

Is defunding the police systemically racist?

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THE MORNING CALL

Is defunding the police systemically racist?

Crime · Police brutality · Society

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The Black Lives Matter movement and its supporters propose defunding the police, using the money saved for other purposes. Are they right that most cities would be better off with fewer police officers?

Economist Alex Tabarrok of George Mason University argues that if we compare the benefits from crime reduction to the cost of hiring more police, we should double the number of officers on the streets.

In 2016, a report from President

Obama's Council of

Economic Advisers noted that: "Expanding resources for police has consistently been shown to reduce crime; estimates from economic research suggest that a 10% increase in police force size decreases crime

by 3 to 10%."

Although you have to dig through a ton of social justice pieties on his campaign website to find it, Joe Biden apparently also believes we need more police: "Biden spearheaded the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) program, which authorized funding both for the hiring of additional police officers and for training on how to undertake a community policing policy. ... Biden will reinvigorate the COPS program with a \$300 million investment."

According to a recent Gallup poll, 86% of all U.S. adults, including 81% of Black adults, would like to see the police spend the same or more time in their neighborhood. Only 15% of all U.S. adults and 22% of Black adults favor defunding the

police.

Surprising though it may seem, the United States spends less on police

(But more on prisons) than do other high-income countries. According to calculations by Daniel Bier, from 1950 to 1975, about 100 people were imprisoned in the United States per 100,000 residents. In the late 1970s we began

Putting more people in jail. The imprisonment rate rose to a peak of 506 per 100,000 residents in 2008, after which it began a slow decline to 432 per 100,000 residents in 2018.

Keeping so many people in prison is expensive. The U.S. went from spending \$3 on police for every \$1 spent on prisons to spending only

police and prisons.

Consider two policies that from a criminal's point of view result in the same expected amount of punishment: (1) A large police force that solves more crimes combined with short prison sentences, or (2) a small police force

That solves fewer crimes combined with long prison sentences. In other words, to a criminal, a greater chance of being caught multiplied by a short prison sentence is equivalent to a smaller chance of being caught multiplied by a longer prison sentence.

If criminals respond rationally, policy (2) will deter as much crime as policy (1) but is less costly because it requires a smaller police force. Until recently, the United States relied on policy (2), with Congress and state legislatures mandating long sentences for many crimes. Most other high-income countries have used policy (1) — spending more on cops and less on jails.

Recent reforms have shortened the sentences for some crimes, thereby reducing spending on prisons. But, following Becker's analysis, shorter

sentences need to be coupled with hiring more police officers to increase the likelihood that criminals will be arrested.

Reducing sentences while defunding the police would appear to be a recipe for higher crime rates. While FBI crime statistics for 2020 are not available, homicide numbers for some of our larger cities, New York, San Francisco, Chicago, Philadelphia and Los Angeles, are up this year.

In Minneapolis, ground zero in the police defunding movement, the city council has had second thoughts on the wisdom of downsizing the police department. After voting to defund the police, council members were unnerved by a rise in murders, robberies and assaults. As Minneapolis Public Radio reported: "With violent crime on the rise in Minneapolis, city council asks: Where are the police?"

The costs of crime fall disproportionately on Blacks and Hispanics.

For example, in 2018, Blacks made up 13% of the U.S. population but 48% of homicide victims. In 2017, homicides accounted for 28% of all

deaths among Black men aged 20 to 44, but only 3% of all deaths among white men in the same age group.

It's not surprising that polls show more Blacks want an increase in police activity in their neighborhoods than want a reduction.

Systemic racism is variously defined, but often taken to refer to policies that have a disproportionately negative effect on racial minorities. In this sense, a policy of defunding the police is systemically racist.

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In the fallout of the death of George Floyd, protesters call for the Chicago Police Department to be defunded during a march in Chicago on June 5.

\$1.50. By contrast, the countries of the European Union spend about \$5 on police for every \$1 they spend on prisons.

In the 1960s, economist Gary Becker argued that in deciding whether to Commit a crime, criminals take into account the amount of punishment

they expect to receive. Optimal law enforcement policy minimizes the cost of crime including both the damages suffered by victims and the cost to taxpayers of spending on