

Defunding the police: Calls not easily transferable to other sectors without significant expenditures, adjustments

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Following the killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in May of 2020, many have argued for defunding the police. But these appeals have not been guided by research into the scale or nature of issues that police handle. A new study analyzed millions of 911 calls for service across nine U.S. police agencies to determine how defunding the

police might be handled.

The study found that the amount and types of incidents for which people called the [police](#) were voluminous, with most calls not obviously transferable to other organizations or government sectors without significant expenditures of resources or adjustments in the current scope of work of police officers. The study's authors suggest that if police retain the responsibilities they currently handle, they need to reconsider how to address community concerns more effectively.

The study, by researchers at George Mason University (GMU), is published in *Police Quarterly*.

"Deaths of unarmed individuals—many of them Black Americans—by the police have generated a sense of urgency that something must be done," says Cynthia Lum, professor of criminology, law, and society at GMU, who led the study. "If calls for service are diverted away from the police, substantial investments in other social service agencies or the creation of entirely new entities would be needed to handle the volume of these calls."

Calls for defunding the police have generally focused on shifting resources from law enforcement to other public services that may improve the quality of life in marginalized communities. The idea of defunding police has been met with resistance by law enforcement as well as by communities with high rates of crime and poverty. Absent from the debate, say the authors of this study, is adequate research.

To address this gap, Lum and her colleagues analyzed nearly 4.3 million 911 calls for service across diverse regions and over the span of a year (2016 or 2017 for most jurisdictions) using computer-aided dispatch data from nine U.S. [law enforcement](#) agencies. All but one of the agencies were in large jurisdictions with populations of 400,000 or

more. Some are urban, some are suburban and rural.

The researchers looked at how frequently different calls arose, how much time agencies spent on them, and the outcomes of the calls. Such an analysis has not occurred since the early days of the establishment of the 911 system in the 1980s.

The study found that the amount and types of incidents for which people called police were voluminous and that they called frequently, with rates of call volume falling within the range of one to two calls per person each year. Researchers identified 14 categories into which calls fell, with traffic-related problems; routine disputes; concerns about suspicious behaviors, disorders, disturbance; and general requests for help and assurance making up the majority.

Not only do these findings reveal expectations of what people think police should handle, they also uncover the absence of other public or private agencies people can call for these concerns. These expectations may be even more salient in poorer communities that may lack high-quality social services or may not be able to provide for them privately, the authors note. The assumption that better, fairer service could be provided by someone else will have to be tested if responsibilities are transferred away from police, the authors suggest. If such calls are diverted from police, they conclude, it is likely that substantial investments in other social service agencies or the creation of entirely new entities would be needed.

Two additional patterns emerged from the study: First, contrary to popular perceptions, calls related to mental distress accounted for only a small fraction of calls to the police (approximately 1.3 percent of calls on average across the nine agencies, and no more than 4 percent for any specific agency) and time that agencies spent responding.

Second, across most agencies and types of calls, only a small share of calls for service resulted in citations or arrests. Thus, diverting various types of minor and otherwise noncriminal problems from the police may not reduce arrests (or disparities within arrests) to the degree hoped for by some reformers, the researchers suggest.

"Research on policing has highlighted the complexity and interconnectedness of police reform and social justice in communities," notes Christopher S. Koper, associate professor of criminology, law, and society at GMU, who participated in the study. "Shifting resources from the police to another agency, whether governmental or nongovernment, is still an unproven idea, and from our study, may be unrealistic without significant changes in funding and resource allocation."

But the study's authors note that if police retain their resources and associated responsibilities, they will need to reconsider how to address more effectively the many concerns about police handling of calls. Specifically, they say, police must be held accountable for the outcomes the public seeks.

More information: Cynthia Lum et al, Can We Really Defund the Police? A Nine-Agency Study of Police Response to Calls for Service, *Police Quarterly* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/10986111211035002](https://doi.org/10.1177/10986111211035002)

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