



The Daily Dish

A Closer Look at Police Budgets

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Eakinomics: A Closer Look at Police Budgets

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The summer was filled with protests over the deaths of several Black men and women at the hands of police officers. In response to these deaths, activists called for “defunding the police”—either through outright elimination of the police force or, more moderately, by diverting some funding to other programs. These proposals seek to reduce the number of interactions that individuals have with police and thus the risk of police violence and abuse.

But as I show in my recent [research](#), cutting police budgets is fraught at best. Spending on police, both in nominal terms and as a share of municipalities' budgets, varies greatly across the country. So too does the number of officers employed in a given police department. While a handful of cities spend significantly on their police force, nationally police spending represents, on average, 4-6 percent of state and local budgets. In terms of employment, nearly half of all police departments employ fewer than 10 officers, while 0.4 percent of police departments employ one-third of the nation's officers with more than 1,000 officers each.

Where there is little variation is the share of police budgets spent on personnel costs. With 97 percent of police budgets spent on salaries, pensions, and benefits, any decrease in police funding will almost certainly result in a decrease in the number of officers.

It is difficult to tell if cities' police forces are staffed at appropriate levels—the wide variation in spending and staffing suggests that the composition of cities' police forces is shaped by myriad local factors—although any universal cut is certain to leave some cities understaffed. Moreover, because most police forces continue to be predominantly White and the majority of minority officers are relatively newer hires, broad cuts that dismiss those with the least experience would likely reduce the diversity of some cities' police forces—an undesirable consequence.

Simple cuts to police budgets is probably not the solution, my research suggests, but there is still an opportunity to use the budget to force change in policing practices. Spending on police forces has grown considerably over the last 30 years, primarily as a result of increased funds from Congress. With cities increasingly dependent on federal funding for their police, federal policymakers have the option of conditioning federal funding on certain reforms. Congress attempted to pass [legislation](#) to do just that over the summer but failed.

A month ago, there were [reports](#) that Congress was seeking to revive the efforts to pass a federal police reform package, but there's been no news since, and the divisions over everything else in Congress—from another round of COVID-19 relief to the Supreme Court nomination—suggests any effort is unlikely to succeed.

Upcoming research of mine will highlight other opportunities for targeted reform at the local level and examples of successful police reform measures taken by cities across the country over the past several decades. But simply cutting police budgets is likely not the solution to the crises that the country is facing.