

**DEFUND**

**THE**

**POLICE!**

WHAT IT MEANS AND  
WHY THE TIME IS NOW

Why now is the time to defund and  
abolish police and prisons

*The call to “defund the police” has become a rallying cry at protests across America, and some lawmakers are listening.*

*Activists who have long fought to cut law enforcement budgets and dismantle police departments say they are seeing an unprecedented wave of support for their ideas, with some elected officials for the first time proposing budget reductions and divestments from police. Here are some answers to common questions about defunding and how organizers are fighting for abolition.*

### **What does it mean to ‘defund the police’?**

For years, community groups have advocated for defunding law enforcement – taking money away from police and prisons – and reinvesting those funds in services. The basic principle is that government budgets and “public safety” spending should prioritize housing, employment, community health, education and other vital programs, instead of police officers. Defunding is the best way forward since attempts to reform police practices over the last six years have failed, as evidenced by the brutal killing of George Floyd. Defunding is only a first step toward abolishing police and prisons, and building a safer world without cages.

### **How much does America currently spend on police?**

In the past four decades, the cost of policing in the US has tripled and is now \$115 billion, according to a recent analysis. That steady increase comes as crime has been consistently declining. In most cities, spending on police is significantly greater than spending on services and other departments (\$1.8 billion on police in Los Angeles, for example, which is more than half the city’s general fund).

The Covid-19 economic crisis has led cities and states to make drastic budget cuts to education, youth programs, arts and culture, parks, libraries, housing services and more. But police budgets have grown or gone largely untouched – until pressure from the George Floyd protests.

### **How are lawmakers addressing the calls to defund?**

Almost overnight and in direct response to protests, some mayors and other elected leaders have reversed their position on police funding. A New York councilman has called for a \$1bn divestment from the NYPD. In Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington DC, San Francisco and other cities, local policymakers have expressed support for some form of defunding or opposing police budget increases. The only truly radical approach that lawmakers are currently considering is in Minneapolis, where a supermajority of councilmembers have pledged to disband the embattled police department altogether. Colleges, public school systems, museums and other institutions are also divesting from police.

### **How do proposed cuts align with activists’ demands?**

The change in direction is monumental, but the size of the proposed cuts is not.

More broadly, longstanding abolitionist groups, such as Critical Resistance and MPD 150, argue that the cities should not be looking for minor savings and cuts, but should be fundamentally reducing the scale and size of the police force and dismantle the traditional law enforcement systems. That can start with finding “non-police solutions to the problems poor people face,” such as counselors responding to mental health calls and addiction experts responding to drug abuse.

## **If cities defund police, will violence and crime increase?**

Policing and prison are at their core racist and harmful, and make communities less safe. The vast majority of police work also has nothing to do with responding to or preventing violence. Further, police have a terrible track record of solving murders or handling rape and domestic violence. It's impossible to address sexual and gendered violence without abolishing the carceral system, which perpetuates those forms of harm in severe and extreme ways.

While there is no contemporary example of defunding in the US, there are studies suggesting that less policing could mean less crime. In 2014 and 2015, New York officers staged a "slowdown" to protest the mayor, arguing that if they did less police work, the city would be less safe. But the opposite turned out to be true. When the officers took a break from "broken windows policing", meaning targeting low-level offenses, there was a drop in crime. Researchers posited that aggressive policing on the streets for petty matters can ultimately cause social disruption and lead to more crime. Policing that punishes poverty, such as hefty traffic tickets and debts, can also create conditions where crime is more likely. When New York ended "stop and frisk", crime did not rise.

## **How are police unions responding to defunding calls?**

America's powerful police unions have long resisted even the most minor reforms and accountability measures, and are predictably arguing, without evidence, that budget cuts at any scale will make cities less safe. They've cited looting and property damage amid protests to suggest that cities don't

have enough officers. But the highly militarized response to peaceful demonstrations and the aggressive and at times violent ways officers are handling protesters have only provided further evidence that police cause harm when there is no public safety threat in the first place.

## **Are there examples of police defunding that US cities can follow?**

America's legacy of racism and severe gun violence epidemic make it difficult to compare to other countries. But some have pointed out that compared to peer nations, the US spends significantly less on social services and more on public safety programs, and has astronomically higher incarceration rates. These investments in police and prison, however, don't translate to a safer country. In fact, police in America kill more people in days than many countries do in years. Within the US, Camden, New Jersey dismantled its troubled police department, but a different police jurisdiction took over. While the replacement may have been less harmful than the original agency, this was neither defunding nor abolition, it was a continuation of police power and funding.

## **Do Democrats support defunding the police?**

Largely, no. Some moderate liberals have attempted to co-opt the 'defund the police' phrase and argue that no one is trying to take power away from police. But that is exactly the point of defunding – to take away cops' money and authority, until they no longer exist.

## **How does defunding the police relate to prison abolition?**

The violence of police and prisons go hand in hand. One couldn't exist without the other. There is no dismantling police without closing prisons, and if prisons still exist, so will cops. We need to work to end both systems of violence now. Neither are just and neither support public safety. They are institutions of violence and harm born out of chattel slavery. There is no way to "reform" them other than shutting them down altogether. Any reform that attempts to make them less violent is in fact simply perpetuating these harmful systems, and in some cases actually give police and prisons more power and money. Don't be fooled. Body cameras haven't worked. De-escalation hasn't worked. Implicit bias training hasn't worked. None of it has worked and every day we don't defund and abolish police and prisons is a day that the BRUTALITY AND VIOLENCE continue.

## **What can individuals do to support defunding and abolition?**

Get educated and share information with your families and communities. Read Angela Davis, Mariame Kaba, Ruth Wilson Gilmore and the other scholars who have been thinking through these complex questions for decades. Get involved in your local abolition groups - many cities have ongoing campaigns to close jails and prisons and to oppose the construction of new ones. In many cities there are groups actively fighting for defunding of police through local budgeting processes right now, and you can show up and support in a wide range of ways. Contribute the skills, resources and time that you have. There has never been more momentum than this current moment. Help organizers

take advantage of this energy and contribute. And if you want to be a good ally to folks most maltreated by these systems, get a prison pen pal through Black and Pink or other organizations. One of the best ways you can give back is to build relationships with folks inside.

## **Black and Pink**

Black and Pink is a volunteer organization with an LGBTQ pen-pal program and monthly newsletter featuring queer and trans writers inside prisons. The group advocates for the needs of specific incarcerated people while also working to abolish the Prison Industrial Complex. Black and Pink serves individuals in CA, NM, CO, NE, WI, IL, NY, RI, and MA.

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