

Police budgets used to be untouchable. The 'defund' movement is changing that.

by [J. Brian Charles](#) in the [July 15, 2020](#) issue



A "defund the police" rally in Baltimore on June 12. (Elvert Barnes Photography)

While smoke still billowed from buildings in Minneapolis and pepper spray choked the air from Los Angeles to New York, a movement to reshape policing coalesced around a demand conveyed in hashtags and spray paint.

“Defund the police” was a rallying cry and a policy prescription long before the killing of George Floyd ignited protests in all 50 states. But as the demonstrations continued, the once obscure idea gained support with the public and a number of city leaders.

Police budgets have been a third rail of municipal government. Their numbers have risen so routinely that cumulative spending on state and local law enforcement now surpasses \$115 billion a year. And even progressive mayors who campaign on police

reform and racial reconciliation, like New York's Bill de Blasio, can wind up pouring more money into their police departments while in office.

Suddenly, thanks to the protests, law enforcement spending increases that were once automatic have become untenable in many city halls.

"It has become clear to people that the cities have more or less lost control of the police," said Mark Funkhouser, a former mayor of Kansas City, Missouri, who previously was that city's auditor. "It's not clear that the police are delivering on safety."

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