



Protesters are flooding the streets demanding change after the death of George Floyd and so many other Black people at the hands of police. Crowds are echoing the rallying cry to “defund the police.” But what exactly do they mean? Some advocacy groups are calling for the current policing structure to be dismantled and rebuilt, investing more resources into communities. Others are calling for the complete abolition of all police. This explainer outlines two among a range of perspectives and sets out some key tenets for bringing about wholesale, systemic change to policing in America.

Police department budgets are at an all-time high, while community services, health care, and public welfare systems in many places struggle for funding. Police have become the first point of contact for a wide range of community emergencies, but most emergencies can’t be resolved with the primary tool of policing: arrest.

Limiting police interactions and investing in community-based interventions are crucial to providing for public safety in a way that’s less intrusive, more just, and more constructive.

## Defunding the Police: A Range of Perspectives

Some people calling for defunding the police argue that we’ll dismantle the current culture of policing by divesting funds from police budgets, ending police overreach and harmful practices, and investing in the services that keep our neighborhoods and communities truly safe.

Others, citing past incremental reforms that haven’t ended police violence and brutality, want police departments completely eliminated. This position is closely aligned with prison abolitionists, who argue that the current system of locking people up is inhumane and unjust, doesn’t make society safer, and does nothing to fix the underlying problems.

## Divesting from Police and Investing in Communities



There isn’t a one-size-fits-all approach to re-envisioning public safety in America. Change should come on many fronts—led by justice-impacted community members, Black leaders, and others, in partnership with grassroots and national organizations like the Vera Institute of Justice. Communities and advocates are calling for a range of systemic changes, including:

**Drastically reducing the size and budget of police departments.** The [\\$115 billion](#) that America spends on policing each year is significantly more than the [military budgets](#) of most countries.

**Reengineering 911 systems** so that police are not the first responders to all of society’s problems. Social workers, medical professionals, and crisis workers who are trained in issues like homelessness, substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental health should respond to such incidents, not police.

**Creating alternatives to policing.** Police shouldn’t be the first responders to every problem. At least [one-quarter](#) of people killed by police from 2015 to 2018 were people with signs of unmet mental health needs. Responding to substance use and mental health crises, arresting children in schools for disciplinary issues, and targeting the homeless shouldn’t be police duties. Instead, social welfare responsibilities should remain with medical, mental health, and social work professionals.

**Investing money in community-based programs and services for education, housing, jobs, and more.** By providing sufficient funding to agencies that address some of the underlying causes of crime, cities can increase public safety while relying less on police. Criminalizing behaviors like homelessness, minor theft, and drug use, rather than addressing their root causes, creates a cycle of police overenforcement and deepens racial divides in communities.

**Decriminalizing low-level offenses.** One way to reduce unnecessary contact with police is to decriminalize certain classes of low-level offenses, which often lead to entanglement with the criminal legal system. Many high-profile killings of Black people by police started with allegations of low-level conduct: Philando Castile (traffic stop allegedly for a [broken tail light](#)), Eric Garner (accused of selling [untaxed cigarettes](#)), and George Floyd (accused of passing a [counterfeit \\$20 bill](#)).

