which the police and other human service providers are coming together to improve community safety and well-being.

DEFUNDING IN THE CANADIAN CONTEXT

Following George Floyd's death, anti-racism protests and marches against police violence also took place in every major city in Canada. Like their American counterparts, Canadian activists pointed to a history of racism and resistance to reform in Canadian policing. They also brought focus to an already tense debate about police legitimacy and the loss of public trust, especially within Indigenous communities, whose members are disproportionately represented in the Canadian criminal justice system (Clark, 2019). In July 2020, an Ipsos survey (2020) showed that 51% of Canadians supported the notion of “defunding,” but this quickly waned.

Though protests and media coverage were widespread, the demands to defund police agencies in Canada were arguably less impactful than in the United States (Ipsos, 2020). This does not mean the defunding movement had no effect in Canada, but in many respects, the movement towards the practice of collaborative community safety and well-being was already well underway in many locations across the country. During the early-to-mid 2010s, police services across Canada

TABLE II Police Costs to Population Ratios in Canadian Cities (2020)

Police Service	Police officers per 100,000 pop	Per capita cost of policing (Cdn \$)
Calgary	157	\$357
Winnipeg	173	\$360
Ottawa	165	\$317
Peel Regional	143	\$292
Regina	152	\$354

began to adapt and respond to demands to look at rising costs of policing. These efforts were largely driven by the period of government austerity, brought on by the 2007 to 2009 global financial crisis, that affected all levels of government. Some police leaders leveraged these opportunities and, with other sector leaders, developed more multi-disciplinary, multi-agency efforts to improve community safety outcomes. During this period, there was also a growing recognition that integrated multi-disciplinary perspectives and responses were necessary—that the efforts of organizations focusing only on their perceived part of the problem were ineffective and often counter-productive (Nilson, 2018). This made sense to progressive police leaders. After all, much day-to-day policing in Canada relates to social problems, not crime. Furthermore, many of these problems cross the mandates of multiple human service agencies. They are *adaptive problems*, wherein fixing one part of the problem won't make much difference unless there are corresponding changes in other related areas.

Some agencies, like Peel Regional Police Service and Edmonton Police Service (EPS), have restructured to support a greater focus on improving community safety and well-being outcomes. In establishing their respective Community Safety and Well-Being Bureaus, they are balancing the focus on law enforcement and investigation with prevention and the multi-agency partnerships that are essential to successfully addressing adaptive problems. As the EPS explained, a central purpose of their Community Safety and Well-Being Bureau is “to move vulnerable citizens away from the criminal justice system and towards community agencies that can provide the necessary support for everything from addictions counseling and housing to employment, basic life skills and health care.” (Edmonton Police Service, 2020).

Some communities also looked at other ways to respond to direct calls for defunding. A comprehensive review by the Halifax Board of Police Commissioners (Ajadi et al., 2021), which considered defunding from Indigenous, African Nova Scotian, and health and disability perspectives (Ajadi et al., 2021, pp. 15–18), proposed diverting certain types of calls for service from the police as primary responders. Beyond mobile mental health crisis teams, recommendations also addressed incidents involving:

- unhoused persons
- young persons
- gender-based and intimate-partner violence
- overdoses, and
- noise complaints (Ajadi et al., 2021, p. 106).

Furthermore, the Halifax report questioned the need for police officers to enforce motor vehicle offences and ultimately recommended that a civilian team be developed to enforce motor vehicle offences and traffic-related bylaws and to handle road closures for street events, protests, and parades (Ajadi et al., 2021, p. 135). In June 2022, the Board of Police Commissioners established a working group to review the report's conclusions and 36 recommendations (Halifax Board of Police Commissioners, 2022).

A continued interest in defunding and its implications for policing and communities alike prompted St. Thomas University in New Brunswick to establish a course entitled, *Defunding the Police: Rhetoric vs. Reality* (Hartai, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Most people now define “defunding” as the reprioritization and redistribution of public resources to improve community safety. To that end, the defund movement is likely to remain a part of the Canadian discourse on improving policing and, more broadly speaking, community safety and well-being.

While calls for defunding in both the United States and Canada may not have achieved immediate reforms, important and progressive changes are well underway in many cities and towns across Canada as to how policing and community safety are organized and delivered. The direct impact of the defund movement on many of these reforms is hard to pin down. But while some proponents of a system recalibration seek immediate solutions to complex issues, progressive communities and their human service agencies are taking carefully considered approaches to get to much the same place. In other words, most stakeholders are not against a recalibration. But these are complex systems. The capacities of alternative service providers must be developed and stress-tested operationally before making wholesale changes in how community safety services are delivered and how corresponding budgets are re-distributed. Recent observations by Micki Ruth, the former president of the Canadian Association of Police Governance and former chair of the Edmonton Police Commission, are on point:

Yes, they [the police] take the bulk of the money because they're the only players in the field [responding to these calls]... Until we get other people—health, social services, education, a bunch of the standalone non-profits and charities who are all sort of all playing in their own ballpark—until there are those people coordinated and at the table, then when you call somebody at 3 o'clock in the morning, the only number you have [is] the police. (Cardoso & Hayes, 2020)

There are no silver bullets, but progressive change to policing and community safety and well-being are well underway in many centres across Canada. Our communities will continue to benefit from informed dialogue and debate on these important issues, with common language and terminology as centre points.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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