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Don't defund the police – re-fund the police and reallocate resources

In the wake of the senseless murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and others, a call to “defund the police” by protestors has grown louder. Not surprisingly, President Donald Trump and his dwindling supporters have twisted the rallying cry into a warning about the chaos that will descend on cities bereft of law enforcement.

While the movement toward meaningful police reform is long overdue, another call might be, “re-fund the police” — as in, reassess, reorganize, and reallocate the vast amount of federal, state and local money for policing in Chicago and elsewhere.

Longstanding crime control strategies, epitomized by the 30-plus year “War on Drugs,” have led to bloated prisons and budgetary crises, while doing little to strengthen communities. Since the inception of the War on Drugs, the federal government has distributed block grants to police departments. Over the last decade-plus, the Department of Justice has provided between \$300 million and \$500 million annually to state and local law enforcement agencies. But spending by police departments is discretionary and used on everything from military grade hardware to officer overtime. To the extent that the monies require outcomes, metrics for success are largely based on arrest, conviction, and incarceration numbers. Moreover, in the War on Drugs era, the Department of Defense has given an additional \$4 billion in surplus military equipment to local police departments — transforming them into domestic armies with missiles and armored personnel vehicles.

More troublingly, sporadic

efforts to curb police abuse and corruption have proven mostly fruitless. While a much-heralded consent decree took effect in Chicago in March 2019 to enhance police accountability, a November report reflected that the city has missed over half of the initial deadlines to implement modest changes. Yet Chicago spends 41% of the city budget — nearly \$5 million every day — on law enforcement.

As we wrestle with the need to radically curb police brutality, a salient question might ask how to reallocate those dollars from practices that tear away at communities toward ones that incentivize sustainable public policy goals. One “re-funding” approach involves tying federal grants to policies and programs that promote community-based policing strategies. Community policing embodies the ideal that police can rarely solve public safety problems alone. The model encourages partnerships with community leaders, teachers, public health officials, and other stakeholders. These partnerships can develop solutions through collaboration and trust-building.

Community policing strategies are not new — and they're effective. In a May 2015 speech in Camden, New Jersey, President Barack Obama heralded the city as a “new model of community policing” in recognition of its successful crime-reduction efforts. The president commended officers who “get to know the residents” rather than just “walking the beat.” He also touted the administration's new policies to regulate military-style equipment, which alienates, intimidates, and oppresses citizens. Finally, he cited concrete proposals of a national — though since disbanded — task



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force on community policing to build trust between law enforcement and the communities they serve. The results in Camden are striking: homicides have dropped by more than 50% since 2012. Excessive force complaints plummeted from 65 to three over the same span.

Though community policing's central aim is developing positive relationships between law enforcement and residents, its success requires more than mere attitude shifts. At a minimum, community policing requires thoughtful re-organization of police departments. The community for which a patrol officer is given responsibility should be a small, well-defined geographical area. In turn, “beat” boundaries correspond to neighborhood or other local government divisions to preserve the unique geographical and social characteristics of communities. Officers remain in one neighborhood over long-term assignments. Ideally, these

assignments foster strong working relationships between officers and residents, promoting mutual trust.

Effective community policing also requires implementation of clear, comprehensive and consistent departmental protocols — especially for the rare occasion where use of force is necessary. At the same time, departments must institute comparably detailed standards to review alleged violations of such protocols. To enhance external legitimacy, soliciting public input in the creation of the policies is essential. Once finished, the policies and procedures must be available for public inspection.

Moreover, community policing demands progressive officer recruitment, hiring, and training methods. Recruitment and hiring practices should emphasize race, gender, and socio-economic diversity and aim to create police departments that reflect community demographics. By the same token, employment descriptions, applications, and interviews must incorporate core community policing principles. As officers move through the ranks, performance evaluations and promotions should remain closely linked to problem-solving skills and relationship building. Finally, as community policing prizes versatility, training must encompass a multitude of abilities and attributes. Police “re-funding” could serve this laudable goal.

At bottom, the long-term prospects for community policing — like any other crime reduction strategy — hinge on increasing public safety and trust. In the short term, ensuring that our country doesn't add another name to the ever-growing list of victims of police brutality would be a worthy start.