

Defunding the Police: The Path to Creating Safer Communities

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Abstract

Following the murder of George Floyd by police in Minnesota on May 25, 2020, protests erupted throughout the country. Protests continued as other Black people were killed at the hands of excessive violence from police officers—Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Ahmaud Arbery, and far too many others. Protestors demanded justice for all Black people that have died, and continue to die, at the hands of police. In tandem with the calls for justice, protestors called for defunding the police. In this paper, I discuss the calls to defund the police and assess the public safety outcomes in communities most affected by police brutality—ultimately answering the question, *is defunding the police a justifiable and sustainable option for creating safer communities?* To do this, I review the impacts of criminalization on the Black community, past federal government defunding initiatives, and the municipal budget process. Then, I delve deeper into the general operating funds of three cities, Atlanta, GA, Philadelphia, PA, and Phoenix, AZ, by reviewing the total general fund expenditures and compare the amount being spent on law enforcement and other selected expenditures.

Introduction

Following the murder of George Floyd by police in Minnesota on May 25, 2020, protests erupted throughout the country. Protests continued as other Black people were killed at the hands of excessive violence from police officers—Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Ahmaud Arbery, and far too many others. Protestors demanded justice for all Black people that have died, and continue to die, at the hands of police. In tandem with the calls for justice, protestors called for defunding the police.

By definition, *defund* means, “to withdraw funding from” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Jessica S. Henry, an associate professor at Montclair State University, provides a more comprehensive definition of *defund* in the context of defunding the police. She defines defunding the police as, “redirecting funds traditionally allocated for police to social service agencies” (Henry, 2020, paras. 6). She says defunding involves scaling back the size and scope of police responsibilities (Henry, 2020).

In this paper, I will discuss the calls to defund the police and assess the public safety outcomes in communities most affected by police brutality—ultimately answering the question, *is defunding the police a justifiable and sustainable option for creating safer communities?* First, I will discuss the impacts of the criminalization of the Black community and examine the origins of excessive law enforcement funding. Then, I will evaluate how city budgets are created and how the police are funded. In order to compare budgets and racial disparities within a city, I will look at the city budgets of Atlanta, GA, Philadelphia, PA, and Phoenix, AZ and review what percent of their budgets go to law enforcement. Finally, I will discuss how the movement to defund the police will affect the future of police department funding.

Impacts of Criminalization of the Black Community

Despite a steady decline in the crime rate since the 1990s, the U.S. is currently spending more on law enforcement than ever before in history (Thomas & Jin, 2020). In 1980, police spending was around \$47 billion when adjusted for inflation, but by 2015, spending increased to almost \$143 billion—an increase of more than 200% over a 35-year period (Lee, 2020). In 2017, state and local governments alone spent \$115 billion on police departments/policing (Urban Institute, 2020). The increase in law enforcement spending has largely to do with the war on drugs that started in the 1970s under President Richard Nixon. During this time, state, local, and federal governments made massive investments in policing and prisons, and this trend in law enforcement funding continued under every president since Nixon (Childress, 2014).

DEFUNDING THE POLICE

The war on drugs primarily targeted nonviolent offenders and drug offenders. Michelle Alexander explains in her book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness*, that the war on drugs created a new system of racial control by targeting Black communities. For instance, The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 dictated harsher punishments for the distribution of crack than the distribution of powder cocaine (Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, 1986). Crack was typically associated with Black users while cocaine was associated with whites. These harsher punishments included longer sentences and, in some cases, exclusion from public housing or ineligibility for student loans.

Both political parties used “tough on crime” rhetoric and policies to continue the war on drugs. During the Clinton administration congress passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, often referred to as the 1994 crime bill (Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, 1994). The Act implemented the “three-strikes” laws and provided federal grants to cities to hire more police, increased funding to build prisons, and enhanced penalties for undocumented immigrants (Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, 1994).

Now, more than 95% of arrests each year are for nonviolent offenses such as loitering, fare evasion, and theft (Alexander, 2020). In a *New York Times* article, Alexander (2020) articulates, “Some are arrested for selling loose cigarettes (which resulted in Eric Garner’s being choked to death by the police) or minor forgery (which resulted in George Floyd’s being suffocated to death by the police).” A recent study conducted by Frank Edwards, Hedwig Lee, and Michael Esposito found that, over the course of a lifetime, about 1 in every 1,000 Black men can expect to be killed by police (Edwards et al., 2019).

Defunding the Police

Calls to defund the police are not new. In fact, since 2007, 35 states have participated in the Justice Reinvestment Initiative (JRI)—a public-private partnership that includes the U.S. Justice Department’s Bureau of Justice Assistance, The Pew Charitable Trusts, the Council of State Governments Justice Center, and the Crime and Justice Institute (Pew Charitable Trusts [Pew], 2020a). The goal of the JRI was to reform states’ sentencing and corrections policies, reduce correctional populations and budgets, and reinvest in other public safety solutions (Pew, 2020a). Ed Chung and Betsy Pearl from the Center for American Progress wrote in a recent publication, “The concept behind justice reinvestment could well be characterized as a defund prisons effort, as the model was originally rooted in the idea that the criminal justice system is too big and too costly and that communities can achieve safety by shifting resources toward other less punitive efforts” (Pearl & Chung, 2020, p. 2).

Some participating states moved revenue saved through JRI into community resources, however, a large percentage of the savings were reinvested back into the criminal justice system. States participating in JRI reinvested \$557 million between 2010 and 2017. During that same time period, correctional institutions and law enforcement agencies received a combined \$123 million. In some states, the savings intended for reinvestment were put into the state’s general fund (Pearl & Chung, 2020). However, some JRI states have and continue to reinvest saved JRI funds into community services.

Oregon, for example, uses JRI to fund a grant program for county-level safety initiatives, including efforts to address social service needs. Between 2017 and 2019, Oregon awarded more than \$6 million to support services related to housing, education, employment, mentoring, parental skill-building, and reentry. In the past, Arkansas used JRI to divert people with behavioral health needs into treatment and away from jails (Pearl & Chung, 2020).

Much can be learned from the Justice Reinvestment Initiative’s failures and successes. For one, initiatives like this one can be done with bipartisan support. But to avoid the failures JRI faced, cities should cultivate meaningful partnerships with residents and allow them to be a part of the reinvestment process. Additionally, cities should make long-term investments in community services that are known to reduce crime in order to ensure and sustain reinvestment into community-based systems of safety.

City Budgets

Municipal budgets are the outlined financial operating plans for cities. These budgets are made up of expected incomes and expenditures for the upcoming fiscal year. Budgets are usually composed of two parts: an operating budget and a capital budget (National League of Cities, 2016). An operating budget shows expenditures for the current period. A capital budget shows the financial plans for long-term capital enhancements, facilities, and equipment (National League of Cities, 2016).

Every year, city governments across the country plan their budgets for the following year. The planning timeline is often aligned with the fiscal year, though some cities follow an alternate timeline. The process for developing a budget varies by city, but generally, there are four stages of the budget process: preparation, approval, implementation, and evaluation (National League of Cities, 2016).

The preparation consists of developing estimates for department expenditures and revenue for the coming fiscal year; during the preparation, a draft budget will be created. After the preparation stage, it's time for the approval process. Budget estimates are then submitted to a city council or board for review and amendment. This part of the review process often includes community feedback during public meetings or hearings. The budget is then voted on, approved, and finally adopted by the council or board. Municipal departments then implement the budget. Government departments and programs are monitored in order to ensure that they are staying on budget and using resources effectively. Their performance is measured throughout the year. At the end of the fiscal year, departments and programs that receive government funding are evaluated and audited. These evaluations inform the budget process for the subsequent year (National League of Cities, 2016).

A budget accounts for expected revenues and allocates resources to particular expenditures. Local budgets fund departmental operations and community services, such as public safety, health, recreation, city planning, economic development, housing development, transportation planning, and workforce services. But as The Center for Popular Democracy, Law for Black Lives, and Black Youth Project 100 point out in their 2017 publication, *Freedom to Thrive*, “For government, budgets are also moral documents. They are an articulation of what—and whom—our cities, counties, states, and country deem worthy of investment” (Hamaji et al., 2017, p. 3).

Law Enforcement Funding

Over the last decade governments at every level have deemed police a worthy investment. According to the US Census of Governments, state and local governments spent \$115 billion on police in 2017, however, most of the spending (86%) came from local governments (Auxier, 2020). While law enforcement funding levels may vary from city to city, the process of how police are funded is generally the same across the country. Police departments derive funding primarily from local sales and property taxes (Rushin & Michalski, 2020). In 2017, property taxes made up 30% and sales taxes made up 7% of local governments' general revenue (Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center, 2020). In the fiscal year 2020, all major local tax revenue sources slowed, with severe year-over-year declines in sales (-11%) and income tax (-3.4%) receipts (National League of Cities, 2020). This trend in local revenue could potentially lead to a decrease in police budgets compared to other fiscal years due to a lack of government funds, rather than being purposely defunded.

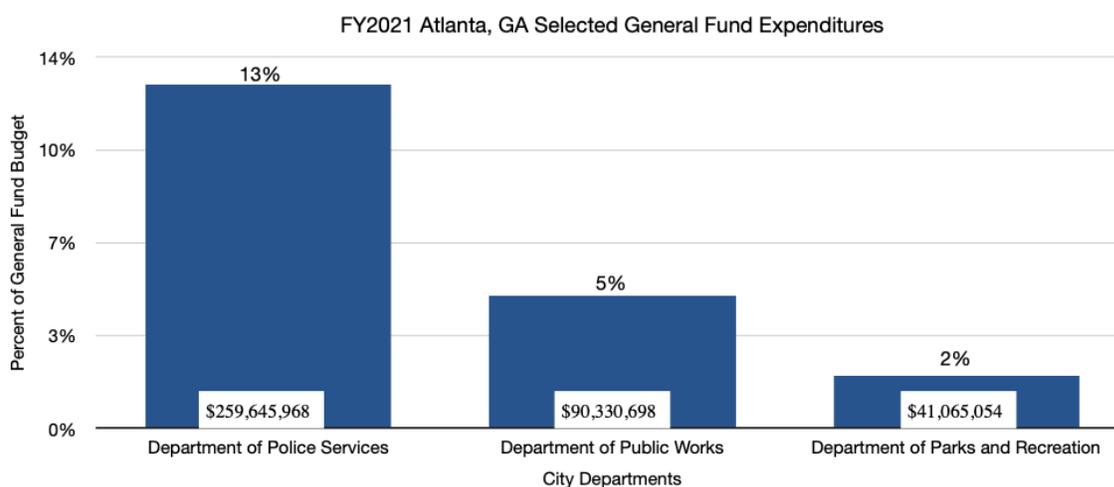
Budget Analysis

I chose to review the city budgets of Atlanta, GA, Philadelphia, PA, and Phoenix, AZ because of their similarities in size. Atlanta, GA, Philadelphia, PA, and Phoenix, AZ were in the top ten most populous metropolitan areas in 2019 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). They also all rank within the top 50 largest cities in the U.S. (PolitiFact, 2015). To compare the budgets of three cities (Atlanta, GA, Philadelphia, PA, and Phoenix, AZ), I specifically look at the cities' general operating funds and compare the totals of the general fund expenditures to the amount being spent on law enforcement and other selected expenditures in each city. I also examine racial disparities in each city.

DEFUNDING THE POLICE

Atlanta, GA

According to the 2019 U.S. Census, in Atlanta, 51.8% of residents are Black (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019a). In 2016, Atlanta had one of the highest rates of income inequality (Berube, 2018). Of households in Atlanta, the top 5% earned at least 18 times more than the bottom 20% of households (Berube, 2018). The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2015) pointed out that, “80 percent of Atlanta's Black children live in communities with high concentrations of poverty, compared with six percent of their white peers” which displays the stark contrast of inequality in Atlanta (paras. 3-4). Additionally, graduation rates for Black and Latinx students in Atlanta Public Schools are around 30% lower than white students (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2015). The unemployment rate for African Americans in Atlanta is 22%, which is nine points higher than the city’s overall unemployment rate and 14 points higher than the rate for their white counterparts at 6% (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2015). Black residents earn three times less than their white counterparts (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2015). Although this city faces overwhelming inequality, 13% of Atlanta’s general fund expenditures go to the Department of Police Services.



*General Funds Total Expenditures - \$1.96 Billion

Source: City of Atlanta Fiscal Year 2021 Adopted Budget

Figure 1

In Fiscal Year 2021, Atlanta’s general fund's expenditures total \$1.96 billion, out of which \$259.6 million, or 13% of the general fund, was dedicated to the Department of Police Services. Meanwhile, the department of public works only makes up 5% and the parks and recreation department makes up only 2% of the city’s annual budget.

Philadelphia, PA

According to the 2019 U.S. Census, 43.6% of Philadelphia residents are Black (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019b). In Philadelphia, more than a quarter of residents, which encompasses about 400,000 people, live below the poverty line (Pew, 2018b). Latinx and Black people have the highest poverty rate in Philadelphia at 37.9% and 30.8% percent respectively (Pew, 2017). But even with a quarter of residents living in poverty, Philadelphia continues to invest 15% of their general fund expenditures in the police.

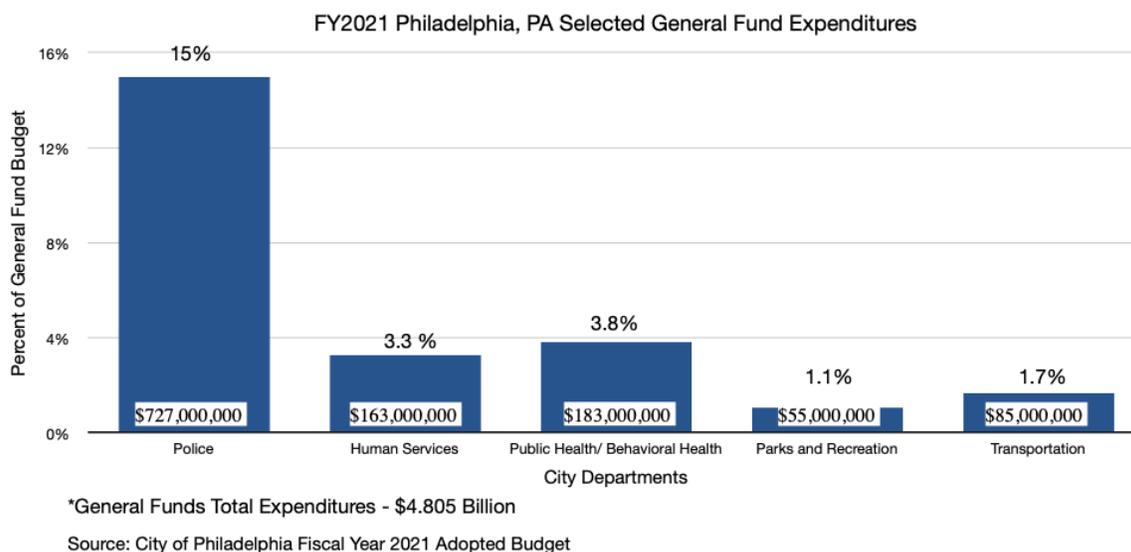


Figure 2

In Fiscal Year 2021, Philadelphia’s general fund expenditures total \$4.8 billion, out of which \$727 million, or 15% of the general fund, was dedicated to the police. Human services and public health make up around 3% each. Parks and Recreation and transportation only make up around 1% each of the general fund.

Phoenix, AZ

According to the 2019 U.S. Census, in Phoenix 42.6% of residents are Latinx and 7% of residents are Black (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019c). One-in-five residents live in poverty. The city’s poverty rate has declined in recent years, but 21% of residents – including a third of children – are living in poverty (City of Phoenix, 2019). As reported by the City of Phoenix Human Services Department in the 2019 Resident and Client Community Survey, some of the greatest challenges Phoenix residents face are a lack of after school activities, lack of transportation, no affordable housing, and a high amount of drug use (City of Phoenix, 2019). But even after asking residents about the challenges they are facing, Phoenix City Council spent 70% of their budget on Public Safety and Criminal Justice rather than investing in solutions to community challenges.

DEFUNDING THE POLICE

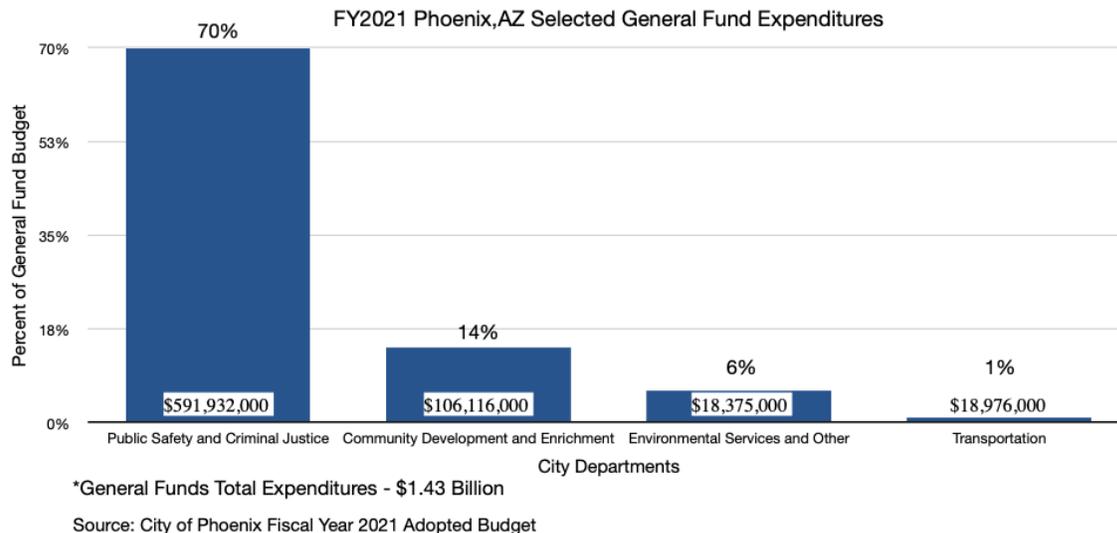


Figure 3

In Fiscal Year 2021 Phoenix's general fund's expenditures total \$1.43 billion, out of which \$591.9 million, or 70% of the general fund, was dedicated to public safety and criminal justice. Community development and enrichment make up 14%, environmental services make up 6%, and transportation makes up only 1% of the total annual budget for 2021.

By continuing to overinvest in policing and underinvesting in community services and programs cities are perpetuating the growth of inequities and maintaining the status quo. While each of these cities is unique and faces an array of different challenges within their communities, one thing is certain—they all prioritize funding law enforcement over community services as reflected in budget allocation.

The Future of Police

The Black community, and other communities of color, have been disproportionately affected by excessive police violence. The continued criminalization of the Black community has resulted in the loss of Black lives, most recently including George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Ahmaud Arbery, and far too many others. Keeping in mind the pattern of protracted police violence on marginalized populations, it is evident that state and local governments fail to prioritize these communities in both policy and budget allocation. Specifically, state and local budgets continue to fund and, therefore, bolster the system that incites excessive violence under the guise of protecting local constituents. Budgets are emblematic of more than mere monetary organization and allocation; they are moral documents. They are an articulation of what, and whom, the government deems worthy of investment. Thus, when city and state officials maintain a police system steeped in systemic violence against specific populations among their constituents, it is clear that those governing bodies do not currently deem communities of color worthy of support. Continuing to fund police departments at the current rate upholds a system that neglects to represent the concerns and wellbeing of all constituents equally. It is time the public's call to defund the police is answered and for cities to reinvest in communities of color.

Within the past year, 13 U.S. cities have cut funding from police department budgets or decreased officer numbers, with several more in the process (McEvoy, 2020). Those cities include Los Angeles, CA, Austin, TX, Seattle, WA, New York City, NY, San Francisco, CA, Oakland, CA, Washington, D.C., Baltimore, MD, Portland, OR, Philadelphia, PA, Hartford, CT, Norman, OK, and Salt Lake City, UT (McEvoy, 2020). When the Mayor of Los Angeles announced his plan to cut police

department funding, he said, the money will be taken from other sources “to put it into health, to put it into hope, to put it into housing and to put it into healing” (Rainey et al., 2020).

This is a start to creating safer communities, however, as seen in the budgets from Atlanta, Philadelphia, and Phoenix, significant portions of public funding are still being dedicated to law enforcement. Meanwhile, the services and resources needed to keep communities safe continue to receive a fraction of what police departments receive.

Defunding the police is a justifiable and sustainable option for creating safer communities, but community leaders need to be committed to continued divestment from police. New, reimagined public safety infrastructures, like restorative justice practices, need to be created and sustained otherwise the risk of reinvestment back into police lingers. Instead of continuing to over-invest and expand police departments and punitive systems, investments should be made in the resources that truly make communities safe, including healthcare, mental health services/treatment, educational opportunities, affordable housing, and transit access.

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