

Resistance to "defund" or "abolish" the police rooted in policy proposals

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Despite broad support in the United States for reshaping policing, movements to "defund" or "abolish" police departments generate strong public opposition. The resistance is largely due to discomfort with the movements' policy goals, not their slogans or negative beliefs about the activists associated with them, according to a new study co-authored by Yale political scientist Gregory A. Huber.

The study, recently published in the journal *Criminology & Public Policy*, uses national survey experiments to better understand the public's perceptions of the movements to defund, abolish, and reform the police. The experiments were fielded in 2020 as protestors marched in cities nationwide demanding change to policing following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin.

The researchers found that efforts to defund and abolish the police are unpopular because they seek to remove police from traditional roles—such as responding to various service calls—and to reduce the number of officers on the streets.

"Our findings suggest that support for policing reform depends on people's beliefs about how proposed policies would affect crime and [public safety](#)," said Huber, the Forst Family professor of Political Science in Yale's Faculty of Arts and Sciences. "We found little appetite for cutting police budgets, reducing the size of police departments, or pulling [police officers](#) from service calls like drug overdoses and drunken disturbances. At the same time, a substantial majority of people are concerned about [police violence](#) and support measures that change how the police operate, such as making it easier to fire officers guilty of misconduct."

Huber co-authored the study with Paige E. Vaughn of Spring Hill College and Kyle Peyton '20 Ph.D. with the Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences at Australian Catholic University, who both recently served as postdoctoral fellows in law and [social science](#) at Yale Law School.

The core data used in the study came from a national survey of 1,137 U.S. adults conducted in October 2020. Respondents' support for efforts to abolish (23%), defund (34%), and reform (66%) the police closely matched opinion polls conducted around the same time.

The researchers first examined whether the relative lack of support for the two more radical proposals—the abolishment and defunding of police departments—can be explained by a disconnect between the movement's slogans and policy goals. To test this, they randomly presented each respondent with one of the movement's slogans, e.g., "defund the police," or policy goals, e.g., "reduce police budgets and reallocate funding to [social services](#)," and then had them indicate their support for it on a 5-point scale.

They found that respondents were significantly more supportive of reform, rather than defunding or abolishing police, regardless of whether they were presented a slogan or policy goal. The [policy goals](#) of "reform the police" caused the greatest increase in public support across the three movements, according to the study.

The researchers next examined whether people's beliefs about the activists associated with each cause accounts for the gap in public support among them. They found that roughly 41% of respondents believed that most supporters of police abolition also supported the destruction of property and 46% believed that most abolition advocates backed attacks on police. By comparison, the findings were 44% and 42% for defunding and 37% and 39% for reform. The modest differences suggest that beliefs about the activists do not explain the varied levels of support, the researchers concluded.

Respondents perceived supporters of all three movements as disproportionately Black compared with U.S. population estimates, but they perceived defund and abolish as having lower proportions of Black supporters than reform. This suggests that perceptions of the racial makeup of each movement does not drive differences in support for their goals, the researchers stated.

A final set of experiments indicated that the differences in support

among the movements can be explained by their policy proposals. The researchers found that just 42% of respondents believed those who supported reform wanted to eliminate police departments, whereas 52% and 65% believed that supporters of defund and abolish, respectively, wanted to do so. Respondents also believed that supporters of abolishing and defunding the police wanted significantly greater reductions in police spending and the size of police forces than supporters of police.

Respondents expressed the belief that the proposals associated with the "defund" and "abolish" movements would greatly diminish the on-the-ground capacity of [police departments](#). When respondents were presented a list of options for responding to a series of 911 calls, including fistfights outside a bar, heroin overdoses, and drunken individuals yelling at outdoor diners, sending only police was the most popular option across the board. (The one exception was for a scenario involving teens playing loud music in a park.) For all these scenarios, *not* sending any police was the least popular option.

Notably, only 21% of respondents believed police should not respond to a call alleging the use of a counterfeit \$50 bill at a local store, the same call that preceded George Floyd's murder. Overall, the public was accepting of supplementing the police with enhanced social services, but not of replacing police with social services.

There was widespread support for several reforms, including eliminating barriers to firing officers, increasing the role of social workers in supporting [police](#) calls, and banning the use of chokeholds.

More information: Paige E. Vaughn et al, Mass support for proposals to reshape policing depends on the implications for crime and safety, *Criminology & Public Policy* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/1745-9133.12572](https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12572)

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